

Archival Artifact Analysis Worksheet¹

Archival collections consist of many categories (textual, visual, material, digital) and can include many types of “artifacts.” Letters, city planning records, sound recordings, out-of-print books and pamphlets, personal diaries, government documents, maps, and video testimony are just a few of the “artifacts” you may encounter in an archive. Archival artifacts are primary sources—that is, original materials that emerge from a unique and specific historical context. Researchers draw on primary sources in order to develop secondary sources such as scholarly articles and books. Whether you visit a material or digital archival collection, the following worksheet will help you prepare for independent research by facilitating your analysis of an artifact that interests you.

- 1) Identify the type of “artifact” you are working with. For example, if it is a document, is it a newspaper article? Map? Letter? Telegram? Press release? Advertisement? Pamphlet? Government record? If it is in another media category, is it a photograph? Sound recording? Video testimony? Website?
- 2) Describe the artifact. What is its topic or theme? What are some unique characteristics of the artifact? If it is a document, is it hand- or type-written? Does it have any seals, stamps, or notations? Does it feature any people, acronyms, organizations, or institutions that you can learn about in a quick online search?
- 3) Where did the artifact originate? Who created the artifact? When was it created, and why?
- 4) To what audience does the artifact appeal? How can you tell? What features of the artifact provide clues?
- 5) If the artifact has a clear creator or author, can you detect any bias or prejudice? Note any tone or language that may indicate bias.
- 6) List three things you find particularly striking or important about the artifact.
- 7) What questions do you have about the artifact? What information might you seek in order to gain a fuller understanding of the artifact?
- 8) Does the artifact reinforce, contradict, or raise questions about expert opinions you have read or heard about the artifact’s topic or theme?

¹ Prepared by Charlotte Nunes. This resource draws on similar worksheets available through the Human Rights Documentation Initiative (<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/signaturecourses/resources/archival-source-analysis-worksheet>) and the National Archives (http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/written_document_analysis_worksheet.pdf).