

# DOCUMENT SOURCE TYPES: VALUES AND LIMITATIONS

## Private letters, diaries and memoirs

Values:

\*Can provide an intimate glimpse into the effects of historical events on the lives of individuals experiencing them first-hand

\*If the source was never intended to be read by a large audience, its contents might be of a more candid and revealing nature

\*Valuable as a study of the personality by whom it was written

Limitations:

\*If the document was intended for disclosure, it runs the risk of being an apologia, contrived to justify or defend the author's opinions or actions/inactions

\*Such personal documents are inherently limited in their scope in that they present only one viewpoint, one interpretation of what happened.

\* Inevitably biased- molded by the opinions, prejudices, and cultural standpoint of the author. Student should read carefully.

\*If the document is a result of recollections many years after the period described, the details might have become blurred with the passing of time. Certain aspects can be consciously or unconsciously forgotten. Memories can be molded to fit views that have evolved with time.

\*Selective by nature (most important is what is excluded than included)

## Poems and Novels

Values:

\*Can provide an interesting perspective into the spirit and culture of the time in which they were written

\*Can chronicle the experiences and feelings of a specific individual living through a period of history, providing a focused and personal portrait of a time

\*Often offer an emotional appeal, allowing the reader to identify more clearly with circumstances and individuals of a time

\*Can provide information on a certain period of history in a more easily digestible format through engaging the interest of the reader

Limitations:

\*Often not solely concerned with providing a factual account. A certain degree of imagination and creative license is involved.

\*Inevitably flavored by biases of creator

## **Drawings, paintings, cartoons**

Values:

\*Can effectively capture the spirit of a time, and the opinions and sentiments generally characterizing that time

\*Contain evidence about a culture at specific moments in history. Can illustrate customs, styles, preferences, atmosphere, architecture, manner of dress, and appearance

\*Provide a visually stimulating piece of historical evidence

\*Examples of art styles of that time

Limitations:

\*Produced by an artist with a definite point of view. Inevitably biased by opinions and prejudices of its creator

\*Limited scope. Work generally highlights one specific aspect of a period

\*Artist not generally concerned with providing a factual account of a historical event or circumstance. The artist provides a creative piece of work expressing their opinions and emotional reactions

## **Photographs/ Film**

Values:

\*Can capture moments in history in vivid detail. Provides a unique glimpse into a point in time.

\*Provide a visually stimulating piece of historical evidence

\*Examples of propaganda

\*Reflections of attitudes and trends in film making

\*Often posed

Limitations:

\*Behind every photograph or film is a creator with their own personal biases and prejudices. May be reflected in the work either consciously or subconsciously

\*Can be manipulated by the creator to convey a certain point. Parts can be edited out, excluded or downplayed. Certain details can be accentuated or focused on.

\*The creator ultimately holds the power to decide the impression conveyed by the photograph or film

\*Tendency for commercial reasons to seek the graphic and sensational

## **Newspapers**

Values:

\*Can provide indication of the nature of a society and on specific aspects of its culture

\*Can provide a daily record of events occurring in history ( albeit perhaps a limited one)

Limitations:

\*A product of the societies in which they are produced, and therefore offering only a limited perspective

\*In a dictatorship, certain details might be suppressed to preserve the authority of the government in power-censorship

\*A newspaper might be primarily an instrument of propaganda

\*Commercial motives

\*All have political agenda

## **Statistics**

Values:

\*provide raw factual evidence of historical trends (provided they are reliable)

\*Generally open to interpretation, free of the potent influence of personal and cultural biases (provided they have not been manipulated)

Limitations:

\*Can be manipulated for example by governments wishing to corroborate claims or present themselves in a favorable light. Accuracy might therefore be questioned

\*Might represent only a limited sample. Does not represent the general population

\*Margins of error must be taken into account

\*Always produced for a purpose

## **Government Records**

Values:

If never intended for disclosure, might provide a candid glimpse into the inner workings of a government

\*Purely factual, solid, reliable

Limitations:

\*If their disclosure was anticipated, potential for manipulation. Perhaps to conceal scandal, illegal maneuvers, or to maintain an image of the government concerned

\*Only what the government allows the public to know

## **Oral History (Interviews with participants in historical events)**

Values:

\*Provides a means of learning about the past from individual with first-hand knowledge of historical events

\*Provides important historical evidence about people, especially minority groups who might have been excluded from mainstream publications

\*A means of preserving details of historical legacies which might not have been include in written accounts

\*Opinions held by people who experienced a period of history

\*Interpretations can be corroborated

Limitations:

\*If the person being interviewed has aged significantly in the period of time between the actual experience and the interview, the physical and mental deterioration of the subject must be taken into account.

\*If the story is being recounted a significant time after the period of history under scrutiny, details might have become confuse over the passage of time or faded completely from memory. Traumatic experiences can be forgotten. Accuracy must be questioned

\*Experiences in the present might influence accounts of the past and a person with the benefit of hindsight might be compelled to reassess events and reconstruct memories accordingly

\*Personal biases, opinions, and cultural background of subject must be taken into account in interpreting the information conveyed

\*Tend to be apologies

+Highly subjective