

# "Bones of the Past"

## Using Primary Sources in African American History

Roy E. Finkenbine. Pearson/Longman, 2004  
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As you read, you will want to examine every document critically. This will involve asking the following questions of each one you encounter in order to "put flesh and blood on the bones of the past."

1. **Who created the document?** A person's perspective on events is usually determined by their experiences and position in life. African American history is populated by diverse individuals from diverse backgrounds. Try to determine the author's gender, class, region, and social status. Clues to this information usually appear in either the headnote or the document. This will help you determine the author's point of view. An African-born slave woman on a southern cotton plantation, for example, would undoubtedly have a different perspective than a wealthy and educated free black man born in the pre-Civil War North.
2. **Why was the document created?** Was the author a participant or a mere observer of the events being described? Did he or she have a personal interest in what they were describing that would bias their account? Were they trying to persuade someone? Was the document produced for a particular cause or organization such as the Civil Rights movement?
3. **What was the document's intended audience?** Was it intended to be private—a diary or a letter between family members or friends? Or was it for public consumption—a speech, a newspaper editorial, a published autobiography? Was it written to other blacks? Or to influential whites? Was it a petition to Congress or a state legislature, or an argument before a court? Most documents are produced with a particular audience in mind. The nature of that audience usually shapes the document. The two sources in Chapter 1 offer an example. Olaudah Equiano penned his narrative as propaganda to be used in a campaign to abolish the Atlantic slave trade; Venture Smith simply hoped to sell his story to a popular audience. Read both documents. Do you think this affected the tone of the account of the slave trade that each produced?
4. **What type of document is it?** Is it written in ordinary prose? Or is it an example of a particular literary or musical genre, such as a poem or a spiritual? If so, the author may have rearranged (or even changed) some of the facts for artistic effect. How does this alter the usefulness and reliability of the document?
5. **When was the document created?** Was it produced immediately after (or during) the event it describes, within a short span of time, or after many years? Human memory fades and changes over time. It becomes less distinct as an event recedes into the distant past. It even deludes us. Sometimes we remember events differently than they actually occurred. A slave just escaped from bondage before the Civil War would likely recall slavery differently than an aging former slave interviewed by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s.