

“What are Primary Documents?”

Biographies of America Instructional Plan

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Teaching American History - Biographies of America

2010 - 2011

**Essential Questions:**

- What are primary documents?
- Why do we use primary documents?
- What can primary documents teach us?
- What are the disadvantages and advantages of primary documents?

**National Standards:**

Standard 1: The student thinks chronologically

Standard 2: The student comprehends a variety of historical sources

Standard 3: The student engages in historical analysis and interpretation

Standard 4: The student conducts historical research

Standard 5: The student engages in historical issues-analysis and decision-making

**Context and Content Background:**

Primary documents are the glue that connect the past to the present. Primary documents enable us to interpret events and understand the context behind decisions that were made many years ago. Making sense of history is akin to completing a multi-piece jigsaw puzzle, and without the assistance of primary documents it would be difficult for historians to fill in the blanks that are so often left behind by historical persons, events and decisions.

As such, the necessity for teaching students the importance of, and how to use primary documents to understand the world in which they live cannot be underestimated. Students' biggest complaint about history is that it has no connection to them. They fail to see how people and decisions from before their lifetime have any impact on the life they currently lead.

Teaching students how to analyze primary documents not only enables them to interpret historical events, but it also drives them to conduct further research, which is the essence of historical study. Interpretations can be, and often are incorrect, leaving the only recourse for finding the truth to be further study. It is through this continued study that students arrive at deeper understandings of events from the past and begin to make a connection between the past and present.

**Lesson Focus:**

With an eye on teaching students how to use primary documents to enhance their study of history, students will be exposed to examples of primary documents to examine. Students will be given a tool box for how to analyze and interpret the information provided by a primary source, and will be expected to share their insights gained from

the analysis of historical documents, pictures or artifacts. Students will also come to understand that primary documents are open to interpretation and can often be misinterpreted.

### **Anticipatory Set:**

To get students working with primary source documents I will plan an event where they become witnesses to an event. At a time when my students and I are working I will have a teaching colleague enter the room and create some disruption before leaving quickly. After she leaves, I will ask my students to write an account of what transpired, including descriptions of the person who entered the room as well as an interpretation of what happened. To add to the seriousness, I will tell my students that I will collect and turn in their reports to the principal to find out who was guilty of the disruption.

### **Guided Discovery Activity/Student Learning Activity:**

1. Day 1: Begin the lesson by posing the questions, "What is history?", "How do we learn about the past?" and "Who decides what events we learn about?" The first question may be easy for the students to answer, but the other two may be more difficult. Students may say things such as, "We read about it in books." Follow up this response by asking where the information in books come from. Guide the discussion toward an introduction to primary sources. Share the student responses from the disruption incident and explain how they are primary sources. Assign "Introduction to Primary Source Documents" for homework.
2. Day 2: Begin by showing the students two personal pictures that could teach the students something about you. These photos could be family pictures, vacation pictures or just general pictures of things you like. Ask the students to list as many things they learned about you from the photos as they can.
3. Introduce the primary source tool box worksheet. Using your photos from the previous step, demonstrate how to use the tool box to glean information from the photos and make them useful.
4. Have the students present their primary source documents from their homework, while their classmates fill out the primary source worksheet for each presentation. Have a discussion about how primary documents are open to interpretation and that many of these interpretations are incorrect by using some of the students responses to their classmates photos. To further demonstrate this concept, pass out a penny to each student. Have them imagine they are explorers who have come across this artifact and they are to list of all the things they can about the society who would have left this artifact behind. Circulate the room and assist students as needed.
5. Have students share responses and clarify any misinformation they may have interpreted from the coins, emphasizing the point that interpretations can be incorrect.
6. Pose the question, "If interpretations are often incorrect, how do we learn the truth about historical events?" Have a discussion around this question. Guide the discussion so that students understand that primary sources allow us to interpret



historical people and events, but that these interpretations may be incorrect, requiring further research.

7. Day 3: Pass out different examples of primary documents, including documents, cartoons, paintings and photographs. Introduce the National Archives Document Analysis Worksheets. Using the worksheets and the primary source toolbox, have students analyze their primary sources.
8. Close the lesson by restating the questions, "What are primary documents?", "Why do we use primary documents?", "What can primary documents teach us?" and "What are the disadvantages and advantages of primary documents?"

### **Assessment:**

To assess students' gained understanding of primary documents they will be required to define and explain the purpose of primary documents in historical study on a pre and post-test. Upon completion of the lesson, they will then be expected to use the primary source tool box, they will also be expected to analyze a primary source document and connect its contents to another historical event, in addition to making their own interpretations of history. (See attached documents)

### **Reflection:**

In choosing a topic for this instructional plan, it occurred to me that most of my students have had little or no experience with primary documents and do not even know what they are. This concerned me because the majority of the content I teach in social studies requires students to access primary documents. I anticipate that my students participation in this lesson will increase their understanding of primary documents, and in turn, enhance their learning experience throughout the course of my social studies curriculum as they will be able to gain access to rich information that cannot be gleaned from reading a text book and understand how to apply it in a greater context.

## Websites and Resources

- \* What are Primary Sources?: [http://www.yale.edu/collections\\_collaborative/primarysources/primarysources.html](http://www.yale.edu/collections_collaborative/primarysources/primarysources.html)
- \* How to Use Primary Sources: [http://dohistory.org/interests/i\\_primarysources.html](http://dohistory.org/interests/i_primarysources.html)
- \* Examples of Primary and Secondary Sources: <http://www.knowledgecenter.unr.edu/help/using/primary.aspx>
- \* A Treasury of Primary Documents: <http://www.constitution.org/primarysources/primarysources.html>
- \* Primary Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primary\\_source](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primary_source)
- \* Revere Speaks: <http://www.americanrevolution.org/revere.html>
- \* The Boston Massacre: <http://www.constitution.org/primarysources/boston.html>
- \* The Curriculum of the Boston Latin Grammar School (1712): <http://www.constitution.org/primarysources/grammar.html>
- \* Five Nations Territorial Belt: [http://www.tuscaroras.com/jtlc/Wampum/five\\_nations\\_territorial\\_belt.html](http://www.tuscaroras.com/jtlc/Wampum/five_nations_territorial_belt.html)
- \* The Six Nations: [http://www.tuscaroras.com/jtlc/Wampum/six\\_nations\\_GW.html](http://www.tuscaroras.com/jtlc/Wampum/six_nations_GW.html)
- \* Document Analysis Worksheets: <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/>
- \*

## Introduction to Primary Source Documents

This evening, with the help of a family member or an adult who is close to you, look through the souvenirs of your life that have been saved as you have grown up. Select one item that you are willing to share with your classmates and teacher, and bring it to class. For example, you might choose to bring a photograph, a letter, a diary, a newspaper clipping, a birth certificate, or a report card.

1. During your turn in class, provide the following information about your document:
  - a. What type of document is this?
  - b. What is the date of the document?
  - c. Who created the document?
  - d. How does the document relate to you?
2. Also consider the following questions for your own document and as well as for the documents your classmates bring in:
  - a. What does the existence of this document say about whoever created it?
  - b. What does the existence of this document say about whoever saved it?
  - c. What does the existence of this document say about American life in this era?

### Extensions:

1. Have students take notes on others' presentations: Focus notes on what other students claimed could be learned from their documents about American History.
2. Have students consider the entire list of items presented during class and choose the 5 items they would want to include in a time capsule. Define what a time capsule is and tell them the purpose is to provide the most well rounded picture of American society. For example, they might select a yearbook, newspaper clipping, ID card, personal journal, photo of an interracial family.
3. Discuss: What can be learned about American life from the time capsule artifacts? What cannot be seen? (poverty, war) Why not? (Perhaps students were protected from experiencing these things. Data set is limited since it's based on the possessions of youth.)
4. Have students prepare a list of an additional 5 items NOT presented in class. Have them assume availability of whatever they want. Size matters – they can't include a Hummer or the Space Shuttle, they won't fit. They may, however, choose the front page of the New York Times on September 12, 2001, any specific DVD or CD, or an autographed picture of Beyoncé.
5. Groups can collaborate to refine, then share their lists. Discuss their criteria for determining which items were included and, therefore, what they deemed significant to capture in the history of this era they were presenting in their time capsule.
6. Brainstorm a list of rules for determining significance and develop into statements that the class agrees shaped their decisions. For example: 1) Rare, first-time, or last-time events, 2) Impacts many people in many places, 3) Impacts many areas of human life, 4) Effect lasts across time, etc.
7. Post each period's "Tools for Determining Significance" on colorful posters and refer to them frequently in your course.

Adapted from National Archives and Records Association "The Digital Classroom." [http://www.archives.gov/digital\\_classroom/introductory\\_activity.html](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/introductory_activity.html) (22 January 2003) with suggestions from Robert Bain's "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction" in *Knowing, Learning, and Teaching History*

## Primary Documents Pre/Post Assessment

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What are primary documents?

2. What information do primary documents provide for us?

3. Why do we use primary documents?

4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of primary documents?

5. Post Assessment - Use the primary source toolbox to analyze your primary source document.



## Primary Document Scoring Rubric

	(1) Novice	(3) Proficient	(5) Advanced
What are primary documents?	Student does not respond to the question or does not correctly identify what is a primary document	Student correctly identifies the definition of a primary document	Student correctly identifies the definition of a primary document and gives specific examples of primary documents
Why do we use primary documents?	Student does not respond to the question or incorrectly lists the uses of primary documents	Student correctly identifies the uses of primary documents	Student correctly identifies the uses of primary documents and provides and examples
What do primary documents teach us?	Student does not respond to the question or responds incorrectly	Student is able to provide a general list of the types of information gained from primary documents	Student is able to provide a general list of the types of information gained from primary documents, as well as specific examples
What are advantages and disadvantages of primary documents?	Student does not respond to the question or is unable to give examples of advantages or disadvantages	Student adequately explains the advantages and disadvantages of using primary documents	Student adequately explains the advantages and disadvantages of using primary documents and provides strategies for enhancing or diminishing their impacts