

A Quick Guide to Analyzing Historical Documents

Document Analysis

Identification of the Document:

Who is the Author?

What is the Full Title of the Document?

When was the document written? Is the date significant? Why?

Form: What form does the document take? (E.g. letter, treatise, etc.) Why was that form chosen?

How does the form affect the way the views are expressed by the author?

Language: In which language was the document written originally? Why was that language chosen?

Content:

The addressee: To whom is the document addressed? Who is/are that person/those persons? Why does the author address that person/those persons? Is the way the document is written influenced by whom it is addressed to? How? Why?

Reference to event or situation: Does the document refer or react to a particular event or situation? If so, discuss the context and nature of the event or situation in detail. What is the attitude of the author to the event or situation? Why does the author take that attitude?

Reference to people: Does the document mention a particular person or group of people? If so, discuss that person or group of people in detail. What is the attitude of the author to that person or group of people? Why does the author take that attitude?

Reference to text: Does the document mention a particular text? If so, discuss that text in detail. What is the attitude of the author to that text? Why does the author take that attitude?

Reference to existing belief, idea or practice: Does the document refer or react to an existing belief, idea or practice? If so, discuss the context and nature of the belief, idea or practice in detail. What is the attitude of the author to the belief, idea or practice? Does the author support it or challenge it? How? Why?

Expression of new belief or idea: Does the document express a new belief or idea? If so, discuss the belief or idea in detail. How is the belief or idea new? How did the author arrive at the new belief or idea? Why does the author express it now?

Does the author hold any obvious biases in his or her language? Are there any implicit assumptions made by the author?

Connections:

Implications: What are the implications of the views expressed in the document?

Consequences: What were the consequences of the views expressed in the document?

Image Analysis:

[based on Susan Hilligoss, *Visual Communication: A Writer's Guide* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 32-35]

Identification

Who is the Artist? Can we tell? Do we know?

What is the Full Title of the Work?

When was it created? Is the date significant? Why?

What form does it take?

Rhetorical Purposes

Where does the image appear?

What is the image's purpose?

Does it document a situation, event, or condition?

Is it conceptual? If so, what is its point?

Representation: Is the image realistic, like a photograph or more stylized, like a cartoon or caricature? If the image is realistic, do you detect any types of distortion? Describe any features that may be distorted.

Reaction: What tone does the image project? How seriously are we to take this image? Explain why.

Audience: Who do you think are the intended viewers of the image? What features or context suggest this audience? What would you say your relationship is to the producer or producers? Do you think they understand you, as a viewer?

Overall Design

What draws your eye first? What does the dominant part of the image portray?

What is in the center of the image? What is shown in front and larger? What is behind and smaller?

What is shown in the upper half? the lower half?

Are portions more blurred? Are there very distinct parts in sharp focus?

Is there "empty" space? What does the empty space frame?

Are some areas or shapes very large? Are others very small?

Describe the overall arrangement of parts. Are they ordered symmetrically or otherwise balanced against each other?

People and Images

Who is portrayed? Describe your inferences from each feature of the person(s) - age, details of dress, gender, ethnicity, class, posture and stance, portions of the body shown, tilt of head, facial expression, gesture of hands.

What is the person looking at? Follow his/her gaze or eyeline. Does he/she look toward something else in the image? or out of the picture? What do you make of the direction of the gaze?

If there are two or more people, what features suggest their relationship to each other?

If there are two or more people, does one seem dominant? How is this expressed?

From what angle are the people shown? Do you seem to look down on them, as if they were below the viewer? Look up at them? Look right at them?

Are people shown close up or far away? What emotional effect does this have?

What do you consider to be your relationship as viewer to the person or people shown? Do you empathize with them or not? Explain why.

If there is no one represented, imagine what sort of person would be at home in this image. Explain why.

Setting

If the image has a distinct background, describe it. How does it relate to the dominant focus of the images, especially people, if any?

What time and place does the image suggest? What is the effect of this setting?

Is anything “out of place” in the image? What do you make of the incongruity?

Symbols and Signs

Are there items or features in the image that might mean more than themselves? Consider connotations and associations of particular objects or features in the image. Relate them to the rest of the image.

Text

If the image includes text, such as headlines, labels, captions, or paragraphs of explanation, relate the text to the image.

In what ways does the text help you make sense of the image? Does it answer questions about the image, or only raise more questions?

What is the personality and tone of the typography, or the fonts that the text uses?

Story

What is the story being told in the image? Consider the people and objects in the image and their relationships to each other, the viewer, the setting and the text.

Who can relate to this story? Who may not find it believable or interesting?

Who or what is excluded from the image? Why?

What attitudes - social, political, economic, cultural - are suggested in this image? Who benefits from the attitudes shown? Who does not?