



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Using Primary Source Documents A Guide

History is significant. Knowing one's history provides a sense of identity and purpose. Understanding history provides context, helps us to make sense of our society and community and the values and ideals by which we live. Written history reflects interpretation of past events and the writer's perspective of the "truth." The writing, and more importantly, the understanding of history is powerful. Whoever controls how history is written, determines which and how the story is told, controls the interpretation of history. Knowledge of history and all its various pieces gives us the power to create, reinterpret, and reconstruct a new and perhaps more complete understanding of past events. So how can we get a broader, more complete understanding of history? Engaging in primary documents can be an effective path to understanding not just historical periods or events but the lives of the people who lived them.

Primary documents tell stories. These stories are a unique point of view that can only be understood in the context of those who created them. Each one is like a piece of a puzzle that helps to create a picture of a particular time or event, allowing us to see into the lives of people from the past. Primary sources are real and personal, they take what can be sterile and "once-removed" events in history and humanize them. Primary sources and documents provide information about the lives, values, attitudes, and emotions of the people who were there and help us to understand and give meaning to the past. A primary document is any type of document (fiction or nonfiction) created concurrent to events by someone who witnessed or participated in them. Examples of types of primary documents are: reports, maps, photographs, letters, drawings, memoirs, official documents, contemporary newspapers, diaries, journals, economic records, paintings, sculptures, poetry, literature, movies, and videos.

Using primary source documents can help students by enhancing their understanding of a historical time period. By sharing in the process of history, students learn to recognize point of view, hold "conversations" between the past and the present, and construct their own picture of history through the pieces in which they interact. In addition, working with primary sources helps students to gain skills in analyzing and evaluating contemporary documents and interpreting the events of their own times.

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What to consider when choosing primary documents:

- Documents should be **Accessible**- texts on the level of the students who will be reading them
- Documents should be **Engaging**- texts that are appealing and relevant to both the subject and to the students themselves
- Documents should be **Complex**- but not complicated. Consider texts that will help students to gain new insights and contain multiple levels of information
- Documents should give a **Perspective**-sets of texts should provide varied viewpoints
- Documents should be a manageable **Length**-texts that are too long can become unmanageable and texts too short won't provide enough information

Guiding questions for working with primary documents:

- What type of document is this?
- Who created this document? What do I know about his/her background and position?
- When was this document created?
- What was happening during the time the text was created?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the author's point in writing this text?
- What ideas are expressed? What does the text suggest?
- What or whose perspective does this text represent?
- What feelings does this text raise? What emotions does it stir up?
- How does the perspective of this text compare with others around the same time and topic?
- What questions does this text raise? What don't we know about this source?
- How does this text impact your understanding or perspective on the historical context or event? How does this text fit into or alter your existing interpretation of the past?

Resources:

Teaching with Documents from the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington DC (1989).

“Teaching with Primary Sources” web article by Jennifer Suri from Prentice Hall eTeach

DoHistory Using Primary Sources
dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/primarySources.html

Library of Congress Using Primary Sources
www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/

Beyond the Textbook: Teaching History Using Documents and Primary Sources
David Kobrin Heinemann Portsmouth NH (1996).

“You Want Me to Read What?” Educational Leadership Vol. 71 #3.

“Connecting Creativity to Understanding” Educational Leadership Vol. 70 #5.