The papers or documents that people leave behind every day are full of clues. Historians work like detectives, gathering information about people who lived in the past by looking for those clues. Written or printed personal, public, and government papers are all rich in information about our lives. Diaries, letters, birth certificates, death certificates, wills, newspapers, military records, and tax records help tell our stories long after we are gone. These documents are called “primary sources.”

Historians find primary sources in homes, schools, businesses, historical societies, museums, places of worship, and social organizations, and city, state, and federal archives.

You can uncover the clues found in documents by looking for the five Ws. Ask yourself:

**Who** wrote the document? How can I tell?

**What** is the document about?

**When** was the document created? Is it dated or does it mention a historical event with a known date?

**Where** was the document written? How can I tell?

**Why** was the document created?

All images from runaway slave ad from the Charleston, South Carolina *Mercury.*
Document Detective
Looking for Evidence

First Impressions
See what you can discover about slavery by studying the documents. Make a list of any words or phrases that you do not know and look them up in a dictionary. Understanding the words will help you understand the document. Answer the following questions.

Who wrote the document?

What kind of document is it? (a letter, a diary, a newspaper advertisement, a will, a receipt, or a government document?)

Who are the people who ran away? How many are men? How many are women?

Can you tell where they lived?
Searching for More Information

The document is an advertisement found in the Charleston Mercury, a South Carolina newspaper. It describes slaves who ran away from their owners. Look again at the document and try to answer the following questions:

How were the runaways treated if they were recaptured? How do you know?

What is the highest reward offered in these ads? What is the lowest?

What are the differences between the slaves with the highest and lowest reward?

Interpreting Your Answers

Think about all that you have learned from this document. Discuss what you have discovered with your classmates or write a paragraph that explains your findings.