

Primary Sources: Some Points of Good Practice (with special reference to Xerte)

By this stage you should be already familiar with what PRIMARY SOURCES are and how to read, study and analyse them. You should therefore be aware that primary source evidence should be at the core of your Xerte object (as for any assignment in History!) because it is fundamental to building up a convincing argument. You can then strengthen it with secondary reading around the subject. But primary source evidence should be the basis of your work and certainly of your Xerte object, which is meant to offer an introduction to a specific primary source or set of sources. Therefore, please make sure that you use primary evidence consistently to back up your arguments. At this stage we do not expect you to be able to access the original (as they may be in Latin or not even available in a printed version). **You can find guidelines for citations of primary sources in the 'Style Guide' section of the History Subject Site on Blackboard.**

Citing primary sources located in secondary sources

When you find references to primary sources in secondary sources, even when they are very short quotations, you still need to reference the primary source first, followed by the secondary study where you find it. Such a citation (usually in a footnote, but in a Xerte object, at the foot of the page) might look something like:

- Isidore of Seville, *Chronicle*, chapter 34, cited in Jamie Wood, *The Politics of Identity in Visigothic Spain*. Leiden: Brill, 2012: 56. [this means that Wood cited/quoted Isidore's *Chronicle*, the primary source for his argument, on p. 56 of his book]

Guidelines for introducing a primary source

If you decide to analyse a particular primary source extract, the following structure might be useful:

- 1) **Introduction:** outline the following basic information (if known; remember that many medieval works are anonymous) about the source from which you have extracted your direct quotation or paraphrase (an explanation/ summary of a quotation):
 - a. genre/ type of source (e.g. history, chronicle, law, letter...);
 - b. author;
 - c. date of composition;
 - d. patrons for whom it was written;
 - e. historical context;
 - f. any other basic information about the text and its context that you think will help your reader to understand it.

- 2) **Main themes:** (a) What does the author seem to be particularly concerned about? (b) What does he talk about most frequently? (c) What does he talk about in the introduction and conclusion to his work? This is where he should be laying out his position so you'd expect him to state his main theme(s) at this point.
- a. Use **relevant quotations** from the chosen extract to support your argument and to illustrate those key themes.
 - b. **Paraphrase** (= summarise/ explain briefly) some quotations to further illustrate your point. This is especially important with long quotations. Remember, you **must provide a reference for paraphrases** so that we can see where you have taken your information from.
 - c. **Broader significance** (not compulsory, but will potentially score you marks; if you decide to mention other examples, please make sure to keep your focus on your main source(s)/ themes):
 - i. Discuss whether the themes relate to a more general trend within the work; within the author's writings as a whole, or society at the time;
 - ii. Mention other examples, case studies or historical cases which might highlight similarities or contradictions concerning the points presented in your extract.
- 3) **Conclusion:** try not to repeat again what you discussed in the previous slides/pages of your Xerte object, but rather conclude with a discussion of the reliability of the source (if you did not do it before, in the introduction), what it tells us about the author or his historical context, or a summary of the importance of this text, etc...

TO AVOID

- **Incorrect information:** if you are unsure or something is ambiguous, please either point this out as a point for further discussion or do some further research to clarify your knowledge. Please, avoid partial (and even worse!) incorrect information.
- **Generalizations:** Try to be as specific as possible. For example, mention a more specific time period than "the Middle Ages" because, as you will see, there are HUGE differences between the different parts of the period which made such a label quite dangerous to adopt generally. So, we would recommend that you mention at least a century (e.g. "in the eleventh century") or a broader, but still constrained, period (e.g. "during the Central Middle Ages").
- **Making very general conclusions based on a small amount of information.** And avoid mentioning a highly debateable (or debated) topic if you do not have time or space to clarify it (or to mention some of the related historiography).
- **Spelling and grammar mistakes.** Please, mind the following points of good practice:



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- Write using the FULL SPELLING of a word or phrase rather than contractions. E.g. “It is” (NOT “it’s”); “and” (NOT “&”), “does not” (NOT “it doesn’t”)
- Pay attention to PUNCTUATION: it really makes a difference!
- Pay attention to the vocabulary that you use: e.g. the difference between TO INFER and TO IMPLY. Use a dictionary if you are not sure!