

# Choosing Primary Sources for the Classroom

# OBSERVE

*Identify and note details.*

- What do you notice first? · Find something small but interesting. ·
- What do you notice that you didn't expect? ·
- What do you notice that you can't explain?
- What do you notice now that you didn't earlier?

# REFLECT

Generate and test hypotheses about the source.

- Where do you think this came from?
- Why do you think somebody made this?
- What do you think was happening when this was made? ·
- Who do you think was the audience for this item?
- What tool was used to create this? ·
- Why do you think this item is important?
- If someone made this today, what would be different?
- What can you learn from examining this?

# QUESTION

Ask questions to lead to more observations and reflections.

What do you wonder about...

- who?
- what? ·
- when? ·
- where? ·
- why? ·
- how?

# Further Investigation

What more do you want  
to know, and how can  
you find out?

- Identify questions appropriate for further investigation.
- Develop a research strategy for finding answers.

# Selecting Suitable Primary Sources

**Interest** - What kinds of sources are of particular interest to my students?

***Reading Level*** - How difficult is the reading level of the primary source compared to my students' abilities? What might help my students comprehend this material (a glossary of terms, for example)?

# Selecting Suitable Primary Sources

**Points of View** - Are various points of view on a given topic, event, or issue fairly represented in the sources I have chosen to use? Have I achieved proper balance among the competing points of view?

# Selecting Suitable Primary Sources

**Variety of Sources** - Have I included a variety of types of sources (e.g., published, unpublished, text, visual, and artifacts)?

**Location** - Where can I or my students find the sources we need (the school or public library, the local history society, over the Internet)?



***Length*** - How long is the source? Do I need to excerpt a portion of the source given my students' abilities and/or classroom time constraints? How do I ensure that the original meaning of the source is preserved in the excerpt?

Be sure that the use of primary sources makes sense in the overall curriculum plan. Using too many primary sources or in the wrong places could cause them to lose impact.

# Time and Place Rule

Time and place rule says the closer in time and place a source and its creator were to the event, the better the source will be.

# Better primary sources starting with most reliable:

- Direct traces of the event;
- Accounts of the event, created at the time it occurred, by firsthand observers and participants;
- Accounts of the event, created after the event occurred, by firsthand observers and participants;
- Accounts of the event, created after the event occurred, by people who did not participate or witness the event, but who used interviews or evidence from the time of the event.

# Bias Rule

Bias rule says that every source is biased in some way.

Documents tell us only what the creator of the document thought happened or what the creator wants us to think happened.

# Guidelines for reviewing primary sources.

- Every piece of evidence and every source must be read or viewed skeptically and critically.
- No piece of evidence should be taken at face value. The creator's point of view must be considered.
- Each piece of evidence and source must be cross-checked and compared with related sources and pieces of evidence.

# Questions for Analyzing Primary Sources

Asking these questions may help you judge the quality of a primary source.

- Who created the source and why? Was it created through a spur-of-the-moment act, a routine transaction, or a thoughtful, deliberate process?
- Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event? Or, did the recorder report what others saw and heard?
- Was the recorder a neutral party, or did the creator have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?
- Did the recorder produce the source for personal use, for one or more individuals, or for a large audience?
- Was the source meant to be public or private?
- Did the recorder wish to inform or persuade others? (Check the words in the source. The words may tell you whether the recorder was trying to be objective or persuasive.) Did the recorder have reasons to be honest or dishonest?
- Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How large a lapse of time?

# Sweet Primary Sources

<http://vimeo.com/11238880>