

## 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.”