How to Read a Historical Source

Establish creator, audience and purpose before interpreting a historical source's message.

5 min preparation | Science, Maths and Humanities

Before the lesson

Choose a source with known creator, audience, date and purpose.

Teach it in four steps

1. Establish creator, audience and purpose before interpreting a historical source's message.
2. Separate what the source states from what the reader infers.
3. Use a specific detail to support an interpretation.
4. Name a limit and identify what another source could clarify.

Worked example: How to Read a Historical Source

A recruiting poster shows a message its creators wanted to promote. It cannot establish that everyone accepted the message. A diary or survey could supply different evidence.

Teacher prompt: “What can this source establish, and what needs another source?”

Check understanding

Ask for one supported claim and one claim requiring additional evidence.

Fade the support

Remove the context grid once learners can ask the source questions independently.

Adapt it across subjects

Science: evaluate what a measurement can establish. English: distinguish a narrator’s account from an author’s intention.

Adjust the language support

A1-A2 access: keep the subject goal; use visuals, a small word bank, pointing or drawing and partner rehearsal. Use a home language to establish meaning where helpful.

B1-B2 extension: ask for fuller explanations, precise subject vocabulary and qualifications. Reduce sentence openings when learners can organise the response independently.

These are starting points, not placement rules. Judge support from the learner’s response to this task; proficiency can differ across skills.