"You shouldn’t believe everything you read"

You have probably heard this sentence before. These guidelines provide you with the tools to evaluate sources.

- When is a source a 'good' source?
- Can one trust the creator of the source, and is the content of the source the truth?
- When you have read the guidelines, you will be better prepared to work with original sources and to be critical when assessing a source’s relevance!

WHAT IS A SOURCE?
Sources can be both written documents and artefacts – and both types can inform us about the past. An artefact such as a chair gives us knowledge about how human beings have created furniture through the centuries – from old wooden chairs to modern plastic ones. Your school is also an artefact. It reflects understanding of what makes a good school at the time of construction. Consequently, just by looking at it, an artefact can also ‘tell’ us something about the time it was created and about the creator’s purpose with the artefact.
Written sources can be thought of as informative or ‘speaking’ sources. Unlike artefacts, written sources contain a text that tells us something directly. The source can be a newspaper or an old church register. These guidelines deal with written sources. We examine them when trying to find out what took place at a certain time in the past. The sources are to help us get as close as possible to the event. If the event took place many years ago, the persons who took part in it cannot be interviewed. Therefore, one can only obtain knowledge about what happened through sources.
THE RELEVANCE OF THE SOURCE

There are no good or bad sources! Whether a source is relevant or not depends on what you would like to get to know from it. For example, if you want to know how witch burning took place in the 16th century, an eyewitness account by a farmer’s wife who saw the witch being burned at the stake would be a good source. However, her account would perhaps not be a good source if you want to know how the witch defended herself in front of the judge in the town. Court records could tell you much more about the statements the witch made in court. A bad source would be the town mayor who hated witches and therefore wrote a biased account. In other words, it is your question – what you want to know – that determines whether the source is relevant for you.

RELIC AND NARRATIVE

All historical sources are relics. This means that all sources are the result of a certain action, of the attitude of the creator and of the time the source was created. For example, the diary of a soldier during the First World War is a relic that is the result of the soldier’s daily accounts in a book. The diary is simultaneously a narrative, because you can read about the war in it. You can utilize a source as a relic or a narrative. It depends on what you want to use the source for – again, what you want to find out! For instance, if you want to know something about how soldiers wrote diaries in 1914-18, the paper they used, whether they could spell or had messy handwriting, you are using the diaries as relics. If instead you want to know something about the course of the war, you can use the diaries as narratives, because the soldiers describe what happened, for example, at the battle of Verdun in 1916.

SEVEN QUESTIONS TO PUT TO THE SOURCE

The toolbox for source criticism. The point of source criticism is exactly that: To examine your source critically to determine its reliability and whether it is relevant or good enough to answer your question. When using sources – irrespective of whether they are ancient or from yesterday – you should consider the following:

1. What kind of source is it?
What type of source is it? Is it minutes, a letter, a diary, a law, instructions etc? The type of source can explain why it contains the information it does.

2. Who has written the source?
Who has written the source and why? Is the content biased? Did the creator have a special motive for writing the narrative and is the source influenced by his or her motive? Always take into consideration whether the creator of the source can have had a special interest in lying, exaggerating or altering the truth.
3. When is the source from?
Notice when the source was written. Was it written down close to the event or many years later? If it was written a long time after the event took place, there is a risk that the creator of the source has forgotten what actually happened or that he or she does not remember correctly.

4. Is it a primary or secondary source?
Investigate whether the source has copied its information from another source. You may know the story of Herodotus, the Greek historian who in the 5th century wrote about events that had taken place several hundred years before he was born. Where did Herodotus get his information? He must have had it told to him or have copied from other sources. We call the oldest known variant of a source the primary source. If the source is a copy or relies on another source, it is a secondary source because it is based on the primary source. It is important to know this, because just imagine if the secondary source has copied wrongly from the primary source! This is why it is a good idea to go to the primary source if it still exists. If it does not exist anymore, then the copy suddenly becomes the primary source, because it has now become the oldest known variant of the source.

5. Is the information first-hand or second-hand?
Think about whether the creators of the sources have seen what they are writing about with their own eyes. Was the creator present when it happened or was he or she told about it by someone else? If the creator was present and saw what took place, we call this a first-hand account. If he or she heard about it from others, we call the source a second-hand account. As a point of departure, first-hand sources are best because we know that the creators have seen it themselves and have not got incorrect information from someone else. BUT you should still be critical about first-hand sources, because even if the creator was an eyewitness to an event, he or she could still have an interest in exaggerating, lying or not telling the whole truth. Or he or she could have forgotten what took place.

6. Who is the source addressed to?
Pay attention to the recipient of the source. The creators of the sources may have had an interest in writing as they did because they knew who would read it. You probably know this from yourself. When you write a message, you also consider what your recipient should know – or not know – about a certain situation.

7. Is the source backed by other sources?
One source is not enough to explain the past! After all, the information in the source may not be correct. There are often several different accounts that tell about the same event. In addition, almost as often, the accounts disagree about what actually happened. Make use of your toolbox for source criticism to assess which sources come closest to the truth.