HOW TO READ A HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

**Primary sources** are created in the time period under study. They are the original sources of information about the past on which secondary accounts draw. They can be just about anything, from newspapers to diaries, from material artifacts to interviews. In this course, our primary sources are mainly published works written by the historical figures we are studying, though you may use other kinds of primary sources in your research paper. Primary sources may be original, but they can be misleading if not interpreted in context and different kinds of sources present different challenges. Here are some basic questions to help interpret primary source documents accurately and in context.

1. **Establish the basics.**
   - Who is the author? What is his claim to authority?
   - Where and when was the document written or produced?
   - Who was the intended audience? What is the relationship between the author and his audience?

2. **Understand the content.**
   - What does it say?
   - What kind of document is it?
     - Does it fit a particular genre? What do we usually expect from sources of this genre? How does this document fit or frustrate those expectations?
   - What rhetorical strategies does the author use?
   - Can the document be taken “literally”?
   - Does the author have apparent preconceptions or blind spots?

3. **Interpret in historical context.**
   - What does the context tell you about the document?
     - To what is the author responding? Is he in dialogue with other authors or positions?
     - On what sources might the author have been drawing?
     - Consider the document’s place in the *longue durée*: what do we know about the predominant structures of thought under which it was created?
   - What does the document tell you about the society in which it was produced?

4. **Determine the significance.**
   - What influence did this document have?
     - Who read it and why? How did they respond?
   - Why is this document important to the central themes and questions of this course?
     - What does this author think of the relationship between reason and faith, or between science/natural philosophy and religion? How does this author try to reconcile the tensions that he may perceive?
GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A SOURCE REVIEW

The assignment

The source review is a short paper (5-7pp) devoted to a historical analysis of an assigned primary source. In general terms, analysis may be defined as the act of separating into constituent parts. Synthesis, on the other hand, brings together separate elements into a whole—synthetic essay questions are typical for example of exam questions.

In this analytical writing assignment your goal is to understand the author's position in the assigned text and explain it (make sense of it) in its historical context. A "criticism" of the assigned passage from today's perspective is therefore not the goal of the assignment. A useful frame of mind to adopt when writing the analytical paper is to assume that you are explaining the passage and its problems to an intelligent reader who knows nothing about it, but is interested in finding out more.

Nuts and bolts

– Papers should be double-spaced with 1-inch margins all around.

– Your paper should have a title; please list your name, section time and TF.

– All written work should be fully footnoted (endnotes OK) with references to the primary sources and whatever secondary sources you might draw on (e.g. assigned textbook reading, lecture or section discussion). No reading beyond the assignment on the syllabus is expected.

– Like all papers, this paper needs to have an argument (a thesis), which should be stated early in the paper and to which the bulk of your argument should be devoted. You should use quotations from the primary source to support your argument, but may also want to refer to elements of historical context that you have garnered from other readings in the course. Comparisons with other authors read for the course are welcome when relevant, but not necessary.

Advice on carrying out the assignment

– We recommend that you start by reading your primary source closely by posing the questions outlined on the reverse on "How to read a historical document." But the paper is more than an answer to a set of questions. You need to choose a specific theme to discuss that strikes you as important and relevant to the course.

– If you are at a loss for a theme, try using the questions under steps 3 and 4 on the reverse to generate one. You may also focus on a much more specific theme, such as the meaning of a specific term or the role of one kind of argument (e.g. Biblical quotation or reference to a philosophical or religious authority); in that case be sure to explain the significance of the specific theme you have chosen to the broader issues we are studying in the course.

– We highly recommend that you meet with your TF about this assignment in office hours, after you have done the reading and when you are ready to write or are in the process of writing.