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Using Primary Sources

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Using Primary Sources

Primary sources are the raw materials of history — original documents and objects which were created at the time under study. They are different from secondary sources, accounts or interpretations of events created by someone without firsthand experience.

Examining primary sources gives students a powerful sense of history and the complexity of the past. Helping students analyze primary sources can also guide them toward higher-order thinking and better critical thinking and analysis skills.

Before you begin:

- Choose at least two or three primary sources that support the learning objectives and are accessible to students.
- Consider how students can compare these items to other primary and secondary sources.
- Identify an analysis tool or guiding questions that students will use to analyze the primary sources

1. Engage students with primary sources.

Draw on students' prior knowledge of the topic.

Ask students to closely observe each primary source.

- Who created this primary source?
- When was it created?
- Where does your eye go first?

Help students see key details.

- What do you see that you didn't expect?
- What powerful words and ideas are expressed?

Encourage students to think about their personal response to the source.

- What feelings and thoughts does the primary source trigger in you?
- What questions does it raise?

2. Promote student inquiry.

Encourage students to speculate about each source, its creator, and its context.

- What was happening during this time period?
- What was the creator's purpose in making this primary source?
- What does the creator do to get his or her point across?
- What was this primary source's audience?
- What biases or stereotypes do you see?

Ask if this source agrees with other primary sources, or with what the students already know.

- Ask students to test their assumptions about the past.
- Ask students to find other primary or secondary sources that offer support or contradiction.

3. Assess how students apply critical thinking and analysis skills to primary sources.

Have students summarize what they've learned.

- Ask for reasons and specific evidence to support their conclusions.
- Help students identify questions for further investigation, and develop strategies for how they might answer them.

Analysis tools and thematic primary source sets from the Library offer entry points to many topics.

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