

Photographs

Introduction to Photographs

Photographs provide us with images of past events. Today, historians study the content and the meaning of these visual images to locate information about a particular topic, time, or event. Photographs can convey countless details about life. For historians and for us, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

Photographers have the ability to manipulate, intentionally or unintentionally, the record of the event. It is the photographer—and the camera’s frame—that defines the picture’s content.

Historians who study the everyday lives of anonymous people find photographs are an invaluable source. Sometimes photographs are the only means of reconstructing the material world and behavior of people who did not leave many written records.

Yet, photographs, like other primary sources, must be studied carefully and critically. While they appear to be the most objective and accurate of all primary sources, they MAY not be. Photographs are the product of many variables, including, the photographer’s intention, the user’s need, the viewer’s interpretation and the equipment’s technical abilities.

Photographers have the ability to manipulate, intentionally or unintentionally, the record of the event. It is the photographer—and the camera’s frame—that defines the picture’s content. Thus, the photographer chooses what will be in the picture, what will be left out, and what the emphasis will be.

The first steps in using photographs as a primary source are to identify the subject and content of the photograph, and the contextual information that may not be in the photograph, such as learning about the photographer. What was the photographer’s intention? Was the photographer hired for a specific purpose? Was the photographer a partial or seemingly impartial observer, an insider or an outsider?

Like all other primary sources, photographs must be studied in conjunction with other evidence. One must look at many photographs, related documents, and oral histories to determine if a photograph’s information is unusual or part of a larger pattern.

Photographs: Strengths and Limitations

Primary Source

Photographs: Visual records obtained through photography

Strengths

- + Visual records of a moment in time
- + Convey many details about people, places, objects, and events
- + Convey information about everyday life and behavior that is best communicated in visual terms (hair and clothing styles, interior design)
- + Sometimes provide evidence of attitude
- + Important to the study of people who did not leave many written records
- + Can stimulate the personal involvement of the viewer
- + Do not require fluency in a particular language to understand
- + Can be used to stimulate the memory of people

Limitations

- Not a complete or objective source: the image that serves as the lasting record does not equate directly with the reality of the event itself
- Relationship of the photographer to those being photographed often difficult to determine
- Reflect the bias or perspective of the photographer including choices about:
 - what is included in the frame of the camera
 - the moment in time recorded in the photograph
 - the subject matter that the person present at the event thought was important to record
 - whether or not to manipulate the people or objects in the picture
- People, place, date, and the name of the photographer are often not identified.
- The emotions and thoughts of those involved often are not evident.
- Information from this kind of source is often suggestive rather than definitive. Photographs must be studied in conjunction with other evidence. One must look at many photographs and/or other source materials such as documents and oral histories to determine if the information is unusual or part of a larger pattern.



Tips for Reading Photographs

1 of 3

Use this guide to help you analyze photographs. Answer as many of the questions as you can using evidence from the photograph. Write your answers to as many questions as possible based on what you see and what you may already know.

First Impressions

What are your first impressions?

Take a closer look . . . make sure to examine the whole photograph.

Make a list of any people in the photograph.

What is happening in the photograph?

Make a list of any activities you see going on in the photograph.

Make a list of any objects in the photograph.

Make a list of any animals in the photograph.



Tips for Reading Photographs

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Looking More Closely

Are there any captions? A date? Location? Names of people?

What kind of clothing is being worn?

Is there any lettering on signs or buildings?

What time of year is pictured? Time of day? Cite your evidence.

Where was the photograph taken? Cite your evidence.

Thinking Further

If people are in the photograph, what do you think is their relationship to one another?

Can you speculate on a relationship of the people pictured and someone who is not in the picture?



Tips for Reading Photographs

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What do you think happened just before the picture was taken?

What do you think happened just after the photograph was taken?

Who do you think took the photograph? Why?

What does this photograph suggest to you? Describe your reaction in a statement.

What questions do you have about the photograph? How could you try to answer them?

What is the one thing that you would remember most about this photograph? Why?

What questions do you have about the photograph that you cannot answer through analyzing it? Where could you go next to answer these questions?
