



Library Programs: Treasures of the Library

LIBRARY MAIN HALL:

Using Primary Sources in the Classroom

Adapted from the Library of Congress, "Using Primary Sources in the Classroom"



Grades 4–12

I. Introduction

Suggestions for using primary sources were compiled from the National Digital Library's Educators' Forum held in July, 1995, and from the Library staff. Educators at the Forum, like many throughout the country, know that history comes alive for students who are plugged into primary sources. These suggestions for student activities can help you enhance your social studies curriculum using authentic artifacts, documents, photographs, and manuscripts from the Library of Congress Historical Collections and other sources.

II. Objective

- ◆ To develop skills in observation and description.

III. Procedure

Select primary sources for the students to study, or have the students chose their own. Have the students make observations and conclusions about the sources, and record their observations on the Document Analysis Worksheet.

A. Source Type: Images

Sample Primary Sources: photographs, film, video

Use a historic photograph or film of a street scene. Give an oral description of the sights, sounds and smells that surround the scene, presenting evidence from the photograph itself and other sources about the time period. Examine the image to find clues about the economics and commerce of the time.

Select a historical photograph or film frame. Predict what will happen one minute and one hour after the photograph or film was taken. Explain the reasoning behind your predictions.

To encourage focus on detail, show a photograph or film frame to the classroom for three minutes and then remove it. Have students draw the contents of the image on a piece of paper divided into a grid of nine sections. Repeat this exercise with new images and watch students' ability to recall detail improve.

Sample Primary Sources: fine art

Select a piece of fine art that appeals to your senses. Research the artist, the date of the piece and the medium.. What does information about the artist, the medium, the subject and the composition tell you about the prevailing attitudes and conditions of the time period? (For example, what symbolism is used? How is perspective used? In what roles are people portrayed? What is left out of the composition?)

B. Source Type: Text

Sample Primary Sources: cookbooks

Research the recipe for a common food (examples: bread, cake) in cookbooks of different times. Report on differences in the vocabulary of the cookbooks over time. How have terms for measurement, ingredients, portion size and accompaniments changed? Prepare the food from recipes of two of the time periods you find. Hold a taste test of the end results.

Select a cookbook from another era. Look at the ingredients lists from a large number of recipes. What do the ingredients lists tell you about the types of foods available and lifestyle of the time?

Sample Primary Sources: advertisements

Use old catalog pages to research fashion trends, household articles, cost of living and lifestyles of a particular period. Use other sources of information to reconstruct a picture of family life at the time. Who did the household purchasing? What were considered necessities of the time? What were considered luxuries? How do the catalog pages highlight attitudes of the time?

Use newspapers over time to analyze advertising. Have students research advertisements for a particular type of product (clothing, tools, household appliances, automobiles) through history. What information do the advertisements contain? What claims do they make? Who is the target buyer? How has advertising for this product changed over time? What social changes are reflected by changes in advertising for this product?

Sample Primary Sources: journals, letters, diaries

Find first hand accounts of historical events written by children or young people (example: Diary of Anne Frank). Analyze how first hand accounts give context to historical events. Have students begin keeping their own journals with an emphasis on including current events topics in their entries.

Select a time period or era. Research and read personal letters that comment on events of the time. Analyze the point of view of the letter writer. Compose a return letter that tells the author how those historical events have affected modern society.

Read a personal diary from a historical period. Analyze the individual's character, motivations and opinions. Explain how the individual changed over the course of the diary. How might that person react if they were dropped into the present time?

Sample Primary Sources: documents in the original handwriting or language

Decipher the original text of a famous document (examples: The Constitution, The Bill of Rights) by decoding historical lettering, spelling, grammar and usage. Compare the original writing with printed versions of the document today. What has changed?

To help illustrate the writing process, study draft copies of famous documents. Look at how side notes, additions, and crossed out words were used to edit the document. Discuss how the changes affected the meaning of the finished work. Have students practice editing their own writing using similar tools.

C. Source Type: Statistics**Sample Primary Sources: census data, land surveys, maps, ordinances, blueprints or architectural drawings**

Study historical maps of a city, state or region to find evidence of changes in population, industry and settlement over time. Use other resources to find and report on causes for the changes you find. Use maps to illustrate your descriptions of these changes.

Choose a famous, historical, public building in your area. Research blueprints or architectural drawings of the building. With help from an architect or librarian, compare the plans to the building as it exists today. What changes do you see? Why do you think the changes occurred?

Document Analysis Worksheet

(This worksheet is an adaptation of one designed and developed by the staff of the Education Branch, Office of Public Programs, National Archives, Washington, D.C.)

1. Type of document (check one)

- Image
- Private letter
- Political cartoon
- Speech or public address
- Report to Congress
- Map
- Artifact
- Secondary source

Other(describe) _____

2. Date(s) of document

3. Author

4. For what audience was the document written?

5. Document information

A. List important pieces of information presented in the document.

B. Why was the document written?

C. What evidence in the document helped you to determine why it was written (use quotes if appropriate)

D. What historical event(s) does this document refer or pertain to?

