

COMPARING TYPES OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Objectives: The objective of this classroom exercise is to introduce students to the use, comparison, and evaluation of primary source documents. Students will learn what a primary source and first person testimony are, and the difference between primary and secondary sources. They will also learn about history from individuals, and compare how different primary and secondary sources teach about the same historic event in different ways. This exercise will also introduce students to the wealth of primary sources available at the Smithsonian Institution Archives and through the World Wide Web.

Time: 30 minutes (*Adjust Time As Needed*)

Skills: Conceptual Knowledge of Types of Historic Documents, Observation, Comparison, Evaluation, Document-Based Questions and Answers

Content Area: History

Materials:

- Handouts or overheads or online images of primary sources
- [Student Worksheet [link to pdf](#)]

Please note that all Smithsonian Institution primary and secondary source materials can be used and reproduced for educational purposes without further permission.

Grade Level: Grades 6-12

Definitions:

Primary source - a document or object that was created by an individual or group as part of their daily lives. Primary sources include birth certificates, photographs, diaries, letters, embroidered samplers, clothing, household implements, and newspapers.

First person testimony - the account of a person who actually participated in an event. Examples are oral history interviews, diaries, letters, photographs and drawings of events, and court testimony of an eyewitness.

Secondary source - summaries, second-hand accounts, and analyses of events created by someone who did not witness the event, but may have read or heard about it. Examples may include: books or articles written on a topic, artworks depicting an event, letters or diaries recounting a version of events told to the author by another source.

Second person or hearsay testimony - an account repeated by someone who did not actually participate in the event. Examples are newspaper accounts from interviews of observers, letters

that repeat a story told to the writer, drawings based on other people's observations, or a book written about a topic.

Mixed sources - A document that is a primary source may contain both first person testimony and second hand testimony. An example would be a diary entry that records a person's eyewitness observations of an event (first person testimony) but also contains additional stories told to the writer by a family member (second hand testimony). Newspapers often contain a mixture of first and second hand accounts.

It may depend on the question you are asking - The same document can be a primary and secondary source, depending upon the question you ask. For example, a Baltimore newspaper's account of Lincoln's death that includes unattributed accounts of what happened at Ford's Theater contains second hand testimony, if your question is what exactly happened at Ford's Theater that night. But if your question is how people in Baltimore heard about Lincoln's assassination and what did they hear, then the newspaper is a primary sources for answering that question.

Instructions for Teachers:

If your class has computer and internet access, the students can practice research skills by searching for the necessary documents using the links and instructions below. If not, you could gather and print the documents from the links or from other activities on this DVD.

1. Before sending students to work with the documents, explain the definitions of primary, secondary and mixed sources.
2. Divide the class into three groups. Each group will be given print-outs of one set of materials relating to Lincoln's death and the worksheet. First have students examine the original documents carefully in their individual groups, and answer the questions on the worksheet.
 - Group 1: Mary Henry diary, April 15 and 16, 1865,
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/deathoflincoln.htm>
 - Group 2: Civil War era images of the Smithsonian,
<http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/documents/dcduringcw.htm>
and
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ammemhome.html>
Search for: "Assassination of President Lincoln" and pick two or three of the images, such as an engraving of Lincoln being shot, and a photograph of Lincoln's funeral.
 - Group 3: New York Times coverage of Lincoln's assassination.
<http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/browser>
Search for: April 15 and 16, 1865
3. After students have thoroughly analyzed and read their documents and answered their questions in the small groups, bring the class back together for a large discussion. Have each group share a summary of their documents and the answers they found. Ask these questions to begin a discussion:
 - What do these documents tell you about Washington, D.C., at the time of President Lincoln's death?
 - How does studying these documents differ from reading a chapter on the Civil War in a textbook?
 - Why is it important/valuable to look at primary sources?
 - How do primary sources help you understand history?

- Does one form of evidence shed light on other forms of evidence?
 - Does one document help you evaluate the quality of the information in another document?
 - When you combine these primary sources, is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?
 - How can diaries/photographs/newscippings be used to learn about history?
 - How can you use contemporary materials to become aware of the historic events that you are a part of?
 - What can you learn from writing a diary? Taking a series of photographs? Clipping articles on a topic from a newspaper?
4. If appropriate, students can also be assigned a short essay on their document or the group of documents with these instructions:

Critically evaluate the primary sources, providing support for your points. Evaluate such issues as the reliability of early accounts during a crisis, the reliability of different forms of evidence, the impact of personal accounts on our understanding of history, and the impact of visual evidence on our understanding of history.

Instructions for Students:

In your assigned groups, look at, read, and analyze your source documents carefully. Answer the questions listed on your worksheet as a group, using evidence from the documents to support your answers.

Names: _____

Questions:

1. Who produced this document?
2. Did they actually witness the event?
3. Why was this document created?
4. What was the occasion?
5. What is this document about?
6. Who was the intended audience?
7. What biases might the creator have had?
8. How reliable is the creator of the document? If not, why not?
9. What does this document tell you about the Civil War era in Washington, D.C.?
10. What type of document is this? Is this document a primary source?
11. Does it have first person or second hand testimony or both?
12. Is the evidence clear, reliable, first person or second-hand/hearsay?
13. How does this compare to what you have learned in your textbooks?
14. Does this document help you understand the history of the Civil War in Washington, D.C.?

Primary Sources in the Classroom

Primary Sources Exercise

What Is a Primary Source?

Additional Resources:

Smithsonian Institution Archives

Institutional History Division

siarchives.si.edu

Reliable websites with documents online:

SI Stories, Smithsonian Institution Archives, <http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/stories-smithsonian>

Smithsonian Institution Archives History Pages, <http://siarchives.si.edu/history>

Smithsonian Institution Collections Search, <http://collections.si.edu/search/>

Historic Pictures of the Smithsonian, Smithsonian Institution Archives, <http://siarchives.si.edu/history/exhibits/historic-pictures-smithsonian>

Smithsonian Institution Education Site, <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/>

American Memory, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov>

Digital Classroom, National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/education/index.html>

Edsitement, The Best of the Humanities on the Web, National Endowment for the Humanities, <http://edsitement.neh.gov/>

History Matters, The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, The Social History Project, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>

New York Times Archive, <http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/>

Chicago Historical Society: "Wet with Blood: The Investigation of Mary Todd Lincoln's Cloak," <http://www.chicagohistory.org/wetwithblood/index.htm>