



FROM SMITHSON TO SMITHSONIAN
THE BIRTH OF AN INSTITUTION
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES
FOR GRADES 9-12

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LESSON PLAN ONE

EVALUATING HISTORICAL SOURCES

OBJECTIVES

- ❖ Identify methods historians use to study the past
- ❖ Define primary and secondary sources
- ❖ Examine the relative strengths of a variety of primary source materials

MATERIALS

- ❖ Copies of Activity Pages 1A–1D
- ❖ Pens, pencils
- ❖ Teacher Resource Pages

SUBJECT

Social studies

PROCEDURE

1. Ask your students to imagine that a historian twenty years in the future has been commissioned to write a history of their school at the present time. What type of information might this historian use to write an account of everyday life in their school? (*To make the example clearer, you may wish to emphasize events that students are familiar with, i.e., a recent athletic season or school activity fair.*) Answers will vary, but students will probably conclude that a historian could

use a variety of sources (e.g., documents, books, interviews, newspaper articles, audio and video recordings). Ask a student volunteer to record the class responses on the chalkboard.

2. Direct your students to the class responses on the chalkboard. Ask them to evaluate how a local newspaper account about a school event published a week later differs from a student participant's diary entry about the event. Answers will vary, but students will likely conclude that the diary entry is "closer" to the event than the local newspaper account because it reflects the perspective of a participant. Tell your students that historians use a variety of sources like these testimonies and must evaluate the relative strengths of their sources before writing a history. Emphasize that accounts written by non-participants (often many years later) are generally known as *secondary sources*, while first-hand accounts from the time period are known as *primary sources*.

3. Divide your class into groups of equal size. Give each group a copy of Activity Page 1A "Identifying Primary and Secondary Sources." Ask each group to review the definitions of primary and secondary sources and then place the class responses from the chalkboard into the appropriate columns on Activity Page 1A. When the groups have finished, lead the class in a discussion of the results.

4. Give each student group two copies of Activity Pages 1B–1D. Ask each group to provide examples of the primary source types (documents, images, and oral history). (*Students should be encouraged to provide primary source examples beyond those already listed on the chalkboard. See the Teacher Resource pages for additional examples of primary sources.*) Then ask each group to carefully consider the strengths and weaknesses of each primary source type. Why might the source be useful evidence to a historian? Why might the source require additional evidence?

5. When the groups have finished, lead the class in a discussion of the results. Students should conclude that historians need to carefully evaluate all sources before they can hope to write an objective account of the past. Conclude the activity by telling your students that in the next activity, they will apply their knowledge of primary sources in a historical "detective" game.

DEFINITIONS

Primary Source—A first-hand, original account, record, or evidence about a person, object, or event.

Secondary Source—An account, record, or evidence derived from an original or primary source. (*Newspaper accounts included in this exhibition are secondary sources.*)

Teacher Resource pages adapted from *Getting in Touch with History: A Smithsonian Course*, a joint publication of the Smithsonian Office of Education and the TI-IN Network.

ACTIVITY PAGE 1A

IDENTIFYING PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

Primary Source	Secondary Source

ACTIVITY PAGE 1B

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary Source	Strengths	Weaknesses
DOCUMENTS		

ACTIVITY PAGE 1C

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary Source	Strengths	Weaknesses
ORAL HISTORY		

ACTIVITY PAGE 1D

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary Source	Strengths	Weaknesses
IMAGES		

TEACHER RESOURCES

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary Source	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>DOCUMENTS</p> <p>Printed or written materials that communicate and record information.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <p>diaries; letters; birth/death, or marriage certificates; deeds; contracts, constitutions, laws, court records; tax records; census records; wills, inventories; treaties; report cards; medical records; passenger lists; passports; visas; naturalization papers; military enlistment or discharge papers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide information on the “who, what, where, when, why, and how” of an event • provide written, printed, or graphic information • purpose of the communication or transaction is often clear • may indicate the social and economic status of the author • may offer insight into the emotional state of the author • can stimulate the personal involvement of the reader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may not be a thoroughly objective source • generally a verbal, rather than a visual record • may not consider other views or perspectives on the same event(s) • the identity of the author may be unclear (especially true in the case of government documents) • the author is usually no longer living and therefore can not be consulted for verification • may be difficult to read: handwriting may be difficult to decipher; words or phrases may be unfamiliar and their meanings may have changed over time • documents must be evaluated in conjunction with other evidence to determine whether they present information that is exceptional or conforms to previously established patterns

TEACHER RESOURCES

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary Source	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>IMAGES</p> <p>A visual record obtained through photography or painting.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• visual record of a particular moment in time• conveys a variety of details about people, places, objects, and events• conveys information about everyday life and behavior that is best communicated in visual terms (hair and clothing styles, interior design)• sometimes provides evidence of the photographer or painter's attitude• important to the study of people who did not leave many written records• can stimulate the personal involvement of the viewer• can be used to stimulate the memory of an oral history informant	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• not a complete or objective source: the image that serves as the lasting record may not equate directly with the reality of the event itself• the relationship of the photographer or painter to his or her subject is not always clear• one must consider the bias or perspective of the photographer or painter, including:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– the choice of subject– the choice of timing– the subject matter that a person present at the event chose to record– whether the people or objects have been manipulated by the photographer or painter• the people, place, date, and photographer or painter are often not identified• the emotions and thoughts of those involved often are not evident• information from this kind of source is often suggestive rather than definitive; photographs and paintings must be studied in conjunction with other evidence, i.e., documents and oral histories, to determine if the information is unusual or part of a larger pattern

TEACHER RESOURCES

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary Source	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>ORAL HISTORY</p> <p>The record of an individual's (informant's) reminiscences, accounts, and interpretations of the past in his or her own spoken words obtained through planned interview(s) and preserved through the use of audio or video tape, film, or written transcription.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personalizes history by recording an individual's remembrances (or opinions) about their life or an event in which they were involved • provides information about a topic or time period that may otherwise lack documentation in written or archival records • often conveys emotion clearly • contains spontaneity and candor not always present in a personally written account • may contain unusual dialect or speech patterns • often informant is living and may be consulted for clarification or additional information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • memory of the informant is fallible • informant may intentionally or unintentionally distort the event or his or her role in the event, thereby compromising the record's validity • informant may be reluctant to discuss certain topics, resulting in an inaccurate or incomplete record • informant's testimony may not be consistent from one interview to the next • the bias, objective, or the relationship of the interviewer to those being interviewed must be considered • interviewer's questions may intentionally or unintentionally influence the informant's response • unfamiliar words or phrases from another time may not be clarified by informant • the bias of the historian or interviewer may be evident in the edited version of the interview(s) • oral history is the mutual creation of the historian and the person being interviewed: the historian creates the topic or problem to be studied, and the informant provides the information • oral histories must be evaluated in conjunction with other evidence to determine whether they present information that is exceptional or conforms to previously established patterns

TEACHER RESOURCES

READING ABOUT PRIMARY SOURCES

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Kyvig, David E., and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982.

ORAL HISTORY

Baum, Willa K. *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. Nashville, Tenn: American Association for State and Local History, 1977.

——— *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*. Nashville, Tenn: American Association for State and Local History, 1981.

Dunaway, David, and Willa K. Baum, eds. *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. Nashville, Tenn: American Association for State and Local History in cooperation with the Oral History Association, 1984.

Fletcher, W. *Recording Your Family History: A Guide to Preserving Oral History with Videotape, Audiotape, Suggested Topics and Questions, Interviews Techniques*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1986.

Mehaffy, George L., Thad Sitton, and O.L. Davis, Jr. *Oral History in the Classroom, How to Do It Series* (2, no. 8.). Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1979.

Schopes, Linda. *Using Oral History for a Family History Project*. Technical Leaflet 123. Nashville, Tenn: American Association for State and Local History, 1978.

Tyrell, William G. *Tape Recording Local History*. Technical Leaflet 35. Rev. ed. Nashville, Tenn: American Association for State and Local History, 1973.

Zimmerman, Bill. *How to Tape Instant Oral Biographies*. New York: Bantam Books, 1992.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Fleischauer, Carl, and Beverly W. Brannan, eds. *Documenting America: 1935–1943*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press in Association with the Library of Congress, 1988.

Trachtenberg, Alan. *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evans*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1989.