

Utilizing Primary Source Material in Your Classroom

Primary sources can be incorporated into many core competencies: reading; writing; speaking, listening and viewing; quantifying; problem solving, reasoning and creative thinking; learning resources and information technology; and working independently and collaboratively.

Why Use Primary Sources?

For years, historians and other educators have understood the value of primary sources in education. They are of particular value when they are used to understand women's history and other marginalized groups as a vehicle for incorporation. Primary sources expose students to multiple perspectives on great issues of the past and present. By working with primary sources, students can become involved in these conversations.

Selecting Sources

Here are some questions to answer before selecting primary sources for your students:

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?

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?

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?

Variety of Sources - Have I included a variety of types of sources (e.g., published, unpublished, text, visual, and artifacts)?

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

Adapted from:

Library of Congress. The Learning Page. 6pp. Online. Microsoft Network. 7 Sept. 2003
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/fw.html>

How to “Read” Primary Sources



There are many questions to ask when “reading” a primary source. Below are some guidelines that will be useful when analyzing these sources:

Determine the type of document:

Is the document a newspaper, letter, patent, memorandum, map, photo, illustration, painting, poem, advertisement, report, transcript, or other type?

Note any unique physical qualities:

Is it handwritten, typed, seals, postmarks, type of medium i.e., oil paint, color, paper type, notations or anything else?

Record the date, title, and author/creator:

If this information is present, use it. If not the context will often give clues for some of this information, particularly dates.

Ask who was the intended audience:

Was there a specific group or person intended to view this document or other item? What age, race, class, sex, religion or geographic location were they from?

Explore the content of the primary source:

List some things the author/creator said or portrayed that you think are important. Ask questions – why was the document written? Is there evidence to support your interpretation? Quote from the document.

Interpret the primary source:

List some things that the source tells you about the time it was written/created. Question the source – what does it leave unanswered?

The application of primary source material in the classroom is an exciting way to learn and enhance student’s fundamental skills, such as reading and writing. The use of these materials can be applied across the curriculum, all year long, to teach research techniques, enhance critical thinking skills, and build proficiency in math. The students work both independently and collaboratively with your guidance. This process will help them acquire tools that they will use throughout their academic career and skills they can apply in their day-to-day lives.