

Values and Limitations of Various Sources

Private letters, diaries, memoirs:

Values

- Can provide an intimate glimpse into the effects of historical events on the lives of individuals experiencing them first-hand.
- If the source was never intended to be read by a large audience, its contents might be of a more candid and revealing nature.
- An eye-witness's account of events she/he witnessed
- Valuable as a study of the personality of its author/creator
- Reveal the point of view (bias) of the author

Limitations

- If the document was intended for disclosure, it runs the risk of being an apologia, contrived to justify or defend the author's opinions or actions/inactions.
- Such personal documents are inherently limited in their scope in that they present only one viewpoint, one interpretation of what happened.
- Inevitable biased-molded by the opinions, prejudices, and cultural standpoint of the author. Must be read critically. **Bias is not necessarily a limitation.
- If the document is a result of recollections many years after the period described the details might have become blurred with the passing of time. Certain aspects consciously or subconsciously forgotten, and memories molded to conform to views evolved since then(i.e. benefit of hindsight).
- Selective by nature (most important is what is excluded not included)

Poems and novels:

Values

- Can provide an interesting perspective into the spirit and culture of the time in which they were written.
- Can chronicle the experiences and feelings of specific individuals living through a period of history, providing a focused and personal portrait of a time.
- Often offer an emotional appeal, allowing the reader to identify more closely with circumstance and individuals of a time.
- Can provide information on a certain period of history in a more easily digestible format through engaging the interest of the reader.

Limitations:

- Often not solely concerned with providing a factual account—a certain degree of imagination and creative license involved, and, therefore, perhaps not as useful as a factual account of history.
- Inevitably flavored by biases of creator. (Can be trivial without back-up)

Drawings, paintings and cartoons:

Values:

- Can effectively capture the spirit of a time, and the opinions and sentiments generally characterizing that time.
- Contain evidence about a culture at specific moments in history – its customs, styles, preferences, atmosphere, architecture, and manner of dress, appearance.
- Provide a visually stimulating piece of historical evidence.
- Example of art styles of the time.
- Comment on features of regime (e.g. Role of an artist in a one-party state).

Limitations:

- Produced by an artist with a definite point of view, and therefore inevitably influenced by the opinions and prejudices of its creator.
- Limited scope—generally highlight one specific aspect of a period of history.
- Artist not generally concerned with providing a factual account of a historical event or circumstance, but rather with producing a creative piece of work or expressing own opinions and emotional reactions.

Audio and visual sources: photographs and films

Values:

- Can capture moments in history in vivid detail, providing a unique glimpse into a point in time and stimulating a first-hand experience.
- Provide a visually stimulating piece of historical evidence.
- Examples of propaganda
- Can show aspects of the culture (i.e. dress)
- Reflections of attitudes, trends in filmmaking at a specific time.

Limitations:

- Behind every photograph or film is a creator with own personal point of view and prejudices, which may be reflected in the work either consciously or subconsciously.
- Can be manipulated by the creator to convey a certain point or impress upon the viewer his/her own conceptions (parts can be edited, parts can be cut out.) Certain details can be excluded or downplayed. Certain details can be accentuated or focused on.
- The creator ultimately holds the power to decide the impression conveyed by the photograph or film.
- Tendency for commercial reasons, to seek scenes, which are graphic and interesting.

Newspapers:

Values:

- Can provide indications of the nature of a society and on specific aspects of its culture.
- Can provide a daily record of events occurring in history (albeit perhaps a limited one).

Limitations:

- A product of the societies in which they are produced, and therefore offering only a limited perspective.
- In a dictatorship, certain details might be suppressed to preserve the authority of the government in power –censorship.
- A newspaper might be primarily an instrument of propaganda.
- Commercial motives
- All have political agenda

Statistics

Values:

- Provide raw factual evidence of historical trends (provided they are reliable).
- Generally open to interpretation, free of the potent influence of personal and cultural biases. (Provided they have not been manipulated).

Limitations:

- Can be manipulated; for example, by governments wishing to corroborate claims or present themselves in a favorable light and their accuracy must therefore be questioned.
- Might represent only a limited sample not representative of the general population.
- Margins of error must be taken into account.
- Always produced for a specific purpose.

Government records:

Values:

- If never intended for disclosure, might provide a candid glimpse into the inner-workings of a government.
- Purely factual, solid, reliable

Limitations:

- If their disclosure was anticipated could have been manipulated, perhaps to conceal scandalous happenings or illegal maneuverings, or to maintain the image of the government concerned.
- Only what the government allows the public to know.

Oral history (interviews with participants in historical events):

Values:

- Provides a means of learning about the past from individual with first-hand knowledge of historical events.
- Provides important historical evidence about people, especially minority groups who might have been excluded from mainstream publications or did not leave behind written primary sources.
- A means of preserving details of historical legacies which might not have been included in written accounts.
- Opinions held by people who experienced a period of history.
- Interpretations must be corroborated.

Limitations:

- If the person being interviewed has aged significantly in the period of time between the actual experience and the interview, the physical and mental deterioration of the subjects must be taken into account—e.g. memory loss, emotional trauma.

- If the story is being recounted a significant time after the period of history under scrutiny, details might have become confused over the passage of time or faded entirely from memory and traumatic experiences might have been deliberately forgotten. Thus, accuracy must be questioned.
- Experiences in the present might influence accounts of the past, and person with the benefit of hindsight might be compelled to reassess events and reconstruct their memories accordingly.
- Personal biases, opinions, cultural background of subject must be taken into account in interpreting the information conveyed, as well as his/her motives in sharing memories- the individual might not paint an entirely balanced and accurate picture of events and circumstances.
- Tend to be apologies
- Highly subjective.