

21H.206
American Consumer Culture

Creating a Primary Source Journal

Collect primary sources on five days throughout the semester. Attach a one-page analysis of this primary source. The journal is due on the last day of class, December 12. But each time you collect a source, you should bring it to class and be prepared to share it in discussion.

The purpose of this assignment is to discover your own primary sources on a specific topic related to class discussion. This assignment will help you hone your research skills and enable you to think about the most effective way of presenting your findings. Over the course of the semester, you will create your own annotated collection of materials and share them with your classmates.

The key is to pick a very focused topic such as a person, an event, a new trend, a place, an invention, etc. You want to choose something that illuminates an important historical change in the history of American consumer culture. Ideally what you select will also shed light onto the broader contours of American history.

Think of these as a scrapbook for a historical scavenger hunt. It's your job to find a primary source document (i.e.: something old) that sheds light on the time period we are studying. Writing history is like doing good detective work. To figure out what happened, you have to piece together clues of evidence. Rather than hunting down the missing murder weapon or the revealing finger print, your job is to find a story or person or event that helps to explain why things turned out the way they did. Your bit of historical evidence can be exactly that: just a bit. While every episode might not have determined the fate of the twentieth century, each should reveal something about a particular historical moment. Think of the past as an unfolding story where individual actors and actions, big and small, shaped the course of events.

Where should you look for these clues and stories? For the twentieth century, your choices are endless. The easiest place to begin is in old magazines and newspapers. The MIT Humanities Library has many choices. To get a sense of how each document is the product of a specific time period, it is important to see it in its context. So it is best to have a real hands-on experience: browse the stacks, look through old magazines, read the ads, see the fashions. To

help give your searching expedition some focus, you might want to begin by consulting the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature or the New York Times Index. Both reference books list subjects and people alphabetically, year by year. You should also feel free to venture out into other sources such as old Congressional hearings, scientific and industry trade journals, census and other statistical data, etc.

You can also gather your sources on-line as long as you can provide detailed information about the document and where it comes from. Note that many historical journals are on-line through the Barton Catalogue either through JSTOR or the History Cooperative. You should also consult the many on-line resources, beginning with those on the MIT Server. The History Matters site is a very good place to start. In doing on-line research, be sure you are relying on a legitimate source.

What do these stories or slices of the past tell us? Though any one document will certainly not explain everything, each should provide a window into another world. It's your job to explain what your primary source tells us. For example, if it is a story about a person, figure out who the person was: a public official or a private citizen, a man or woman, black or white, typical or unusual, a leader or follower, an outsider or an insider, a reactionary or a radical, etc. Try to figure out why this person or event or phenomenon was thought important enough at the time to receive attention. Next, try to figure out what the larger historical forces were that enabled or influenced this person and vice versa? Finally, place this story in the context of your other readings for the week. Does this story help to explain the readings? In what ways? Does it offer a different viewpoint and how so? You should be able to get all that information across in just a brief one-page synopsis.

Bring these to class prepared to share your evidence and what you learned with your classmates. You will want to analyze these texts by explaining what is significant about them. There is no single right way to do this assignment. The more creative you are, the better.