**Analyzing Primary Source Documents**

**Primary Source Definition:** A first-hand, original account or record, such as an oral history, a photograph, or a document, such as a newspaper, text of a speech, essay, poem, diary, journal, or letter, is a primary source.

**Secondary Source Definition**: A written document derived from primary sources, often processed by a scholar or expert – e.g., text book.

**Strengths of Primary Sources**

-Offers an unfiltered point of view of the author at the time events unfolded

-Can provide the who, what, where, when, why and how of historical topics

-Supports the production of secondary sources

-Can be used to correct and update inaccurate secondary sources

-Allows the reader to play the role of historian rather than passive receiver of history

-Ties reader personally and emotionally to people, places, and things in the past

**Limitations of Primary Sources**

-Only one piece of a much larger puzzle

-Author’s bias must be determined and considered

-Often missing key information

-If handwritten or uses archaic language, may be difficult to read

-Needs to be corroborated or deemed an exception

**When analyzing primary source material, seek to determine . . .**

-Author -Meaning of Language on Word, Sentence, and Paragraph Level

-Place and Time -Patterns of Language

-Audience -Organization

-Purpose -Writing techniques

-Bias -Underlying Narrative (the big picture)

-Significance -Connections Within and Outside of Document

**Ask questions!**

**-**Primary sources can answer some questions, but more often they create a demand for many new questions to be asked and answered.

**Effective analysis of primary source material takes time and repeated close and active reading. Focus on key words and their meanings; seek out patterns of language and ideas, and work to determine how these features affect the author’s purpose. Expect to feel in-the-dark at times, however, with persistence and some additional research, the dots will begin to connect and undiscovered stories and new perspectives will emerge.**