The Top 10 Considerations When Using Primary Sources with Grades 8-12

Lee Eysturlid
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, leysturl@imsa.edu

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By Lee Eysturlid

Too often teachers are confronted with the expectation of using “primary sources” without any thoughtful discussion of how to do so or why one should. The following points will hopefully act as a catalyst for thinking about the “how” and the “why” of effectively using primary sources.

1) Why are you using a primary source?
This is a really good place for any teacher to start. There is clear pressure to use sources that give voice to persons or people, but is what you want students to understand best served this way? If you have not established the basics, or if the voice speaking is simply too “foreign” to your audience, maybe it’s better to read something by a good historian. However, if you do decide that a primary source fits what you are doing, be picky.

2) What officially is a primary source?
A primary source is usually defined as an original document, a creative work or a relic or an artifact. Documents are not just written letters, but also diaries, speeches, photos and state records. A creative work includes art work of all types, from paintings to novels. Relics and artifacts are, for the classroom teacher, most likely in the form of pictures of architecture, clothing, or archeological items.

3) Primary sources and understanding what is “valid” versus “factual.”
The useful meaning for most history comes by way of the participants’ lived experiences. Therefore the student must search out a plausible interpretation and must learn to deal with the fact while there might seem to be a best answer, there is not, definitively, an incontrovertible truth. This “messy” reality is served well by the use of primary sources, as they require interpretation.

4) Where to find sources?
Finding the source(s) can be problematic. Although the web is full of sites that have sources in whole or in part, sites can be political in nature or be edited badly. This is particularly true for works in translation. Often translations on free sites are old, and therefore past copyright – making them free. Best to search out one or two academically oriented sites, preferably ones that also have background material.

5) Gaining the necessary background.
Too often primary sources are seen as self-explanatory. This can be true, but even something as apparently self-evident as a political cartoon is fraught with party politics, references specific to its own time, and, while a cartoon, isn’t funny. Before approaching the selection of a source, it is essential for the teacher to do some background reading.

6) How many, how long?
This is the moment when the specific teacher must make an assessment of the class’ inherent abilities and level. While a State of the Union address or a Supreme Court case might work for an advanced class, an ESL class might do well with political cartoons – as long as they have captions – and a several pertinent quotes. Again, as stated above, a little bit of time and thought in searching the sources can really pay off. Having the available sources all at hand, and searchable, can really work to shorten that task.

7) Introduction first, or read the source?
Here again the instructor must make a decision as to class ability and the goals. Are the students
going to be asked to interpret the material they read or look at for themselves? Or are they going
to be asked to see how it fit with the historical reality of the time? If the first, try having the
students read (or look) at the materials first. See what they get out of it before they hear the
“historical reality.” If it’s the second, best to have them read the background, then allow them to
read, but give them a few questions to answer that will make engaging the source(s) necessary.

8) **Primary sources as debate drivers.**
Primary sources make excellent material for debate. A simple example is the Federalists and the
anti-Federalists. Dividing a class between the two and giving students one or two sources
representing each view opens a world of preparation questions and necessitates getting as close
to the real meaning as they can.

9) **Primary sources for writing papers.**
A mix of primary and secondary materials establishes issues or problems that are ideal for
writing about. Students must seek out evidence to support a specific voice from a primary
source(s) and then write effectively as to “why” they thought or did what they did. Here again
the primary source(s) allows the student that moment as historian as they engage in the search for
valid evidence.

10) **Being empathetic.**
Finally, it’s through these sources, and this is true of any type of source, that the student can be
taught to be empathetic. It is important that empathy be applied to everything in order to
understand the “why.” This means investigating the ideas held by the slave holder as well as the
slave, of the Nazi henchmen as well as the Holocaust victim. Here empathy is seeking to
contextualize and understand, not agree with, the thoughts and actions of people from the past, a
useful skill.