

UNITED WISDOM

Primary source and retelling: different purposes for reading

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Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *the speaker always gives one unvarying answer.*

Excerpt from Socrates’s speech in Plato’s Phaedrus, discussion of written speech; Benjamin Jowett’s English translation. This is a clause from a longer sentence, not an independent maxim.

What this article is about

Advice to read primary sources sounds straightforward until a specific task arises. Someone wants to understand a difficult argument, check an account of an event, or decide whether an older text addresses their question. They face the work, a translation, a commentary, and a short retelling. Which do they need? A primary source is not a universal guarantee of truth, and a retelling does not become useless simply because it came later. They can serve different purposes. This article considers how to choose and how to return from an explanation to a particular passage. We consult limited passages from Plato and Epictetus and a Library of Congress analysis sheet. These offer a philosophical dialogue, advice about philosophical practice, and a document-analysis tool. The reading exercise proposed here promises no automatic improvement. It helps define an answerable question and make its basis visible. Sometimes explanation is enough; sometimes direct reading matters; sometimes uncertainty should remain.

I. Primary in relation to which question?

A primary source bears directly on the subject in the particular respect being investigated. This is the article's working definition, not a badge of unconditional superiority. If we ask which words occur in a work, the work's text supplies the starting evidence. If we ask how a later commentator understood it, the commentary becomes primary material for that question. Investigating a translator's choice requires the particular translation, despite its distance from the author in time and language. One document can occupy different positions in different inquiries. Name the subject first; otherwise, primary merely decorates a shelf and sorts books by prestige rather than their role in the work actually undertaken.

Consider an invented example. A popular essay says a philosopher advised giving up a certain activity. A reader wants to decide whether to follow that advice. Several questions are

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

involved. Does the essay represent an actual passage? What did the activity mean to the philosopher? What reasons are given? Does the argument apply to the reader's present situation? Direct reading can help with the earlier questions; the last requires the reader's judgment and further information. A source cannot live our situation for us. Separating these levels makes it easier to choose a text without expecting one page to answer a question it was never written to address.

An invitation to read the original is therefore more useful when it identifies a place and purpose. Check a term, recover an argument, or examine a condition are intelligible tasks. Read everything to become serious enough is less definite and can turn a book into a test of the reader. The first approach allows a limited stage to finish with a clear result. Accessibility and depth need not compete: a small passage can demand close attention, while a large volume may remain familiar only through its contents page. What matters is the route from question to evidence. It lets us say what our reading established, what an explanation supplied, and which transition still needs examination.

II. A retelling can provide orientation

A retelling selects what its writer considers important, changes the order or detail, and expresses the material differently. A useful explanation can make a difficult work more accessible for a particular purpose. Accessibility does not eliminate selection. Ask what the explanation promises: general orientation, historical background, reconstruction of an argument, or a critical interpretation. Those promises differ. An introduction need not answer every specialist question. Trouble begins when limited orientation is mistaken for a complete account, or when the writer's position is concealed behind an impersonal claim that the author means something. A clear description of purpose helps us use an explanation for what it can offer.

For example, an imagined reader encounters an unfamiliar philosophical concept. A commentary explains the usual translation and offers a simple instance of its use. That may provide a sufficient entrance. A more precise question follows: does the author use the concept in that way in the chosen paragraph? Now open that paragraph rather than immediately rejecting the commentary. The explanation has already helped formulate the question. If direct reading reveals a difference, revise the map while retaining appreciation for the initial guide. We need not call every retelling deceptive to recognise its limits. The commentator and reader can have different tasks, provided the difference is made visible.

We can question the retelling itself. Where are its references? Does it identify passages supporting its conclusion? Does it distinguish quoted words from explanation? Does it acknowledge disputed readings? These questions are proposed as criteria for our work, not a measured quality scale. They help choose the next action: use a limited overview for

orientation, check a specific passage, or seek another commentary. Several explanations can be useful, but their number does not replace a connection with the text. If they all repeat one unsupported formulation, they transmit one assumption several times. A direct question about the words still requires a location another reader can open and inspect independently of the explanations.

III. Proximity does not remove limitations

Primary source can sound like a promise of direct access to reality. Yet a participant also speaks from a position, selects matters to report, and addresses someone. This article assesses no particular witness; the point is a logical distinction between proximity and completeness. A letter can show directly what its writer communicated to its recipient. One letter does not automatically establish every circumstance of the reported event. A recording can preserve spoken words without explaining all their causes. A broader claim needs a broader basis, regardless of the honour associated with calling the located document primary. The category tells us something about its relationship to the inquiry, not everything about its adequacy.

Imagine two accounts of one meeting. One participant describes the decision reached; another describes a moment of feeling unheard. They answer different questions about the same occasion. The first need not cancel the second person's experience; the second need not disprove the decision. Identify the object of each claim before looking for agreement, contradiction, or missing circumstances. Choosing which document outranks the other too early can impose a question that one does not answer. Both accounts may be close to the event without providing complete, interchangeable descriptions. This invented example illustrates a distinction; it is not evidence about an actual meeting or its participants.

Such attention does not make every version equally valuable. Access, detail, checkability, and internal consistency can differ. Each difference needs examination rather than being inherited from a category's name. We may establish one fact while leaving motives unknown. We may compare accounts and discover a contradiction that remains unresolved. A useful note retains the specific finding: this document says one thing, another passage says something else, and the additional material needed has not been found. Reading remains an inquiry rather than a ceremony confirming a chosen side. A primary source gives access to its own words, including limits a good retelling should preserve but may omit. It does not relieve us of deciding how far those words support the claim we intend to make.

IV. Translation belongs to the route

For many works, direct reading begins with a translation. We can consult the work itself in a translated edition without having read it in its author's language. Here, Plato was consulted in the English text naming Benjamin Jowett as translator, and Epictetus in the text naming Elizabeth Carter. The ancient Greek was not checked. That limit does not make the inquiry meaningless. It identifies its basis and the question that would require another step. A dispute about the nuance of a Greek word cannot be settled by one English formulation alone. An accessible translation can nevertheless provide a workable entrance when the task concerns the sequence of an argument in that edition.

Imagine a difficulty: two translations use different familiar words, and the reader concludes that the author contradicts himself. First establish that they represent the same passage and question. Perhaps the variation concerns the rendering of one concept; perhaps the translators chose different explanatory approaches. Perhaps matters here: without comparing the texts, these remain hypotheses. We cannot excuse a translation automatically as a stylistic difference or declare every unfamiliar choice erroneous. Define a small task instead. Which difference affects the conclusion, and what evidence could clarify it? A translator's note may suffice, or specialist assistance and more extensive reading may be needed. The next action should match the particular uncertainty.

When passing a passage onward, name the edition and the language used for your own translation. The Russian quotations accompanying this article were translated by its authors from the stated English texts. They are not attributed to Russian translators or presented as checks against ancient Greek. This leaves the chain visible so a reader can choose another route if needed. Accuracy does not require eliminating intermediaries from life; it requires preserving their participation. A commentary explains, a translator renders, an editor selects a textual basis, and we formulate a question. When those roles are distinguishable, we can locate the level at which a disagreement arose and identify what needs clarification before making a stronger claim.

V. An interpreter can help without replacing the task

In Enchiridion, section49, Epictetus considers difficult writing by Chrysippus, an interpreter, and philosophical practice. In Carter's displayed translation, seeking explanation belongs to the movement towards understanding. The passage does not encourage pride in the ability to expound difficulty alone. For our inquiry, it offers a particular distinction: help can serve a task, while displaying familiarity can displace it. This is philosophical advice, not research into educational effectiveness. It cannot measure a person's worth by books read or justify assessing another life against an ancient writer's demanding ideal. The interpretation here remains bounded by the passage actually consulted.

Ask what we need the commentary to do. If the difficulty concerns an argument's structure, an interpreter may reveal a transition we missed. We can then return to the passage and examine whether it supports that transition. If the purpose concerns reasoning about a situation of our own, the explanation can prepare us without making the decision. There is no need to promise that returning to a primary source will transform a life. A smaller result is enough: we understand which sentence supports the explanation and which part belongs to our application. That relationship can be shown to another reader without presenting our reading history as a credential or asking them to accept an interpreter's reputation in place of the passage.

A difficult question about knowledge follows. Someone can explain an argument clearly while remaining unsure whether they accept it. They may accept it without choosing to live by its proposed rule. They may try a limited application and reconsider. These distinctions should not disappear under an accusation of insufficient seriousness. We use the ancient passage to distinguish a means from a task while retaining the present reader's freedom. The interpreter does not become useless after the first assistance, and the primary source does not become a personal examiner. We can return to either with a defined question and assess the understanding gained through its visible basis. Understanding, agreement, and application need not be compressed into one verdict about the person reading.

VI. A written text does not answer back

Plato's Phaedrus discusses written speech in relation to a reader's questions. This article's epigraph comes from Socrates's speech in Jowett's translation. The relevant closing passage and the opening exchange about Lysias's speech were read; the whole dialogue was not investigated for this article. Our limited observation is that direct access to written words does not become a conversation in which the author answers a clarification. This is a philosophical consideration of writing, not a modern reading experiment or grounds for declaring written culture harmful. The identity of the speaker matters, and the short excerpt is labelled as an excerpt rather than presented as an independent maxim.

When we ask a book a question, an answer often arises through rereading, comparing passages, and reasoning. The printed sentence does not change after hearing our difficulty. Distinguish a question supported by a located passage from one whose answer we reconstruct. Suppose an imagined reader asks whether a rule covers a situation the author never describes. The reader may propose an analogy but should identify it as their own. Returning to the primary source checks the material for that analogy; it does not transfer responsibility for a modern conclusion to the author. Mediation continues during direct reading because the reader is connecting words with a new question. Direct access and independent judgment are therefore related without being identical.

This is no reason to abandon books or treat all explanations as arbitrary. A text's stability lets us return to a place and show it to others. Repeatability is not a ready answer to every request, however. If support is missing, change the question, inspect another passage, or leave the conclusion open. A limit in the available text is a substantive finding. It protects against the convenient formula the author would have said, which can conceal our own transition. We are free to develop a thought, object to it, or try an application. Responsibility for that development remains ours. Accurate reading makes the transition visible rather than removing the need to decide what to do with it.

VII. Read a particular passage for a particular purpose

After a retelling, the work itself may seem too large to revisit. Begin with one claim on which the conclusion actually depends. This is a proposed working order, not a proven law of learning. Frame a question as a distinction: all cases or a stated condition; the author's assertion or another position being considered; an action or an evaluation? Such a question helps locate a bounded passage. The reading need not stay short, but expansion should have a reason. If the answer depends on a previous argument, read it. If it depends on a term used elsewhere, locate that passage instead of accumulating unrelated pages merely to increase the amount consulted.

Consider an invented example. An overview calls a writer an advocate of strict rejection of pleasure. A reader finds a paragraph concerned with a particular situation and a distinction between kinds of pleasure. This does not establish the writer's complete position, but it may qualify the overview's broad label. The next action depends on the question: do we need the entire doctrine or an accurate correction to one sentence? The first requires a wider inquiry. The second calls for naming the located condition without converting it into an opposite slogan. A clarification can reduce confidence while preserving usefulness. Replacing one simplified portrait with another would lose the very distinction that made returning to the passage worthwhile.

This approach permits a stopping point. We can record that the passage was read, its condition recovered, and its relationship to other parts of the work remains unchecked. Stopping does not equal comprehensive knowledge. It marks a completed stage that can continue when needed. Do not present the stage as a definitive account of the author. In this passage and the author always believed reflect different amounts of support. A useful retelling can suggest further locations, while direct reading can generate questions for the retelling. The movements complement each other when their direction is visible. A familiar name and confident general conclusion should not conceal the limited inquiry behind them or persuade readers that an unfinished relationship between passages has already been settled.

VIII. Distinguish observation, reflection, and question

The Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool separates observation, reflection, and questioning, and provides for further investigation. Its complete one-page text was read. It is an institutional methodological sheet, not an experimental report. For our argument, it offers a way to record different actions separately. What can we directly observe in the document? What meaning are we inferring? What else needs to be known? These questions make a reading route describable. They do not certify an answer or guarantee the quality of every inquiry that uses them. Our practical adaptation belongs to this article and remains open to the reader's judgment.

Apply the distinction to an invented letter. Observation: the writer says a meeting has been postponed. Reflection: perhaps relations between participants have become difficult. Question: is the reason for postponement known from other evidence? If the second statement is labelled an observation, an assumption becomes fact without further support. Remove the third, and reading may end with the most convenient story. We can retain all three even when no additional documents are available. We then know what the message states and where the inference ends. Another reader can see what needs checking rather than inherit our hypothesis as a confident retelling. The hypothetical letter clarifies the operations and provides no evidence about an actual event.

Give the commentary a distinct place too. It may have suggested the hypothesis, explained a word, or pointed to another document. Name that assistance without recording someone else's explanation as our direct observation. If the commentary offers no basis, its claim remains a proposed interpretation. If it supplies one, inspect the passage and assess the connection. The methodological sheet organises a note but cannot decide how strong the connection is. Independence here means describing the operations clearly rather than refusing assistance. We can acknowledge reliance on translation and explanation while preserving the ability to check a particular assertion. We can also decline a broader conclusion that the available material does not support, even when a respected commentator presents it confidently.

IX. Specify the subject of disagreement

Two retellings may conflict because they consider different passages or ask different questions. They may also genuinely disagree about one passage's meaning. Do not assume beforehand that the dispute is a misunderstanding. Record each precise claim and its basis. One commentator may discuss an argument's sequence and another a concept's historical significance; those answers are not yet opposites. If both assign incompatible functions to the same sentence, the dispute becomes more specific. Examine the neighbouring passage, translation, and explanatory transition. A single preferred reading may remain unavailable, but we can identify what is contested and why a general retelling obscures it. The unresolved point is more informative than a vague verdict that the commentators disagree about everything.

Imagine a discussion in which one person defends a favourite interpreter and another demands reading without intermediaries. Both positions can miss the actual difficulty. An interpreter's name does not replace an argument, and reading without commentary does not make our understanding unmediated. Ask instead for the passage and the transition to the conclusion. This is a proposal for shared reading, not a technique guaranteed to change relationships. Participants may remain in disagreement. The discussion nevertheless has a workable object: a formulation, condition, or omitted step. If it becomes humiliating, a reader can end the conversation and continue privately at a suitable pace. A book need not become grounds for accepting an interaction that denies the reader room to think.

When a conclusion remains open, record two readings and the basis of each. Do not manufacture a third position supposedly reconciling them all. A significant difference may need to remain. We can also decide that the dispute is unnecessary for our practical task: perhaps we were checking wording rather than the entire philosophical system. That is defensible when the purpose really was limited. Do not use a settled small question as permission to speak for the whole doctrine. Primary sources and commentaries together provide material for judgment. They do not remove our responsibility to state its scope or

explain the reason supporting the reading chosen. Leaving a dispute open can be more accurate than describing an agreement that none of the evidence establishes.

X. Return with a more precise question

Movement between a retelling and a primary passage can resemble movement between a map and a particular place. This is the article's metaphor, not a scientific model. The map gives direction, the place checks particular landmarks, and a discovered difference changes the map. We need not traverse the whole work before asking a question or discard an explanation after its first inaccuracy. Begin with accessible assistance, choose a passage, and return to the explanation with a clarification. The movement remains useful while each transition answers an actual task. If new pages merely repeat a familiar idea without addressing a gap, ask why the reading continues and what would change the conclusion.

This can also preserve the reader's own voice. We can say that the located passage presents one argument, the commentary offers a particular explanation, and we draw a stated conclusion for our situation. The three sentences need not coincide. Separating them lets us respect a source, use assistance, and answer for a decision. Authority remains relevant without replacing the relationship between argument and application. A later error can be corrected in one link without rendering the entire inquiry meaningless. If another translation changes an important term, revisit that interpretation and ask whether the later conclusion depends on it. The discovery does not automatically require rejecting the whole work or treating every earlier observation as unsupported.

Return to the initial scene: a person faces a work, commentary, and retelling. The choice can now follow the question. Orientation calls for a clear overview; checking words calls for a recoverable passage; a difficult transition calls for help with examinable grounds; application calls for judgment and relevant additional information. No item must replace the others. We can finish with a limited answer, a disagreement, or an identified gap. Depth belongs to the substance of the inquiry rather than a display of strenuous reading. The primary source offers an encounter with a particular text. A retelling can open a route towards it. Responsibility begins when we describe what that route has shown and what it has not yet established.

What this means in practice

Choose a retelling you already use and one claim important to your question. There is no need to check everything at once. Record what the retelling promises: an explanation of a term, an argument's reconstruction, or a general assessment of the author. Locate the cited passage in an accessible text. Name the edition and translation. If no reference is given or access is unavailable, keep that limit in the note. Read a complete unit of meaning and separate observation, reflection, and question. Record the assistance provided by the retelling and the claim you were able to examine directly against the passage.

State the result in two sentences: what the passage supports, and what belongs to your conclusion. If they only partly coincide, revise the formulation while retaining the explanation's useful part. If a substantial new question arises, decide whether to expand the inquiry now. This exercise is the article authors' proposal, not a validated psychological or educational intervention. You can stop after establishing one distinction. Its purpose is to make the answer's basis visible rather than demonstrate reading prowess. Later, the note can help you revisit the passage, identify the remaining limit, and decide which additional evidence could actually change your understanding. The choice of depth and continuation remains yours.

Key quotation

> *I seek, therefore, one to interpret them.*

Epictetus, Enchiridion,§49: the referent is Chrysippus’s difficult writings. Elizabeth Carter’s English translation.

Connections between traditions

1. **Plato’s Phaedrus / Enchiridion§49:** a dialogue about writing and advice about an interpreter let us ask about mediation. This is our comparison: Plato considers writing in relation to questions; Epictetus considers explanation in relation to philosophical practice.

2. **Epictetus / the Library of Congress sheet:** an interpreter’s assistance and an organised note can serve a defined task. The ancient advice sets a philosophical ideal; the modern sheet distinguishes analytical operations. The tool does not certify the ideal, and the ideal does not establish the tool’s effectiveness.

3. **Phaedrus / the methodological sheet:** questions addressed to a written text connect them at the level of our reading inquiry. Philosophical argument is not an experiment; a space for questions does not resolve the philosophy of writing.

4. **Jowett / Carter:** both ancient texts are accessed here through identified English translations. This is a shared route of access, not evidence of identical teachings; the ancient Greek was not checked.

5. **Text / our application:** in considering the philosophical passages and using the analysis sheet, identify the transition from located material to our task. The article's authors introduce this general boundary; it is not presented as a jointly agreed thesis of the three sources.

Primary sources

1. Plato. Phaedrus, Benjamin Jowett's English translation: opening exchange about Lysias's speech and closing discussion of written speech.

2. Epictetus. Enchiridion,§49; Elizabeth Carter's English translation: difficult text, interpreter and philosophical practice.

3. Library of Congress. Primary Source Analysis Tool: one-page methodological sheet, not experimental research.

Tags

primary source, retelling, reading, commentary, interpretation, translation, translator, edition, context, Plato, Phaedrus, Socrates, Epictetus, Enchiridion, Chrysippus, philosophical practice, written speech, question, observation, inference, source, testimony, uncertainty, critical reading, independent judgment, reading exercise, argument, application, disagreement, Library of Congress

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.