Teaching with Primary Sources

UNC-Greensboro Collection, Digital Public Library of America
This tutorial, “Teaching with Primary Sources,” is one of a series produced by the North Carolina State Historical Records Advisory Board with funding from the National Historical Records & Records Commission.
Learning to use and interpret sources is an important skill for students to master. Young students can be introduced to various documents that provide clues to the past. Older students should be encouraged to examine such documents and think critically about them.
To begin, teachers must help students understand the differences between primary and secondary sources.

*Primary?* OR *SECONDARY?*

Primary sources are ones that were created or in use during the time period being studied.
Diaries, letters, photographs, maps, newspapers, and music are some of the types of documents that might be considered primary sources. Documented memories of individuals who experienced an event are also primary sources.
Secondary sources are ones that are created later or by people who were not present at an event. Textbooks or other academic works written by scholars long after an event would be examples of secondary sources.
It is essential that students understand that both types of sources are important. Primary sources give insight into the actual time period being studied, but secondary sources provide context and perspective.

Primary sources are contemporary evidence.

Secondary sources provide context and perspective.
An excellent repository for primary sources is the Digital Public Library of America or DPLA. It is a free digital resource that includes many types of sources from cultural agencies around the country.
More than 400,000 of the sources on DPLA are contributed by the North Carolina Digital Heritage Center. It provides sources from agencies across the state that span much of the state’s history.

Orange County Historical Museum, DPLA

Shaw University Bulletin

Summer School 1955

Shaw University, DPLA

Eastern Carolina University, DPLA

Shaw University, DPLA
Activity sheets can help determine students’ understanding of sources. The website, Common Core Sheets, has worksheets in several subject areas, including social studies.

http://www.commoncoresheets.com/Sources.php

Determine if the sources is a primary or secondary source:

1. A play showing how Benjamin Franklin flew a kite during a lighting storm
2. A short story showing Thomas Edison and Nikolas Tesla’s electrical battle
3. Anne Frank’s diary describing her life during World War 2
4. A cartoon showing how Pocahontas met John Smith.
5. A textbook describing the Civil Rights movement.
6. A news report about the opening of a power plant.
7. A scientist explaining what it was like for Buzz Aldrin to walk on the moon.
8. A YouTube video describing how the pyramids were built.
A useful activity for evaluating primary sources is to have students use analysis worksheets. Several agencies provide such resources.

**The National Archives** provides worksheets that help students evaluate a particular type of document, such as a photograph or a map.  

**The Library of Congress** provides instruction on guiding students through the interpretation of different sources.  
### Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1. **TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):**
   - ☐ Newspaper
   - ☐ Letter
   - ☐ Patent
   - ☐ Memorandum
   - ☐ Map
   - ☐ Telegram
   - ☐ Press Release
   - ☐ Report
   - ☐ Advertisement
   - ☐ Congressional Record
   - ☐ Census Report
   - ☐ Other

2. **UNIQUE PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):**
   - ☐ Interesting Letterhead
   - ☐ Notations
   - ☐ Handwritten
   - ☐ "RECEIVED" stamp
   - ☐ Typed
   - ☐ Other
   - ☐ Seals

3. **DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:**

4. **AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:**
   - **POSITION (TITLE):**

5. **FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?**

6. **DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)**
   - **A.** List three things the author said that you think are important:
   
   **B.** Why do you think this document was written?

   **C.** What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

   **D.** List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.

   **E.** Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:
Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observe</th>
<th>Reflect</th>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask students to identify and note details.</td>
<td>Encourage students to generate and test hypotheses about the source.</td>
<td>Invite students to ask questions that lead to more observations and reflections.</td>
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</tbody>
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Further Investigation
Students who learn to distinguish between primary and secondary sources and who know how to evaluate such sources will develop better critical thinking skills.