

The City of Washington at Lincoln's Death

Primary Source Document Exercise

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, learn about history from individuals, and compare how different primary sources teach about the same historic event in different ways. This exercise will also introduce students to the wealth of primary sources available through the World Wide Web.

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. A document that is a primary source may contain both first person testimony and second hand testimony.

First person testimony - the account of a person who actually participated in an event.

Second hand or hearsay testimony - an account repeated by someone who did not actually participate in the event.

Instructions:

Go to each of the websites listed below and print out the documents listed for each group. Make copies of each group of documents for one third of the students in the class.

Divide the class into three groups. Each group will be given print-outs of one set of materials relating to Lincoln's death. Each group should be given c. 20 minutes to read and discuss the facsimiles of the primary sources that they have been given, addressing the questions listed in section A. The entire class should then come together for presentations and discussions outlined in B. If appropriate, students can also be assigned a short essay on their document and the group of documents, as in C.

Group 1: Mary Henry diary, April 15 and 16, 1865,
<http://siarchives.si.edu/documents/mary.htm#documents>

Group 2: Civil War era images of the Smithsonian,
<http://siarchives.si.edu/documents/dcduringcw.htm>

American Memory site:

<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, April 15 and 16, 1865,
<http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/>

A. BREAK-OUT EXERCISE:

Examine copy of documents carefully and address the following questions:

1. What is this document about?

What does this document tell you about the Civil War era in Washington?

2. Who produced this document?

Did they actually witness the event?

How reliable is the creator of the document? If not, why not?

What biases might the creator have had?

3. Who was the intended audience?

4. Why was this document created?

What was the occasion?

5. What type of document is this? Is this document a primary source?

Does it have first person or second hand testimony or both?

6. Evaluate the information provided in the document:

Is the evidence clear, reliable, first person or second-hand/hearsay?

Does this document help you understand the history of the Civil War in Washington, D.C.?

B. FULL CLASS DISCUSSION:

1. One representative from each group summarizes their document(s) for the group, touching on the points above.

2. The full class discusses the following points:

What do these documents tell you about Washington at the time of 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?

3. The class should also discuss:

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?

4. How can diaries/photographs/news clippings be used to learn about history?

How can students use contemporary materials to make them aware of the historic events they are a part of?

What can a student learn from writing a diary? Taking a series of photographs? Clipping articles on a topic from a newspaper?

C. ESSAY:

Have students write a short essay. Younger students will summarize the documents. Older students will be asked to critically evaluate the primary source, providing support for their points. Students can 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.