

Supplementary Lesson: Working with Sources

This lesson is primarily discussion based and is intended to introduce students to different sources in history.

1. Ask your students if they can define primary and secondary sources. Make note of their definitions on the board. Summarize their ideas into a working definition for the class.

A primary source was created or recorded very close to the time period under study.

A secondary source was created after the events under study and typically secondary source authors did not experience the events first hand. These are the 'histories' historians create

2. Ask students to brainstorm what documents fit into each category:

Primary	Secondary
Letters	Histories
Diaries	Documentaries
Photographs	Memorials
Artifacts	Textbooks

3. Ask students what records they will leave behind for future historians.

Write these responses on the board or have students make their own lists and present their top three choices to the class.

Ask them what these sources might reveal about their own lives and what they might leave out.

An interesting lesson when evaluating historical sources is how they are preserved, why they were preserved, and by who? If you think your students possess the maturity raise the issue of the state specifically constructing historical narratives. For example, why are Indigenous people largely excluded from the historical record? Why are records for women harder to find? If someone was illiterate how did they send letters home or write a diary? If our historical record is largely constructed from literate people is there an issue with representing people from different classes?

What sources can we use to uncover the history of illiterate people? One possibility would be photographs. Is it true that pictures don't lie?

4. Ask the class to consider what type of source is the Database they used to fill in the basic biographical details about their person.

There is no right answer here. The Database is both a primary source and a secondary source. The original attestation papers can be consulted, but there is additional information on each person's profile that may not have appeared on the original attestation paper.

5. Ask your students "how do we know we can trust this source?"

In general there is no real way to know for certain we can trust it, but because it was produced by a reputable University and the website is co-authored by historians we can be reasonably assured the information is accurate. Reinforce that caution is always warranted when evaluating sources.

6. Lastly, ask you students what is the value of this source? If they stumble on this question ask them to think about it this way: If in a hundred years someone was doing a research project on teenagers in Victoria and this type of database existed with your information, what could those historians learn about you?

The answer should be very little, but very useful preliminary evidence; a basis from which to look for more evidence. For example, knowing the dates someone was alive allows us to rule out people with the same name from other time periods. Knowing what unit someone served for leads us to the official history of that unit to look for more information.

7. Have your students compile a preliminary list of possible sources they can use for completing their historical Facebook profile. Ask your students what these sources can tell them about their person and what challenges they might encounter while trying to evaluate these sources.

Have your students go through the list they just made of potential primary sources and suggest inferences they could draw from those sources. In other words, what can we know about our historical actors from the different types of sources? What information is left out? Can they draw conclusions about the past if there is an absence of evidence? What strategies could they employ to overcome these challenges?

If you like the Canadian War Museum has two "worksheets" for comparing sources.

- Canadian War Museum Primary Source Worksheet
http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/guerre/pdf/4-a-1-b-primary-document-analysis_e.pdf
- Canadian War Museum Secondary Source Worksheet
http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/guerre/pdf/4-a-1-c-secondary-source-analysis_e.pdf

Additional Material:

The Historical Thinking Project's "Primary Source Evidence" page for several worksheets and recommendations for approaching primary sources. <http://historicalthinking.ca/concept/primary-source-evidence>

The Canadian War Museum "Comparing Primary and Secondary Sources Lesson Plan." A quick and easy lesson with worksheets on the First World War in Canada.
http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/guerre/pdf/4-a-1-all_e.pdf

Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History "What are Primary Documents? Or Seeing Myself in the Future's Past." <http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/en/3513.php>