

Why use primary sources?

Primary sources provide a window into the past—unfiltered access to the record of artistic, social, scientific and political thought and achievement during the specific period under study, produced by people who lived during that period. Bringing young people into close contact with these unique, often profoundly personal, documents and objects can give them a very real sense of what it was like to be alive during a long-past era.

Engage students

- Primary sources help students relate in a personal way to events of the past and promote a deeper understanding of history as a series of human events.
- Because primary sources are snippets of history, they encourage students to seek additional evidence through research.
- First-person accounts of events helps make them more real, fostering active reading and response.

Develop critical thinking skills

- Many state standards support teaching with primary sources, which require students to be both critical and analytical as they read and examine documents and objects.
- Primary sources are often incomplete and have little context. Students must use prior knowledge and work with multiple primary sources to find patterns.
- In analyzing primary sources, students move from concrete observations and facts to questioning and making inferences about the materials.
- Questions of creator bias, purpose, and point of view may challenge students' assumptions.

Construct knowledge

- Inquiry into primary sources encourages students to wrestle with contradictions and compare multiple sources that represent differing points of view, confronting the complexity of the past.
- Students construct knowledge as they form reasoned conclusions, base their conclusions on evidence, and connect primary sources to the context in which they were created, synthesizing information from multiple sources.
- Integrating what they glean from comparing primary sources with what they already know, and what they learn from research, allows students to construct content knowledge and deepen understanding.