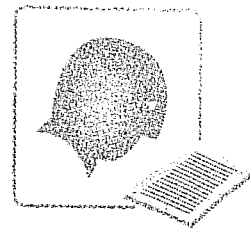


# Document Skill



## Determining Credibility: Whom Do You Believe?

When looking at sources in general and specifically on the DBQ portion of the AP test, you must be able to assess their credibility quickly. That is, which document provides the most accurate information concerning the event or phenomenon? When you confront conflicting points of view, you must decide which author left the most reliable account. In other words, you must weigh the evidence.

Below are some questions that will help assign credibility to a speaker and a source.

1. Is the source a primary or secondary one? A primary document is a first-hand account of an event. Examples of primary sources are letters, speeches, court rulings, and newspaper articles. A secondary source is written by someone who acquired the information second-hand and at a later date. He or she was not actually present at the event. An example of a secondary source is your history textbook. Primary sources are usually given greater weight than secondary sources but not always.
2. Was the document produced at the time the event occurred? Some primary sources such as newspaper articles, journals, and diaries are eyewitness accounts but may have been written many years after the fact. Always look for the date of the source.
3. What do you know about the writers? Did the writers have a vested interest in the event that would color their perspective? For example, were they describing a battle in which they participated? Did they own slaves? Did they command the ship that torpedoed the passenger liner? You would generally place greater credence in a neutral observer.
4. Were the writers in a position to know what happened? Were they actually present at the battlefield or on the bow of the ship? Were they in the Senate when Charles Sumner was actually attacked? Could they give an accurate first-hand account?

On the DBQ, you must look for the date, writer's agenda, and opportunity immediately. Since the DBQ is composed exclusively of primary sources, it is important to assess these components quickly to establish credibility. For example, both William Lloyd Garrison and George Fitzhugh were first-hand observers of slavery, but they held diametrically opposing views and represented totally different constituencies. Also, dates are important because their attitudes changed over the antebellum period. All these factors must be considered when deciding which man most accurately described the institution of slavery. A quick way to evaluate the credibility of sources is with P.O.W.S.; that is, when a student sees a source he/she should ask:

- P. Primary or secondary source?
- O. Occasion of the source—when was it produced?
- W. Writer's agenda—did he/she have a vested interest?
- S. Standing of the author—could he/she really know?