

Teaching Historical Document Source Types

Primary Sources vs. Secondary Sources vs. Tertiary Sources

Grades: 5th Grade and up

Class Time Needed: 30 minutes

Big Idea

Understanding how we use historical records to interpret the past is not just an important skill to understanding history but also to navigating a world where information is all around us.

Maryland Curriculum Standards

Social Studies Standards

- Standard 6.0 Skills and Processes

Materials Needed

- 1 Deck of Document Cards for each group of 6 people. Print on cardstock and cut or print on paper and laminate.

Teacher Resources

- Deck of Cards Answer Key

Lesson Procedure

Introduction:

Introduce the importance of understanding the source of your information.

Ask students why they think it is important to understand where we find information?

Ask students from which scenario can they trust that they are getting the most accurate retelling of history from- a letter written from someone who was witnessing the building of the railroad first hand or a book written 50 years later about the letter that person wrote? Just like the game of telephone, the farther away from the original source you get, the more likely you are to get some of the facts incorrect.

We also need to understand that eye witness accounts have their own bias regarding the events they witnessed first-hand. You can present two letters from two different eye witnesses at the Boston Tea Party, with one letter being from someone who supports the actions of the Sons of Liberty and one letter being from someone who supports loyalty to England and their retelling of the same event could have very different "facts". When we gather information from the past (or present), it is always important to try and gather information from all points of view.

When we talk about historical content, we typically have three different categories that we can place them in based on their source. Review the definitions of these three types of sources and ask for example of each type from students.

Primary Sources: These sources are records of events or evidence as they are first described or actually happened without any interpretation. It is information that is shown for the first time or original materials on which other research is based. Examples: diaries, letters, ship logs, original documents like birth and death certificates, trial transcripts, legal government documents, autobiographies, interviews, speeches, statistical data, original newspaper reporting, original objects, original inventions, blueprints, painting of an attended scene, etc.

Secondary Sources: These sources offer an analysis or restatement of primary sources. They often try to describe or explain primary sources. They tend to be works which summarize, interpret, reorganize, or otherwise provide an added value to a primary source. Examples: histories, biographies, literary criticism and interpretation, reviews of law and legislation, political analyses and commentaries, newspaper opinion pieces or editorials, artwork reflecting on past events, some textbooks.

Tertiary Sources: These are sources that index, organize, compile, or digest other sources. Some reference materials and textbooks are considered tertiary sources when their chief purpose is to list, summarize or simply repackage ideas or other information. Tertiary sources are usually not credited to a particular author. Examples include encyclopedias, dictionaries, textbooks, wikipedia, almanacs, and fact books.

Student Activity:

Explain to students that they will be playing a social studies version of poker today called Five Card Draw. For the game, divide students into groups of 6 or 7. Each group will receive a "deck of cards" (see the appendix for your "cards" to print to form each deck). Instead of what we are used to showing

up on a deck of playing cards, these cards will each feature a different type of document. Students will play a round of cards with the goal being to achieve a "flush". In a regular game of Five Card Draw, a flush is achieved by acquiring 5 cards of the same suit. In the case of this card game, a flush is achieved by acquiring 5 cards of the same source type (primary, secondary, tertiary). Groups will repeat rounds of play until one player has achieved a flush of primary sources, a flush of secondary sources and a flush of tertiary sources. After each round, when someone achieves a flush, they should present their cards and explain why they have placed them as a primary, secondary or tertiary source.

For students who have never played, here are some simple directions to follow when playing Five Card Draw:

- Choose one person as the dealer, and each sequential round the person to deal the cards will change. Each round, the cards move one player in a clockwise direction to become the next dealer.
- Each player should be dealt five cards, one at a time, all face down. The remaining deck is placed aside by the dealer, Players pick up the cards and hold them in their hands, being careful to keep them concealed from the other players.
- Next, the "draw" phase begins. Each player specifies how many of their cards they wish to replace and discards them. The deck is retrieved by the dealer, and each player is dealt from the deck the same number of cards they discarded so that each player again has five cards.
- Once this round is complete, players reveal their hands. Any players that were successful in building a flush of source types should explain why they have placed them in that category.

Conclusion:

Wrap up the activity by having a discussion with students about the importance of understanding where your sources came from, not just when doing historical research but when reading any piece of information out there today. Not only is it important to know the source so you can judge the credibility of the source (were they eye witnesses or just reporting on gossip?) but also to understand that everyone has a bias and to make sure you are taking that bias into account when reading sources.

Diary of
Enlisted
Civil War
Soldier

Diary of
Anne
Frank

Letter
Written by
Alexander
Hamilton

Letter Written by
Frederick Douglass
to Harriet Tubman

A freight trains
shipping log

Birth
Certificate

Death
Certificate

Scopes
Monkey Trial
Transcript

OJ Simpson
Trial
Transcript

United States Constitution	Emancipation Proclamation	William Craft's Autobiography
Michelle Obama's Autobiography	An Interview with former President Bush about his experience on 9/11/2001	Dr. MLK Jr's "I Have A Dream" Speech
President George Washington's Farewell Address	Statistics Compiled from the Civil War	Statistics of Women Working for the Railroad During WWII

Newspaper Report on Attack at Pearl Harbor	Newspaper Report Detailing Passage of the 13th Amendment	B&O #25 William Mason Steam Locomotive
Original Union Soldier Uniform	Ron Chernow's Biography About Alexander Hamilton	Biography Written 100 years After Henry "Box" Brown Died
Historical Non-Fiction Book Written by a Professor	Law Review Article Written by a Judge	Recording of Election Coverage Analysis on CNN

Podcast of a Reporter Sharing their Analysis of the 1860 Election	Opinion Article in a Newspaper	Newspaper Article Reflecting on End of Slavery 100 years later
College Textbook on Medical History With Analysis	8th Grade US History Textbook With No Analysis	Netflix Documentary About the Civil Rights Movement
Famous Painting Washington Crossing the Delaware by Emanuel Leutze (1851)	Reenactment Painting from World War I	Replica of the First Steam Locomotive

Replica of the Titanic	History Channel Documentary About the Underground Railroad	Wikipedia Article on Malcolm X
Wikipedia Article on the B&O Railroad	Encyclopedia Britannica	Farmer's Almanac
Encyclopedia.com	Oxford English Dictionary	Webster's Dictionary

Fact Book About Trains	The CIA's World Factbook	Fodor's Travel Guide
Thomas Edison's Incandescent Light Bulb Patent (1880)	Architecture Blueprints	Photograph of Pullman Porters in Uniform
Photograph of President Obama's Inauguration		

Answer Key

Primary Sources:

- Photograph of Pullman Porters in Uniform
 - Architecture Blueprints
 - Photograph of President Obama's Inauguration
 - Edison's Incandescent Light Bulb Patent
 - Newspaper report of an event in real-time
 - Original Artifacts
 - Statistical Information
 - Speech
 - Interview
 - Autobiography
 - Government Document, i.e. US Constitution, Emancipation Proclamation
 - Trial Transcript
 - Death Certificate
 - Birth Certificate
 - Ship's Log
 - Letters
 - Entire Diary or single entries
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Secondary Sources:

- Documentaries
 - Object Replicas
 - Paintings, when the artist did not experience the subject first-hand
 - Textbook, with analysis
 - Newspaper Article reflecting on an event in the past
 - Opinion Article in a Newspaper
 - Podcast of a Reporter Sharing their Analysis of a past event not experienced first-hand
 - Recording of Election Night Coverage on CNN, with opinion of event included
 - Law Review Article
 - Historical Non-Fiction book
 - Biography
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Tertiary Sources:

- Fodor's Travel Guide
- CIA World Factbook
- Factbook About Trains
- Webster's Dictionary
- Oxford English Dictionary
- Encyclopedia.com
- Farmer's Almanac
- Encyclopedia Britannica
- Wikipedia Articles
- Textbook, with no analysis