

The Good, the Bad, and the Crazy

A Roman Emperors Source-Criticism Project

Project Question: Which Roman emperors deserve to be remembered as good, bad, or unhinged—and how much can we trust the ancient writers who tell us about them?

Project Overview

For this project, you will investigate three Roman emperors and make an argument about their leadership, reputation, and historical legacy. You are not simply writing three mini-biographies. You are judging emperors while also judging the evidence about them.

- **The Good Emperor:** an emperor you think ruled effectively, responsibly, or admirably.
- **The Bad Emperor:** an emperor you think damaged Rome through poor decisions, cruelty, corruption, military failure, or misrule.
- **The Crazy or Unhinged Emperor:** an emperor whose behavior was described as bizarre, unstable, theatrical, reckless, or irrational—but you must ask whether those descriptions are fair.

Important advanced-class warning: Many surviving Roman sources were written by elite, literate men, including senators or writers sympathetic to the Senate. Some emperors really were terrible. But some may have been described unfairly because they offended the Roman aristocracy, embarrassed the Senate, favored soldiers or common people, or broke elite expectations of how a ruler should behave.

The Critical Thinking Challenge

Your project must answer both of these questions:

1. What did each emperor actually do as ruler?
2. Are the ancient sources fair, exaggerated, biased, or incomplete in the way they describe him?

Example of source bias: Ancient writers might describe the same type of action differently depending on whether they liked the emperor. If an unpopular emperor sold palace property, elite writers might portray it as shameful greed or humiliation. If a respected emperor did something similar to raise money for the state, the same kind of action might be praised as virtuous sacrifice. Your job is to notice these double standards and think like a historian.

Basic Requirements

- Choose three Roman emperors: one good, one bad, and one crazy/unhinged.
- Explain why each emperor fits the category you chose.
- Use specific evidence: laws, wars, reforms, building projects, economic policies, treatment of the Senate, treatment of the army, religious policy, succession, scandals, or major crises.
- Discuss at least one major ancient source problem or possible bias for each emperor.
- Compare the three emperors instead of treating them as completely separate topics.

Name: _____ Period: _____ Due Date: _____

- Include a clear thesis: your main argument about leadership and reputation in imperial Rome.
- Use at least three sources total, including at least one ancient source in translation or a teacher-approved excerpt from an ancient writer.

Possible Emperors

You may choose emperors from these lists, or propose another emperor with teacher approval.

Often Considered “Good”	Often Considered “Bad”	Often Described as “Crazy” or Unhinged
Augustus Vespasian Trajan Hadrian Antoninus Pius Marcus Aurelius Aurelian Diocletian	Nero Domitian Commodus Caracalla Elagabalus Maximinus Thrax Honorius Valentinian III	Caligula Nero Commodus Elagabalus Caracalla Domitian Tiberius, depending on your argument

Note: Some emperors could fit more than one category. That is allowed only if you explain your reasoning carefully. For example, Nero could be “bad,” “crazy,” or both, but you must decide how you are using him in your project.

Final Product

- **Slide Presentation** 10–15 slides, with speaker notes or a written explanation showing your full argument.

Suggested Project Structure

1. **Introduction and Thesis:** Introduce your three emperors and explain your overall argument about what makes an emperor good, bad, or unhinged.
2. **Good Emperor Section:** Explain his achievements, leadership style, problems faced, and why he deserves a positive reputation.
3. **Bad Emperor Section:** Explain his failures, harmful policies, cruelty, instability, or long-term damage to Rome.
4. **Crazy/Unhinged Emperor Section:** Explain the strange or extreme accusations against him, but also ask whether the evidence is fair.
5. **Comparison Section:** Compare the three. What qualities separate good rule from bad rule? How did personality, politics, army loyalty, money, geography, and the Senate shape each emperor’s reputation?
6. **Source-Criticism Section:** Discuss whether the ancient writers seem reliable, biased, exaggerated, moralizing, or hostile.
7. **Conclusion:** Return to your thesis. What does your comparison teach us about power, reputation, and historical memory?

Guiding Questions

For Judging the Emperor	For Judging the Sources
What crises did he face? Did he win wars or lose them? How did he treat the Senate? How did he treat the army? How did he treat ordinary Romans? Did he improve or damage the economy? Did his rule create stability or chaos? What were his most important achievements or failures? Was he judged by results, character, or rumors?	Who wrote the account? Was the writer part of the Roman elite? Did the writer admire the Senate? Did the writer have a reason to hate this emperor? Is the story based on evidence, rumor, or moral gossip? Do different sources agree or disagree? Are similar actions praised in one emperor and condemned in another? Could propaganda after the emperor's death have shaped his reputation?

Source Expectations

Use sources responsibly. You do not need to become a professional Roman historian, but you do need to show that you understand the difference between evidence and gossip.

- At least one ancient source or teacher-provided ancient excerpt, such as Suetonius, Tacitus, Cassius Dio, Pliny, Herodian, the Historia Augusta, or another approved text.
- At least two modern reliable sources, such as your textbook, museum/university resources, academic encyclopedias, or teacher-approved websites/books.
- You must cite your sources. Your teacher may choose MLA format, Chicago style, or a simple Works Cited format.
- Do not rely only on random websites, AI summaries, videos, or unsourced internet lists of “worst emperors.” Those may help you get ideas, but they are not enough for final evidence.

Useful Source-Criticism Vocabulary

Term	Meaning
Elite bias	A source may reflect the opinions of wealthy, educated, aristocratic Romans more than ordinary people.
Senatorial bias	A writer may praise emperors who respected the Senate and attack emperors who humiliated or ignored it.
Moralizing	A writer may use history to teach a moral lesson, making villains seem worse and heroes seem better.
Propaganda	Stories may be shaped by later rulers who wanted to justify replacing or condemning an emperor.
Rumor and scandal	Some dramatic stories may have circulated because they were entertaining, not because they were proven.
Double standard	A similar action may be praised in one emperor and condemned in another depending on the writer's attitude.

Student Checklist Before Turning It In

- I chose three emperors and clearly labeled them good, bad, and crazy/unhinged.
- I explained what each emperor actually did, not just what people said about him.
- I gave specific historical evidence for each emperor.
- I discussed possible source bias for each emperor.
- I compared the emperors directly.
- I included geography, military events, economics, public works, or political institutions where relevant.
- I cited at least three sources and included a Works Cited page or source list.
- My project has a clear thesis and conclusion.
- My final product is neat, organized, edited, and ready to present.

Rubric: The Good, the Bad, and the Crazy

Total: 100 points

Category	Pts	Excellent	Proficient	Developing	Needs Work
Thesis and Argument	15 pts	Clear, original thesis that explains why the chosen emperors fit the categories and what the comparison reveals about Roman leadership.	Thesis is present and mostly clear; argument is logical but may need more depth or precision.	Thesis is vague, mostly descriptive, or not consistently supported.	No clear thesis; project is mostly a list of facts.
Historical Knowledge and Evidence	20 pts	Accurate, detailed evidence for all three emperors, including achievements, failures, policies, crises, and consequences.	Good evidence for all three emperors, though some sections may be stronger than others.	Some accurate facts, but evidence is thin, general, or uneven.	Major inaccuracies or very little historical evidence.
Source Criticism and Bias Analysis	20 pts	Strong analysis of ancient source reliability, elite/senatorial bias, double standards, rumor, propaganda, and uncertainty.	Good discussion of source bias, though some points may be general or underdeveloped.	Mentions bias but does not analyze it deeply or apply it consistently.	Little or no attention to source reliability or bias.
Comparison of the Three Emperors	15 pts	Directly compares the emperors and explains what separates good rule, bad rule, and unhinged reputation.	Compares the emperors in several meaningful ways.	Some comparison, but much of the project treats the emperors separately.	Little or no comparison.
Use of Required Sources and Citations	10 pts	Uses at least three sources, including an ancient source or approved excerpt; citations are clear and complete.	Uses the required number of sources; citations are mostly clear.	Sources are weak, incomplete, or not always cited.	Missing required sources or citations.
Organization and Clarity	10 pts	Well organized, easy to follow, with strong transitions and clear sections.	Mostly organized and understandable.	Organization is uneven or confusing in places.	Difficult to follow.
Presentation, Creativity, and Polish	10 pts	Neat, polished, edited, and visually or rhetorically engaging; format supports the argument.	Clear and presentable with only minor errors.	Some effort, but errors or layout problems distract from the content.	Rushed, incomplete, or hard to read/view.

Teacher Comment:
