

Writing a document analysis

Document analysis is a key skill in historical interpretation. It is not a mere summary or description of what happened, but rather an analysis of the motivation, intent and purpose of a document within a particular historical context.

The key initial questions you need to consider are:

- What type of document is it?
- Does it have any particularly unique characteristics?
- When was it written?
- Who was the author and what was his/her position?
- For whom (what audience) was the document written?
- What is the purpose of the document?
- Why was the document written?
- What evidence is there within the document that indicates why it was written?

Sample extract

... Newspapers reporting the events are at first notable for their restraint, but in May 1851 *The Sydney Morning Herald* declared 'the gold fever has fairly set in' and predicted 'a most lawless state of society ... up there' (ref). The impact of the discovery was immediate and widespread, and brought mixed blessings. One significant early effect was the visible diminution of the populations of Sydney and Paramatta (ref). In the city, goods on sale consisted mainly of clothing and tools for the diggings (ref). A report in *The Times of London* described Sydney as 'becoming deserted' with 'auction prices ... very low' (ref).



What can you learn about document analysis from what markers say?

- Your use of evidence – your discerning comments about what it provided and not, and its consequences upon one's understanding of the period – was well done.
- It is thoroughly and correctly documented, although I think you could have quoted somewhat more from the sources to convey a better idea of what kinds of documents they were.
- Avoid slotting in quotations without telling your reader who the speaker is. It is not enough to name the speaker in the footnotes. Nevertheless, you are acutely aware of the historical debate – a strong point in favour of this analysis.
- Your synopsis is crisp and to the point, and establishes clearly the general parameters of your argument.

Similarly, your introduction deals with both the context of the period, and the documents you use to explore that context. Well done.

- This essay tackles with vigor a complex period. But it seems to get carried away by its critique of the Scullin Government – to the point where it fails to distinguish between the federal and state governments, and the documents and their origins are lost to view [for the reader]. But for your excellent documentation, one could mistake this for a general essay on the Depression, rather than an examination of primary sources.

So in reviewing your draft document analysis, ask yourself:

- In the introduction have I placed the document in its historical context and identified the kind of document it is?
- Where I use quotes, do I identify the writer and his/her position to the reader?
- Throughout, are my documents lost to view to the reader?
- Have I thoroughly analysed both what the evidence says – and what it does not say?
- Have I discussed how reliable the document is as a source of evidence and understanding?
- Have I identified to the reader how the evidence develops – or doesn't develop – a better understanding of the historical period?
- Have I thoroughly and correctly documented my sources of information?

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