

P1 – Analyzing primary documents

A historian analyzes a primary source by asking a series of questions of the text – not unlike how a scholar might come to terms with another’s project, including its structure, tone, materials, and uses and limits. Keep in mind the questions we went over in class. What does the source say on the surface? Is there an argument? Who is the audience? What assumptions does the writer make? What kinds of rhetorical devices does the writer use? Does the source seem credible, and why or why not? In this essay, I want you to first come to terms with several primary sources about the 19th century U.S. slavery experience, keeping the above questions in mind. Read them carefully several times, looking for both their literal and implied meanings, as we did with several documents in class. Then, in 1,200 to 1,800 words (roughly four to six pages), assess how the documents support, challenge, or complicate the slavery experience as depicted in the film *12 Years a Slave*. In other words, does the film faithfully reflect the slavery experience, as described in the documents? And, keeping the arguments of Robert Rosenstone and others in mind, is there any element of 19th century slavery that the film does a better job of depicting, in contrast to the written record?

You must use a minimum of **four primary sources** from a variety of origins, including Solomon Northup’s 1854 narrative, *12 Years a Slave*, found on Blackboard. While any part of his narrative can be used, especially consider chapters 2, 5, 10, 13, 16, and 21. In addition, choose at least one document from the following list culled from George Mason University’s “History Matters” website:

- “Slaves for sale,” 1855 (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6729>)
- “My Master Sold Albert to a Trader,” 1852 (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6380>)
- “We Was Jus’ Turned Out Like a Lot of Cattle,” 1940
(<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6520>)
- “Time Did Not Reconcile Me To My Chains,” 1837
(<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6580>)

In addition, you must find at least two relevant primary source on your own, using library resources taught in our sessions with the librarian. Primary materials from the 19th century can be found in several places, especially through the History subject databases on the library website:

- African American Newspapers
- African American Periodicals
- other newspaper databases (i.e. New York Times, New York Herald-Tribune)
- book anthologies of primary materials (by typing in your subject and then “sources” in a catalog search on the Gelman website).

There are many educational institutions with websites devoted to primary sources about slavery, especially slave narratives. Here are three, including two from the Library of Congress:

- Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-38 (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>)
- Excerpts from Slave Narratives – Steven Mintz, University of Houston (<http://www.vgskole.net/prosjekt/slavrute/primary.htm>)
- Slavery and the Courts, 1740-1860 (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sthtml/sthome.html>)

Lastly, feel free to use other secondary and scholarly sources as you see fit, including Rosenstone and other film scholars we have already read, other more traditional histories of slavery, and reviews of the film. Here are two of the latter, found under Course Documents:

- Nelson, "Cinematic Slavery"
- Urban, "Art as Ally"

This paper will be written in two drafts. A first full draft of several students' papers will be workshopped in class in each section; everyone else will receive written thoughts from me. A second and final draft will be turned in for a grade.

This essay's purpose is to combine several skills we have worked on so far. A successful paper:

- analyzes at least four primary documents by interrogating their assumptions and subtexts (reading for both literal and implied meanings), including the Northup narrative
- crafts a clear, concise claim about the documents' value in interpreting slavery
- supports your claim with specific pieces of evidence – both paraphrased and judiciously quoted – from the documents and other sources cited
- structures the argument effectively, with distinct paragraphs and strong topic sentences
- reads clearly with minimal awkwardness and syntax errors
- uses proper citation (footnote) format, including from the George Mason website

This paper prepares you for P2, in which you analyze even more primary sources to make an argument about a film's ability to narrate a particular historical person, event, or period.

Format: 1,200-1,800 words; 12-point font and 1-inch margins; include name and section at top

Citation form: Chicago or Turabian-style footnotes (see Purdue's Owl website)

First full draft due: week 1, on Blackboard (Assignments – P1 first draft)

Final draft due: two weeks later, on Blackboard (Assignments – P1 final)