**Historiography—A Guide to Evaluating Sources**

As part of the IB History of the Americas curriculum, you will be expected to comment on the reliability of the sources of information you have found, not merely summarize them in a narrative.

Your should always take into account the context of the source. Who produced the document? When? For what purpose? Who was the intended audience? Was it intended for public or private consumption? Can you deduce the author’s purpose? There are many useful questions that can be asked about reliability, but the key component is the issue of **value** (and **limitation**) to the historian. Students should also learn to deal with issues of subjectivity and objectivity without using the simplistic response of “bias.”

In the evaluating of sources, the five “friends” of a scholar are:

**Who? When? Where? Why?** and **For Whom?**

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| **MAIN ADVANTAGES**  | **MAIN DISADVANTAGES**  |
| **Statistics**          Provides very precise numerical information about society (the economy, inflation, employment, trade, population, elections, casualties in wars, etc.) that other sources cannot          By processing this information, often using computers, historians can work out standards or cost of living, birth and death rates, trade output, etc.  |            Sometimes the statistics only relate to one locality and historians error by making generalized statements which may not match reality          May be very incomplete and historians have to use intelligent guesswork to bridge the gaps         The statistics may be deliberately distorted by governments to improve their image  |
| **Governmental Records**—storehouses of information preserved in speeches, laws, treaties, committee minutes, commissions, hearings, etc.          Speeches, etc. can explain ideas behind governmental actions          Help to build up a narrative or account about what happened and when |          Don’t usually tell us about the results of governmental actions (whether a law was effective or a treaty was obeyed, etc.)          Don’t tell us about the conflicting interests of and ideas of rival groups/interests         A lot of sensitive information is destroyed or kept secret  |
| **Newspapers**          Very detailed information about the variety of people, places and events (politics, sport, social affairs, economy, warfare, etc.) in the news, editorials, advertisements, editorials, etc.          They also may give insights into the interest and fashions of the age          They inform about general opinions and attitudes  |          May be factually inaccurate          More room for opinion in reports or editorials          Newspapers often have an official political bias, offering support for particular parties or candidates          They tend to condense information and therefore they may distort what actually happened         Censorship may be imposed during national crises by the government or the courts  |
| **Private Letters, Diaries, and Memoirs**          May inform about personal views and motives of the author         Often gives intimate details, perhaps unknown to others, about other people and events         May give general information that may confirm other sources         Can show how individual people were effected by events |            Very personal and subjective         May be “ghosted” by another writer         Limited scope because the author may not be in a position to know about events         In the case of memoirs and autobiographies, there may be a memory lapse, distortion through hindsight, or deliberate omission of information  |
| **Oral Record**          Gives individual’s feeling and experiences          Provides local details during national events |         May only be one person’s opinion         May be inaccurate if person is forgetful, biased or far from the event  |
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| **MAIN ADVANTAGES**  | **MAIN DISADVANTAGES** |
| **Drawings, Paintings or Cartoons**          Shows the tastes and techniques (interests, styles, humor, etc.) of a particular time          They give a type of information that written sources don’t, such as what things look like  |            Possibly very subjective an selective but could be a totally accurate representation of an event or person          They may only five a general impression rather than a detailed picture  |
| **Photographs**          Can be extremely accurate and detailed providers of information about people and events          They provide the appearance of historical scenes          They freeze historical moments and this may provide unique opportunities for the historian to study details of people and events |            The camera can lie          Each picture is itself a selected fraction of the whole event          Photos can be tampered with  |
| **Poems and Novels**          May provide insight into literary fashions and styles of a particular period          May give personal views and ideas of the author          May contain specific information about people and events of the time  |            Very subjective and often an emotional response to events and ideas          Perhaps the need for a good story or convincing writing may outweigh the need for factual accuracy  |
| **Buildings and Artifacts**          Reveal the materials used at that time          Show the technology of the period          Reveals fashions and tastes in architecture          Reveals contemporary beliefs          May contain internal evidence (inscriptions, etc.)  |           Often incomplete (ruins or foundations) or singular (only example known to be available) and this require great imagination and inference by the historian which may be wrong         They are not always representative and may only tell us about one particular group in society, usually the wealthy and ruling classes  |

***Other thoughts on sources—***

Most types of sources have certain values and limitations for the historian. Make sure you keep this point in mind as you write and refer to the sources in your Internal Assessment.

1.      Use information which more directly represents the thoughts and/or intents of those involved. This probably means further research (i.e. another library) to get more primary source material.

2.      A document written at the time of an incident and/or by a participant is generally more polarized in its views than those written after the fact, when more information and/or a broader perspective is available.

3.      Be wary of any Internet sites dedicated to individuals or events (usually noted with a **.com** or **.org** extension--**.edu** tends to be a more reliable source). They have the same shortcomings (and more) as primary sources do. **DO NOT** use material from these type of sites unless the information can be corroborated by *at least* one other textual source. Also, they may not give proper attribution to an outside resource, as required of a scholarly work.

4.      Be judicious in the selection of source material. Your bibliography should reflect the materials needed to address the different aspects of your thesis and as many points of view as possible. The *rule-of-thumb* is to have as many textual sources as Internet sources.