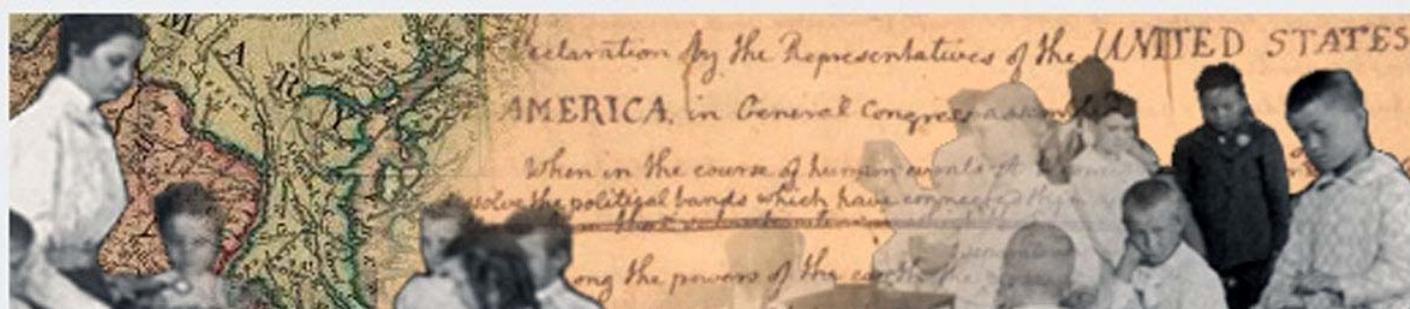


The Teaching with Primary Sources Journal

Strategies and resources for K-12 classrooms from the Library of Congress



Assessing Historical Thinking Skills Using Library of Congress Primary Sources

Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 2013

How can a teacher assess not only content knowledge, but also the development of critical thinking skills? The Stanford History Education Group has created formative assessments using primary sources from the Library of Congress. With these tools, teachers can gauge students' historical understanding and ability to apply critical thinking skills by evaluating their analysis of primary source materials.

About *The TPS Journal*

The Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) Journal is an online publication created by the Library of Congress Educational Outreach Division in collaboration with the TPS Educational Consortium.

Published quarterly, each issue focuses on pedagogical approaches to teaching with Library of Congress digitized primary sources in K-12 classrooms. *The TPS Journal* Editorial Board and Library staff peer review all content submitted by TPS Consortium members and their partners. Please email questions, suggestions or comments about *The TPS Journal* to Vivian Awumey, TPS Program Manager, at vawu@loc.gov.

[The TPS Journal Archive](#)

Previous issues of *The Teaching with Primary Sources Journal*, formerly known as the *Teaching with Primary Sources Quarterly*, are available at www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/journal/archive.html.

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Using Library of Congress Primary Sources for Assessment

By Joel Breakstone and Mark Smith

The Common Core State Standards have set forth ambitious goals for student learning. Students are expected to cite textual evidence to support arguments, consider authors' perspectives, corroborate among competing accounts, and develop written arguments. But what, exactly, can teachers do to help students master these challenging skills?

One proven strategy is to have students analyze primary sources. Research suggests that engagement with historical documents as part of an inquiry-based curriculum can promote learning of these higher-order skills (e.g., Reisman, 2012). A critical component of such a curriculum is assessment. If teachers are to promote complex thinking skills, they must have tools to regularly gauge student learning and adjust instruction to meet the needs of their students. Research has shown that this process, known as formative assessment, promotes student learning (Black and William, 1998). Teachers implementing this practice in classrooms need assessments that are reliable and precise indicators of whether students are, in fact, mastering these skills. Although the assessments most readily available to teachers today are not ideally suited for formative assessment of higher-order skills, teachers can use primary sources from the Library of Congress to create assessments that address the Common Core.

Neither multiple-choice questions nor document-based questions (DBQs) are designed to provide the quick, detailed feedback about student thinking that formative assessment requires. Students may get multiple-choice questions right for the wrong reasons or wrong for the right reasons, yet teachers only see blackened bubbles on a test form. Without information about student thinking, it is difficult for teachers to identify gaps in student understanding and revise instruction to meet student needs. At the other end of the spectrum, the DBQ is a rich, challenging task, but its length limits its use for formative assessment. Teachers with multiple classes might have to read hundreds of pages of essays to determine whether students have mastered particular skills! To build students' skills in interrogating primary sources, teachers need tools that target specific aspects of document analysis and provide immediate feedback about student understanding.

History Assessments of Thinking

Drawing upon the unparalleled archives of the Library of Congress, the Stanford History Education Group has developed new types of assessments. History Assessments of Thinking (HATs) fill the void between the simple recall of multiple-choice questions and the complexity of DBQs. HATs address both content and analytical thinking skills, and each task can be completed in under fifteen minutes, some in less than five. Each question requires students to analyze primary sources. Students weigh the merits of competing claims, evaluate the reliability of evidence, and use evidence to support arguments. In the process, students practice the 21st century skills that the Common Core champions and teachers quickly gain insight into student thinking.

One question addresses a key aspect of document analysis: consideration of source information. Students examine a 1932 image of the First Thanksgiving from the Library of Congress archive and are asked to decide whether it would be useful to historians



The first Thanksgiving 1621 / J.L.G. Ferris. Prints and Photographs Online Catalog. Library of Congress

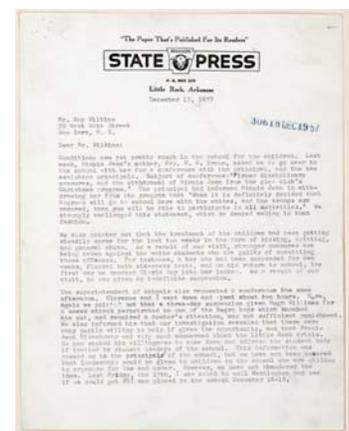
who want to understand the relationship between settlers and the Wampanoag in 1621.ⁱ More than three centuries separate the illustration from the event it depicts, but most students ignore this information.

Instead of considering the limitations of the document, most students fixate on the painting's details. One student wrote: "You can see how they are interacting with each other. Without any picture, you couldn't really see how Wampanoag Indians and the Puritans interacted with each other." Other students examined the source critically but still skipped over the source information. Another student explained, "As soon as the settlers arrived, there was mass curiosity which turned into violence and hatred. There was never such a 'party' between the two peoples. They couldn't even understand each other." The student uses prior knowledge, but like the other student, engages in what we call "matching" – comparing the image to prior beliefs about the event. In both cases, teachers reading these responses quickly receive information about gaps in students' understanding of document analysis that can be used to revise instruction.

Although many students struggled with this task, others crafted sophisticated answers. Consider this response, "This painting was drawn 311 years after the actual event happened. There is no evidence of historical accuracy, as we do not know if the artist did research before painting this, or if he just drew what is a stereotypical Pilgrim and Indian painting." The student identifies the problem associated with the gap in time and also notes that additional information about the artist would help in evaluating the reliability of the source. A teacher reading a response like this can be confident that the student has a solid understanding of this particular skill.

The First Thanksgiving assessment focuses on students' ability to "source" a document. Teachers also need tools for assessing other skills, including historical knowledge. Another HAT gauges understanding of the broad narrative of the Civil Rights Movement without simply asking students to recite facts. Students are given two letters from the NAACP's archives at the Library of Congress. One letter, written by Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, the assistant secretary of the NAACP, describes her husband's reluctance to intervene in the "lynching situation" ⁱⁱ. The second letter, written by Daisy Bates, a journalist and local NAACP official, to Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of NAACP, describes government efforts to support African American students integrating a previously all-white school in Arkansas.ⁱⁱⁱ The dates are removed from the letters and students are asked a simple question: which letter came first? To successfully answer this question, students must analyze the text of both documents and place them within the broader context of the Civil Rights Movement.

Student responses to this assessment are revealing. Some students maintain that the lynching letter came later because the violence had been prompted by the desegregation of schools. This answer has a certain cause-and-effect logic, but it is historically inaccurate. Lynching had been virtually eradicated by the time of school desegregation in the 1950s. In contrast, strong answers demonstrate a firm grasp of the narrative of the broader Civil Rights Movement.



Daisy Bates to NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins on the treatment of the Little Rock Nine, December 17, 1957. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

These types of targeted tasks provide teachers with rich information about student understanding. Rather than staring hopelessly at a sheet of darkened bubbles or wading wearily through stacks of essays, teachers can quickly scan a set of responses and identify patterns in student thinking. Teachers can subsequently use this information to adapt instruction. After teachers have addressed student misconceptions, they can re-assess using another version of the assessment that gauges the same skills but with different documents from the Library of Congress.

Dozens of these assessments are now available for free on a new Stanford University website (beyondthebubble.stanford.edu). The site also includes annotated student work, relevant Common Core standards, short videos that elaborate on key concepts, and links to documents in the Library of Congress's digital archive. Yet, teachers should not feel limited to the assessments posted on the site. Instead, we hope the available assessments will serve to stimulate the imagination of teachers seeking to make new assessments.

To develop similar assessments, teachers can follow these steps:

1. Choose what the assessment will measure. Historical knowledge? Students' ability to corroborate sources? Students' ability to construct an argument? Be as precise as possible. This initial step will guide the rest of the design process.
2. Search the Library of Congress digital archive (www.loc.gov) for appropriate documents, or visit the Library's Teachers Page (www.loc.gov/teachers) to find already compiled primary source sets relating to commonly taught topics, and create a rough draft of the assessment. For example, an assessment like the First Thanksgiving requires a document with a gap in time between the primary source and the event it depicts.
3. Craft one or more questions about the selected source(s) that reflect the measure in step 1. Questions can be as simple as "Which came first?", as in the civil rights example, or more complicated like "Could this source be used...?" as in the First Thanksgiving example.
4. Before giving the assessment to students, consider what students must do to answer the question. Is the task actually focused on the skill or content identified in step 1? For instance, an assessment about corroboration that requires students to write a lengthy essay may provide more information about students' writing abilities than their familiarity with corroborating sources.
5. Try the assessment out with students. Read their responses and consider whether the prompt provided useful feedback about the content or skills identified in step 1. It can take a couple of drafts to produce a strong assessment.
6. Revise the assessment and pilot it again with students. Review answers and make additional tweaks to the task as needed.

As teachers work to build students' 21st century skills, they need tools to track student progress. Assessments created with Library of Congress primary sources provide teachers with timely feedback.

References

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- Reisman, A. (2012). Reading like a historian: A document-based history curriculum intervention in urban high schools. *Cognition and Instruction*, 30(1), 86 - 112.

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Research and Current Thinking

For each issue, Teaching with Primary Sources Consortium members submit summaries of and links to online resources—articles, research reports, Web sites, and white papers—that provide research and current thinking relating to the theme. This issue's Research & Current Thinking focuses on helping teachers use primary sources to build assessments that both gauge and support learning.



LEE, RUSSELL, 1700-1700, photographer Children at the blackboard. Lake Dick Project, Arkansas Prints and Photographs. Library of Congress

Classroom assessment: minute by minute, day by day

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov05/vol63/num03/Classroom-Assessment@-Minute-by-Minute,-Day-by-Day.aspx>

This article from ASCD addresses the use of assessments to support learning rather than simply to gauge what has been learned. Five assessment-for-learning techniques are also introduced.

Crazy for history

<http://jah.oxfordjournals.org/content/90/4/1401.full.pdf+html>

This article from *The Journal of American History* discusses the effectiveness of standardized testing to evaluate students' knowledge of historical events. The author addresses reasons that standardized testing may not give a true picture of whether an appropriate level of knowledge has been achieved with focus on history and the social studies.

Formative assessment: Caveat emptor

http://www.cpre.org/ccii/images/stories/ccii_pdfs/shepard%20formative%20assessment%20caveat%20emptor.pdf

This chapter from *The Future of Assessment: Shaping Teaching and Learning* explains the nature, purpose, and goals of formative assessments. The author also distinguishes between formative assessment and both formative program evaluation and remedial placement testing.

How to Assess Student Performance in History: Going Beyond Multiple Choice Tests

<http://www.serve.org/uploads/publications/AssessHistory.pdf>

This is a self-study resource from The SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro designed to help teachers understand the role of assessment in improving student learning, develop methods of scoring and grading students' work that will provide information and accountability, and integrate assessment programs with statewide testing programs currently in place.

Making the Grade: The Role of Assessment in Authentic Learning

<http://www.educause.edu/library/resources/making-grade-role-assessment-authentic-learning>

This article from EDUCAUSE discusses the importance of assessment in education and how it can be used as a tool to measure authentic learning. Examples and links are provided to illustrate the ideas presented.

Model-Based Performance Assessment

<http://www.cse.ucla.edu/products/reports/TECH465.pdf>

This approach, as described in a report from CRESST/ University of California, Los Angeles focuses on deciding on what type of learning is to be accomplished and then embeds the learning in the subject matter content (or content standard) that the assessment is meant to address. The article presents an example of assessing content understanding in history.

Phony formative assessment: Buyer beware!

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov06/vol64/num03/Phony-Formative-Assessments@-Buyer-Beware!.aspx>

This commentary from *Educational Leadership* offers insight and explanations regarding the history and development of formative assessments as well as how marketing strategies have led to the mislabeling of large-scale tests as formative assessments.

To access links to resources cited above visit the online version of this issue of *The Teaching with Primary Sources Journal* at <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/journal>.

Learning Activity - Elementary Level

SOURCING A DOCUMENT: THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

Overview

This activity introduces students to the importance of source information in the analysis of primary sources. Although assessments are often thought of as tools for accountability, this History Assessment of Thinking (HAT) can be used as an activity for learning. Students complete a HAT about the reliability of a painting of the First Thanksgiving to introduce the idea that it is crucial to consider a source's date. After students complete the HAT, they examine a rubric that includes links to a range of sample student responses. After students discuss the elements an exemplary response, students will have an opportunity to revise their answers to explain why the gap in time between the painting and Thanksgiving make it a less reliable source.

Objectives

After completing this learning activity, students will be able to:

- Consider source information ("source" a document) when analyzing primary documents
- Understand the limitations of a primary source created long after the event it depicts

Time Required

30 minutes

Grade Level

4 - 6

Topic/s

Colonial America

Primary Source Analysis

Subject

American History



*The first Thanksgiving 1621 / J.L.G. Ferris.
Prints and Photographs Online Catalog.
Library of Congress*

Standards

Common Core State Standards <http://www.corestandards.org/>

RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources

RH.6-8.6: Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts)

RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts

California History-Social Science Content Standards for Kindergarten through Grade 5 Historical and Social Science Analysis Skills: Research, Evidence, and Point of View

Students differentiate between primary and secondary sources

Students pose relevant questions about events they encounter in historical documents, eyewitness accounts, oral histories, letters, diaries, artifacts, photographs, maps, artworks, and architecture

View and download the complete learning activity:

http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/journal/assessing_historical_thinking/pdf/ElementaryLevelLearningActivity.pdf

Learning Activity - Secondary Level

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Overview

This activity should be used after students have studied the Civil Rights Movement. This History Assessment of Thinking (HAT) asks student to analyze two primary documents to demonstrate their understanding of the Civil Rights Movement. Document A is a 1936 letter from the Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP. Document B is a 1957 letter from Daisy Bates, a NAACP representative in Arkansas, to Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins. The assessment draws on students' knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement but in a way that gauges more than just the recall of facts and dates. Students must show that they have a broad understanding of how the Civil Rights Movement unfolded and that they can actively use historical information to place the two documents in context. Students then examine the HAT's rubric and sample responses to evaluate their own work. This activity will provide feedback to teachers and students about students' knowledge of the basic narrative of the Civil Rights Movement (e.g., do students understand that lynching peaked around the turn of the 20th century and had been virtually eradicated by the time of school desegregation in the 1950s?).

Objectives

After completing this learning activity, students will be able to:

- Understand a broad narrative of the Civil Rights Movement
- Gain experience in evaluating their work

Time Required

30 minutes

Grade level

9 - 12

Topic/s

Civil Rights Movement
Primary Source Analysis

Subject

American History

Standards

Common Core State Standards <http://www.corestandards.org/>

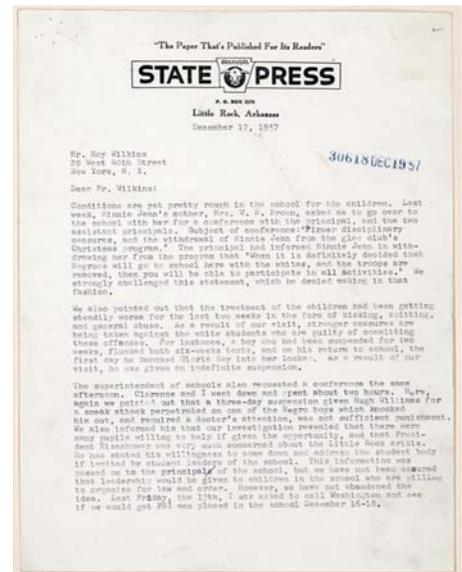
RH.6-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

RH.9-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

View and download the complete learning activity:

http://www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/journal/assessing_historical_thinking/pdf/SecondaryLevelLearningActivity.pdf



Daisy Bates to NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins on the treatment of the Little Rock Nine, December 17, 1957. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

Teacher Spotlight

**Will
Colglazier**



In each issue, we introduce a teacher who has participated in Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) professional development and successfully uses primary sources from the Library of Congress to support effective instructional practices.

This Spotlight features Will Colglazier, an 11th grade college preparatory and Advanced Placement U.S. History teacher at Aragon High School, in San Mateo, California. [TPS at Stanford University](#) nominated Will for his effective classroom use of primary sources. An educator for more than seven years, Will is a graduate of Stanford University's School of Education. In this interview, he discusses teaching and assessment strategies, and favorite Library of Congress online resources.

Describe your first time using primary sources in the classroom. The first time I used primary documents was my first day of teaching. I adapted Stanford History Education Group's Pocahontas [lesson](#) to engage students in a topic they would be familiar with. The lesson plays off pre-existing "knowledge" that students have from the cartoon. I assumed they had misconceptions regarding Pocahontas's life experiences.

The lesson uses excerpts from two published documents written by John Smith that tell different stories about the same events. It's neat for students to see the conflicts and contradictions of accounts written by the same person. When students learned of the confusion regarding whether Pocahontas saved John Smith's life, one student groaned sarcastically that I was destroying her childhood memories. Yet, I could tell she, and others, appreciated being taught the skills necessary to source information for reliability, corroborate conflicting accounts and contextualize historical information. My students learn that history is not the past. Rather, it's the story and perspectives of the past. It's less of who and when, and more of what and why.

Based on your experiences, what questioning techniques are effective when helping students analyze primary sources? I have a poster that students point to repeatedly during the first weeks of school. On it, I have the three main historical thinking skills – sourcing, corroborating, and contextualizing. Beneath each skill is a series of questions that students should ask when applying each skill. For Sourcing, students ask: Who wrote/made this? When was it made? What type of source is it? Why was it written/made? Is the source reliable? For Corroborating, they ask: What do other pieces of evidence say? Where else could I look to find out about this? Which pieces of evidence are

most believable? For Contextualizing, they ask: What was going on at the same time? What would this event look like through the eyes of someone who lived back then? What things were different or the same back then? In this way, students gain practice and become active in the processes of historians.

What is your favorite resource available on the [Library of Congress Web site](#)? I enjoy using primary documents that show the soldiers' perspectives. All too often war is glorified, and I think it's important or students to see the reality of war, not just in present conflicts, but in past ones as well: Revolutionary War, Civil War, WWII, Vietnam, etc. I particularly like primary sources found on the Library's Veteran History Project site, including [personal narratives from the Vietnam War excerpts from D-Day accounts](#) and [accounts from wounded veterans](#).

What advice do you have for teachers who have never tried teaching with primary sources? Start small. Find one primary source and fit it into a familiar lesson. Use scaffolding techniques. For example, if you want to use a speech by President Wilson, you don't have to provide the whole speech at once. Select portions, increase the print size; provide definitions. Allow students to read the passage, annotate and write in margins. Eventually, add public and private documents that offer a different perspective.

Encourage student inquiry by identifying what I call a fulcrum related to an historical event - something students can take another look at that isn't as obvious as it seems. For example, in a Dust Bowl lesson, students might investigate what life was like for the majority who stayed, rather than focusing on the popular story of those who migrated. For the Cuban Missile Crisis, an event most people would classify as the closest the world ever came to nuclear war, the fulcrum could be for students to investigate why the crisis ended peacefully. Finding the fulcrum of an historical event seems hard, but through practice, one can come up appropriate and interesting historical questions to orient lessons around.

Primary documents are not a silver bullet; they must be scaffolded appropriately with a worthwhile historical inquiry guiding student learning. But, if structured effectively, your work in transitioning into the use of primary documents will pay off. The students will be happier doing history rather than just being told history. We can all tell a good story, but in the end, students need to engage in history as historians do.

Additionally, do you have any tips on assessing students' learning using primary sources? In the past, I used multiple choice tests to assess what was learned with primary sources. I realized that I had to start assessing skills. If you're only testing content, you're not assessing critical thinking or how well students can use primary sources.