As with anything, we learn by practice and this maxim especially applies to the challenging task of finding, reading, and writing about documents. Even so, the following are some recommendations that may help you as you confront and interpret primary sources, particularly those from the early modern period:

1. **Transcribe the passage by hand**

   Yes, write out the passage by hand. The (laborious) task of putting pen to paper helps, I believe, refine and focus our attention to a text’s turns of phrase, points of emphasis, syntax, even exclamation and punctuation points. Writing out a sequence of words forces us as twenty-first century readers to become familiar in a concrete way with a passage written hundreds of years ago. Transcribing also has the benefit of keeping distractions of electronic media at bay for some moments. Your transcription may look something like this:
2. **Mark up the passage**

With the transcription in hand, mark up the passage. Pay attention not only to what is said, but how it is said. Note unfamiliar words or expressions, the rhythm of the prose, and especially conjunctions which mark causal connections. Certain links or analogies between things or ideas may be conventional in the time period you are studying, but may strike us as being strange or unexpected. Underline and circle those moments and make a point of drawing out their consequences.

3. **Use the dictionary**

The American poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) claimed that a dictionary could be just as valuable as or even better than a critic for the student of poetry. The same applies for historical documents, especially those originating from distant times and places. Words and their meaning are slippery things, hence their appeal. Please look up unfamiliar words or even familiar words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as connotations of certain terms wax and wane over time. For stylistic criticism from the Renaissance and Baroque, pay special attention to key terms such as *aria, grazia, misura, ordine*, etc., and see how they are deployed to describe an artist, his work, or the work’s effect upon the viewer. For such terms, please consult *Vocabolario della Crusca* (1612) or Filippo Baldinucci’s *Vocabolario toscano dell’arte del disegno* (1681) in addition to the indices found in editions of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550 / 1568). Editions of these indispensable works are now online and there is no excuse not to consult them!

http://vocabolario.sns.it/html/_s_index2.html  
http://baldinucci.sns.it/html/index.html  
http://www.memofonte.it/index.php  
http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/?id=301  
http://bivio.filosofia.sns.it/  

For secondary literature on these terms, I invite you to explore the work of such art historians as Michael Baxandall, Thomas Frangenberg, Roland Le Mollé, Alina Payne, Ulrich Pfisterer, Philip Sohm, Nicola Suthor, David Summer, Robert Williams, to name but a few…
4. **Paraphrase the passage in your own words**

   We often like to think that words can speak for themselves, but sadly this is rarely the case, especially when we are dealing with primary sources. Please do not simply copy and paste a passage from either a primary or secondary source without summary or critical commentary. Rephrasing the gist of the passage in your own words often can help clarify for yourself and eventually for your reader the particular inflection of meaning you wish to emphasize in your interpretation. After performing this exercise of paraphrasing, it is often the case that our initial idea about a source needs deep rethinking or revision. This is the proverbial blessing in disguise: qualified and nuanced claims are often more convincing than blank generalizations.

5. **Translate all passages in foreign languages into English**

   While it is certainly impressive to insert citations in Italian, French, German, etc. into a paper, please make the effort to translate them into English. Often when we read in a foreign language, we think in that language, and with the insight that comes with fluency or familiarity come blind spots as well. The work of translation often brings to the fore certain problems or nuances that have escaped our notice upon our first, second, or third reading.

6. **Consider the passage in relation to its specific historical moment.**

   Think about the particular century and year in which the passage was written. Does the passage allude to any historical events or mention any artists or patrons? How, then, does the passage present or better put, represent this cast of historical characters and what value does it assign to them? Does the passage itself mention the problem of the flow of time or historical development? Early modern sources on the visual arts often (though not always) conceive of a work of art in relation to historical progression, regression, apocalypse, stasis, revival, or decline. Does this historical imagination inflect your understanding of the passage at hand?