

Using Primary Sources in the Classroom

Primary sources give witness to the past and provide clues about past life.

They include:

- Written documents
- Images
- Cultural Artifacts
- Maps
- Personal letters
- Newspapers
- Advertisements
- “Ephemera”
- Cartoons

Using primary sources requires (and exercises) critical thinking skills.

Primary sources force the viewer/reader to ask questions. Here are just a few:

Questions about the original:

- What is this?
- Who created it – and why?
- Was it meant to be public or private?
- When was it created?
- What does it tell me about the creator and his/her life?

Questions about the process:

- How did we get this?
- Who saved it – and why?
- Was it meant to be public or private?
- Has it been altered?
- How have others interpreted it?

Questions about ourselves:

- What is my reaction to this source?
- How does it relate to what I’ve learned about this period?
- Why does this document matter?

We can ask questions about the creator, but also about the publisher, distributor, owner, interpreter, and ourselves based on primary documents.

Important Lessons of Primary Documents:

- We need to be skeptical and ask questions.
- Consider the source: We need to consider the point of view and biases of the creator(s) and distributors.
- “The past doesn’t change but our understanding of it does.”