

# Yes, But Consider the Source . . .

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## Overview

**Topic:** Interpreting/Evaluating Primary Sources. Just as the scientific method and the data it produces are fundamental to the science disciplines, the evaluation of primary sources and the inferences that are made from them form the building blocks of history. This lesson introduces students to the concept of primary sources and the various biases and limitations that are inherent in them. It encourages students to question the sources that they read, and thus is conducive to a variety of higher order thinking skills. No prerequisite skills or knowledge are needed for this lesson, though some knowledge of world or U.S. history may be helpful. This lesson uses a variety of content to teach about the concept of primary sources, and thus is meant for use in any high school level history course. With adaptations, it might also be used in middle schools. The lesson is intended for the beginning of the year, but might fit comfortably at any point in a history curriculum.

## Length of Lesson

1 90-minute block

## Instructional Video/Technology

*What Is . . . ?* #1, What is History?  
Overhead projector (optional)

## Learning Objectives

The students will be able to:

- identify the characteristics of a primary source (Va. SOLs for History and Social Science 9.11)
- evaluate the authenticity, authority, and credibility of a primary source (Va. SOLs for History and Social Science 11.17)
- formulate historical questions and defend findings based on inquiry and interpretation (Va. SOLs for History and Social Science 11.17)

## Materials

- Items to be used as examples and non-examples of a primary source during the previewing activities.

Specific items will vary according to what a teacher has available. Examples might include: an actual letter or diary, a letter (or other source) from the Internet, a photograph or engraving, sheet music, a recruiting poster, and a period newspaper. Non-examples might include the student's textbook, a history book, a video, a CD-ROM, or a magazine article. A teacher needs to show care in selecting the items so that the concept of "primary source" will be as clear as possible. If it is necessary to copy a picture or letter from a book, be sure to use a large enough example so that it will be visible to students (making an overhead transparency can help), but also be sure to crop off any extra text or information that might distract from the primary source. It can help clarify the concept if all of the items concern a single particular period, such as the Civil War. The teacher may find it helpful to teach this lesson at the end of a unit during which the students are gradually exposed to each of the items they need to consider in this lesson.



- puzzles made from the activity sheets (attached) (Copying the puzzles on different colored paper may be helpful.)
- chalkboard
- overhead pens and/or chalk
- poster-sized paper for Post-Viewing Activity
- large magic markers

### Pre-Viewing Activity

Have the students construct their own definition of the term "primary source" by participating in a concept attainment activity. In this type of activity, the teacher presents students with examples and non-examples of a particular concept and, through a process of hypothesis testing, the students identify the most important characteristics of the concept.

1. Show the students an example of the concept, "primary source". After the students understand what the item being used as an example is, show them a non-example of the concept, i.e. an item that is not a primary source. Do not provide the students with the term "primary source" or its definition at this point. Have the students describe the two items that have been shown to them, and allow students to ask questions about the items if they want more information.
2. Have the students begin making hypotheses that state the differences between the two. The students will continue to refine their hypotheses as the lesson progresses, but at the outset, use the chalkboard or an overhead projector to record all of the possible hypotheses that might actually apply to the items in question. These statements may range from the sophisticated (The example is written by a single person.) to the simple (The example is a single page long.) and even to silly and ultimately irrelevant statements (The example will float in water.). The teacher should record all responses, though the students may edit them to make them more accurate. Prompt the students throughout this process with appropriate questioning. (For example, ask: Instead of stating a hypothesis as a what the example *is not*, can you state it as a characteristic of what the example *is*?)

3. Present the second pair of example and non-example to the students after giving them sufficient time to consider the first pair. (If at all possible, place the first pair within sight of the students so that they can refer back to them. Place examples on the left hand side of the class, and non-examples on the right hand side of the class.) Explain to the students that these new items are an example and a non-example of the same concept that was previously considered. Have the students begin the process of refining the hypotheses. The students may decide that certain statements that are on the board need correction or clarification. They may also decide that certain statements are completely wrong. Cross out or erase such statements to eliminate them from consideration. It is also possible that the collection of hypotheses may not need much refining or editing at this step, but may require more when the next example and non-example are presented.

4. Continue presenting examples and non-examples and facilitating the process of hypothesis testing until a final hypothesis or related set of hypotheses remain. In the past, my classes have generated statements such as, "The examples are 'pieces of history';" "The examples come from the same time period;" "The items are 'artifacts'." Many variations on these types of statements are possible and desirable because of the open-ended way that this portion of the lesson began and its constructivist nature.

5. If the students are able to refine their hypotheses to a satisfactory point before all of the examples and non-examples are displayed, a change of procedure can be made. Show the students one item and ask them if they think it should be considered to be an example or a non-example. If a teacher has any ambiguous items that have characteristics of both primary and non-primary sources, they might be used at this point to encourage student discussion.

6. Ask the students if they have a name for the concept that they have just described through their process of hypothesis testing. If they do not know it from previous experience, provide them with the term, "Primary source."

## Focus for Viewing

Show the students a few pieces of the jigsaw puzzles which will be used later in the lesson. Placing the pieces on the overhead projector with only their silhouettes showing is one possible way to show them to the students. Explain that these pieces are symbolic of the primary sources that historians must use in order to find out what happened in the past. A historian's problem is that many pieces are missing, some pieces are partially destroyed, and some may have been put there by your kid brother or sister from another puzzle just to mix us up. We have no way of knowing what the picture is supposed to look like. How do historians deal with such a confusing situation? How do they approach primary sources?

Say: The video that we are about to use is going to help us ask questions about these puzzle pieces—these primary sources—the way that historians do. We will be seeing a girl who is struggling to write an essay about these very questions, and is imagining (emphasize the word, imagining) what it would be like if she could somehow hear directly from the historical figures who created the primary sources.

### Time Cues

To synchronize your VCR with the time cues that are included with this lesson, zero/reset your time counter at the very beginning of the program, before the introduction and titles. Time cues are expressed as “minutes:seconds;” for example, 3:15 means three minutes and fifteen seconds.

## Viewing Activities

**1. CUE** *What Is History?* to about 12 minutes into the program to the point where the Bronze Age masks are dissolving back into the room with the modern girl. **Focus:** How much of this segment on the Bayeaux Tapestry seems to be speculation on the part of the girl in the video and the historians who wrote the script? **START** the tape and play through to the first portion of Bishop Odo's com-

ments about the Bayeaux Tapestry. **PAUSE** the tape after about two minutes, just after the bishop says, "Never mind. It is all there on the linen," and before images from the tapestry itself are shown. Ask a student to speculate on what we seem to know about the Bayeaux Tapestry? What statements in this clip appear to be speculation? Discuss the possibility that Bishop Odo's commissioning of the Tapestry is itself a speculation, and that it has also been attributed to Matilda, the wife of William the Conqueror, as well as others.

### NOTE TO THE TEACHER Pause vs. Stop

When using a video interactively with students, teachers need to decide when to use **PAUSE** and when to use **STOP**. **PAUSE** the video when the anticipated discussion or activity will take less than two minutes. **STOP** for longer periods. Pausing for too long at one time can cause video heads on the VCR to become clogged which may require cleaning to correct.

**2. Focus:** Explain to the students that the pictures in the video and on the tapestry are in a certain linear order that suggests a story. Ask the students to see how much of the tapestry's story they are able to decipher. **RESUME** the tape **WITHOUT SOUND**, and watch the segment with the pictures of the Bayeaux Tapestry. **STOP** the video after roughly two minutes, when the pictures of the tapestry stop. Ask students for the various possibilities for stories that they have developed. Discuss differences between them. Some differences may come from the identification that students have given to the figures in the pictures. If so, explain that the identity of some individuals are given, and some of the scenes are titled in Latin on the tapestry itself.

**3. Focus:** Ask the students to watch for the items that the bishop has had included in the tapestry because of his perspective. **REWIND** the video to the beginning of the tapestry segment. **RESUME** the video with **SOUND ON** to allow the students to hear the bishop's narration and the "accepted" historical meanings of the pictures. **STOP** the video after the girl says that "History has to be seen from

someone's point of view." Note that these explanations have more scholarship behind them than the class' original guesses, but may still be wrong. Ask a student what information the bishop thought was important enough to include? How has the tapestry been influenced by his perspective? How might the tapestry have looked if it had been drawn to show the perspective of someone else—one of the "little" soldiers or the English farmers for example? What things might have been excluded? How would the bishop have been portrayed? Why is it that we don't have a tapestry made by those people?

### Memory Function

Most newer VCRs have a feature often referred to as "memory." If the memory function is "on," then when rewinding OR fast forwarding a tape, the tape will automatically stop at zero. If the counter is purposely reset or zeroed at a particular place in a program, the memory function can be used as a quick way to replay a segment or to cue to a different segment on the same tape.

**4. Focus:** What sort of opinions did the European explorers have of themselves during the "Age of Discovery?" (It may be helpful to note at this and other appropriate points in the lesson that a different time period is going to be considered. Making such a note can keep students from getting confused and can emphasize the generic nature of the term "primary sources.") **RESUME** the video. You should be at the point when the girl thinks, "Point of view depends on where you stand," and should be over 17 minutes and thirty seconds into the video.

**PAUSE** the video after about one minute, when the sailor says that the explorers made an impression with, "The correctness of our ways." Ask: How did the Europeans view themselves? With attitudes like these, what sorts of sources do you think they left? (Diaries, journals, ship logs, autobiographies, adventure accounts, drawings and artwork, etc.)

**5. Focus:** Explain that the next set of images will be images of Europeans from the perspective of the people that were living in the "newly discovered" parts of the world. Ask: How did these other people portray the Europeans? **RESUME** the video

**WITHOUT SOUND.** Have the students provide adjectives that describe the Europeans in these two sources as they appear on the screen. **PAUSE** the video after about one minute, when the Japanese and African images end. Discuss the attitudes about Europeans that appeared to be expressed in the images. Note that these are primary sources that we have from these cultures.

**6. Focus:** What cultures actually made these images, and what attitudes towards Europeans are described by the narrators? **REWIND** the video to the point that the Japanese images first began. **RESUME** the video with **SOUND ON.** **STOP** the video after about one minute, when the non-European images end and the girl says "I always had such romantic images of those explorers." Ask a student what cultures appear to have made the two sets of images. (Japanese and African) Discuss those cultures' attitudes towards the Europeans as they were revealed in these sources and by the narrators. The girl said, "Where you grow up can make a difference in what you see, and that can change the way that you pass on history." What did she mean? Ask: Can you give any other examples of how the same event could be viewed through different eyes, and where you grew up would make a difference in what you see? What do the answers to these questions mean about how we approach primary sources?

**7. Focus:** Ask the students to list the distortions or lies invented by the reporters who covered the Spanish-American War. **FAST FORWARD** the video to 23 minutes and 15 seconds into the video, after the clip of the "Cowboy and Indians" film. The girl sets down the model of the stagecoach and sits down at the desk. **RESUME** when the girl says "I guess there have been conscious lies in history." **STOP** the video after about two minutes when the camera pans out from the cover of the book the girl is reading and she thinks, "I wonder if that image had anything to do with Roosevelt becoming president." Ask a student to list the distortions mentioned in the video. Discuss the question that the girl asks herself at the end—do you think that image helped get Roosevelt elected? What does this say about newspapers—can they ever be relied upon as sources? [You may want to note the difference

between primary and secondary sources at this time, but remember that the newspaper is a primary source when the question is "What attitudes did contemporaries of Teddy Roosevelt have?"] Have the students generalize. What does this example show us about what we have to ask about primary sources?

Note: Newspapers had a tremendous influence over the public at the time of the Spanish-American War. William Randolph Hearst, publisher of the *New York Journal*, told his reporters before the outbreak of hostilities that if they supplied the pictures, he would supply the war. Propaganda about the USS Maine consequently played a crucial role in whipping the public into a frenzy to demand war against Spain and Cuba. The assault of Roosevelt's troopers was on Kettle Hill which flanked the fort that actually stood on San Juan Hill. Roosevelt embraced the image of the Rough Riders that had him charging up San Juan Hill, and the final picture on the cover of the girl's book is a pro-Roosevelt source from the time that uses all of those lies that the reporters created.

## Post-Viewing Activities

1. Distribute the pieces of the jigsaw puzzles one per student. The teacher may choose not to use a puzzle, or otherwise alter the total number of pieces to better match the number of students in the classroom. If a source/puzzle has been deliberately left out to make the number of pieces match the number of students in the room, use it as an example, and work through each of the questions in #5 with the class as a whole before group work begins.

2. Explain the historical background of the situation to be examined. Say: The Stamp Act Crisis of 1765 was one of the pivotal events in the coming of the American Revolution. The colonies objected to the tax strenuously because it was the first direct tax on the colonies and they had no representation in the British Parliament to approve or disapprove of it. Virginia led the way in the protests. During the last days of session, when many members of the House of Burgesses had already returned to their homes, and when nothing was expected to happen, certain

members introduced resolutions protesting the Stamp Act. In support of these resolutions, Patrick Henry made a dramatic speech—one of his earliest and his most important to that date. He said, "Caesar had his Brutus; Charles the First, his Cromwell, and George the Third..." (Be certain that the students understand the historical allusions that Henry made. Both of these leaders had been overthrown and killed by the other men mentioned. What was Henry about to suggest? Revolution was an unthought of idea at this point in the history of the colonies.) The Speaker of the House interrupted Henry at this point and accused him, "Treason!" Henry continued his thought, "George the Third may profit by their example. If this be treason make the most of it." Henry had skillfully sidestepped from any suggestion to kill the king, but the power of what he had said attracted the attention of the rest of the colonies. The House of Burgesses went on to pass... well... something that day as a result of Henry's speech. How many resolutions were passed that day? What did they actually say? The class will attempt to answer these important questions during the remaining portion of the activity.

3. Have the students get up from their seats and try to match their puzzle pieces to the others. Instruct them to keep track of their assigned piece. As they circulate around the room, they will be dividing themselves up into co-operative learning groups, based on the puzzles that they will be putting together. (The smaller pieces will join together to make larger pieces, but the larger pieces will not fit into a bigger puzzle. This fact does not need to be revealed to the students at the outset. They will discover it for themselves.)

4. With the smaller puzzles completed, each group will have a source (the puzzle) available to them to examine. Ask: What does the source for your group say about how many resolutions were actually passed that day? What was the wording of those resolutions? Allow each group to answer both of the questions, first within their group, and then with the rest of the class. (Each group will have a different answer to the "How many" question. As the discussion progresses, the teacher may wish to note the gist of each resolution on the overhead or chalkboard. Referring to these summaries may assist in

the discussion. Note that the resolutions appear to progress in a logical order. The more radical resolutions appear last on some lists, and not at all on other lists.) Note that other colonies used the Virginia resolutions to pass resolutions of their own and most included the most radical resolutions in their acts because they believed that they were following Virginia's example. So what actually was passed by the Virginians? The only way that we can tell is to examine these sources.

**5.** Give each group a poster-sized piece of paper. Have each group designate one person as a recorder and one person as a presenter. The recorder should write the group's answers on the sheet as the group discusses them. As the students are working on this portion of the activity, circulate around the room and check on their progress. Suggest possible directions for the students to brainstorm in if you see that they are stuck. Possibilities may be found on the attached list. Have each group answer the following questions:

a) What kind of source do you have? (In other words, how would you classify it? A newspaper? A biography? Some sort of official source? How could you describe it to someone else, if you had the actual source in your hand and they asked, "What's that?")

b) How many resolutions does your source say the Virginians actually passed?

c) Why is your source reliable? (In other words, why would a historian even begin to take this paper seriously as a source? What reasons are there to believe what your source says? Students can and should come up with several reasons for their group's source.)

d) What reasons can you think of that would indicate your source may be unreliable? (In other words, what limitations might your source have? Why would a historian not want to take what your source says at face value? Encourage students to be creative in their brainstorming and try to come up with as many reasons as they can.)

e) What questions would you like answered about your source? (Many of these questions may actually be questions that we can never know the answers to.)

**6.** Have each group of students present their answers in turn. Begin by having one group post their list in a place that all can see. Have the presenter for each group discuss the answers. Ask questions of the group in general if clarification is needed. After each group has presented, ask the class if there are any other possibilities (good things, problems, or questions) that they think should be added to the list.

**7.** To conclude, say: There is no magic curtain that we can draw back now to show you what happened that day. The evidence that we have in front of us is just about all that exists. There are no sources that are being deliberately held back from you. You may be leaning towards one source or a combination of sources in your own mind now. You may even believe parts of one source, and disbelieve other parts of it. Yet, as we have seen, any of these primary sources might be right or might be wrong. It is a historian's job to weigh answers to questions like the ones you have raised in order to make an educated guess at what actually happened. That's what history is, and that is what historians do.

### Assessment

**1.** Have each student use the Internet to find a copy of a primary source that relates to the unit that the class has just completed, or the unit that the class is going to begin next. Have the student write an essay about his or her source which answers the same questions that were asked about the sources for the Virginia Resolutions.

**2.** Have the students prepare a series of questions that must be asked about any primary source before its content may be considered. The activity may be done individually, in small groups, or as a class. Both the quantity and quality of suggested questions will indicate the depth of the students' understanding of the problems, the insights that they have gained from this lesson, and their ability to "evaluate the authenticity, authority, and credibility of sources." (Va. SOLs for History and Social Science

11.17) These questions should be written in the form of a checklist.

## Action Plan

1. Have the students find a historian's account (a book in the library or a page on the Internet) that describes what happened that day in the Virginia House of Burgesses. Have the students write an essay that explains what sources that historian decided to believe. Why do you think he or she chose those sources and not the others?
2. Use the checklists that are generated by part 2 of the assessment plan, described above, to return to this topic in future classes when primary source material is used. The questions will need to be as comprehensive as possible, but every situation can not be anticipated. The students' lists will certainly be revised as the year progresses and as their own understanding of the issues concerning primary sources deepens.
3. Invite a lawyer or a reporter to visit and talk about the use of sources in their professions. How do they determine the validity of a source? Do the questions that they ask differ from those used by a historian? Why?

## Extensions

**Science:** Have students write an essay to compare and contrast the scientific method with what might be called the "historian's method." Why is history not a "hard" science? What can a scientist do that a historian can't, and vice versa? What techniques are shared by the disciplines?

**Math:** Compare and contrast the logic used by geometers to prove a theorem with the logic historians use to prove a thesis. What do historians use that could compare with the postulates of geometry?

**Language Arts:** Have students write about a current event that is controversial. Have them compare their account/editorial with articles in the news. What are the biases of the press? What are their own biases?

## About the Author

### Scott Frank

Scott Frank has been on the job as the new Utilization Specialist at WVPT since late September 1998. It is his job to work with media specialists, teachers, and administrators to provide training on the strategic and effective use of ITV resources in the classroom. Scott received his undergraduate degree in history from the State University of New York at Buffalo and has earned his Masters of Teaching degree at the University of Virginia. In addition to teaching experiences, Scott also has worked in museums and has been employed at several museum sites in both New York and Virginia. Scott currently lives in Staunton with his wife Julie.

March 1999

Puzzle #1

The resolutions as printed in the  
Journals of the House of Burgesses

Resolved, That the first Adventurers and Settlers of this his Majesty's Colony and Dominion of Virginia brought with them, and transmitted to their Posterity, and all other his Majesty's Subjects since inhabiting in this his Majesty's said Colony, all the Liberties, Privileges, Franchises, and Immunities, that have at any Time been held, enjoyed, and possessed, by the people of Great Britain.  
{1-1/4}

Resolved, That by two royal Charters, granted by King James the First, the Colonists aforesaid are declared entitled to all Liberties, Privileges, and Immunities of Denizens and natural Subjects, to all Intents and Purposes, as if they had been abiding and born within the Realm of England.  
{1-2/4}

Resolved, That the Taxation of the People by themselves, or by Persons chosen by themselves to represent them, who can only know what Taxes the People are able to bear, or the easiest Method of raising them, and must themselves be affected by every Tax laid on the People, is the only Security against a burthensome Taxation, and the distinguishing Characteristick of British Freedom, without which the ancient Constitution cannot exist.  
{1-3/4}

Resolved, That his Majesty's liege People of this his most ancient and loyal Colony have without interruption enjoyed the inestimable Right of being governed by such Laws, respecting their internal Polity and Taxation, as are derived from their own Consent, with the Approbation of their Sovereign, or his Substitute; and that the same hath never been forfeited or yielded up, but hath been constantly recognized by the Kings and People of Great Britain.  
{1-4/4}

Puzzle #2

The French Traveller's Account

May the 30th. Set out early from halfway house in the Chair and broke fast at York, arrived at Williamsburg at 12, where I saw three Negroes hanging at the gallows for having robbed Mr. Waltho of 300 ps. I went immediately to the assembly which was sitting, where I was entertained with very strong Debates concerning Duties that the parliament wants to lay on the American Colonies, which they Call or Stile stamp Dutys. Shortly after I Came in one of the members stood up and said he had read that in former times Tarquin and Julius had their Brutus, Charles had his Cromwell, and he Did not Doubt but some good American would stand up, in favour of his Country, but (says he) in a more moderate manner, and was going to continue, when the speaker of the house rose and Said he, the last that stood up had spoke treason, and was sorry to see that not one of the members of the house was loyal Enough to stop him, before he had gone so far.

{2-1/4}

[cont.]

[May 30th, cont.]

...upon which the Same member stood up again (his name is Henry) and said that if he had affronted the speaker, or the house, he was ready to ask pardon, and he would shew his loyalty to his majesty King G. the third, at the Expence of the last Drop of his blood, but what he had said must be attributed to the Interest of his Countrys Dying liberty which he had at heart, and the heat of passion might have lead him to have said something more than he intended, but, again, if he said any thing wrong, he begged the speaker and the houses pardon. some other Members stood up and backed him, on which that affaire was dropped.

{2-2/4}

May the 31th. I returned to the assembly today, and heard very hot Debates still about the Stamp Dutys. the whole house was for Entering resolves on the records but they differed much with regard the Contents or purport thereof. some were for shewing their resentment to the highest.

{2-3/4}

[cont.]

[May 31, cont.]

one of the resolves that these proposed, was that any person that would offer to sustain that the parliament of Eng'd had a right to impose or lay any tax or Duty what's'r on the American Colonys, without the Consent of the inhabitants thereof, Should be looked upon as a traitor, and deemed an Enemy to his Country. there were some others to the same purpose, and the majority was for Entering these resolves, upon which the Governor Dissolved the assembly, which hindered their proceeding.

{2-4/4}

Puzzle #3

Governor Fauquier's Account

Williamsburg, June 5th 1765

My Lords

On Saturday the 1st instant I dissolved the Assembly after passing all the Bills, except one, which were ready for my assent.

The Four Resolutions which I have now the honor to inclose to your Lordships, will shew Your Lordships the reason of my conduct, and I hope justify it. I will relate the whole proceeding to your Lordships in as concise a manner as I am able.

{3-1/4}

[cont.]

[Cont.]

On Wednesday the 29th of May, just at the end of the Session when most of the members had left the town, there being but 39 present out of 116 of which the House of Burgesses now consists, a motion was made to take into consideration the Stamp Act, a copy of which had crept into the House, and in a Committee of the whole House five resolutions were proposed and agreed to, all by very small majorities. On Thursday the 30th they were reported & agreed to by the House the numbers being as before in the Committee; the greatest majority being 22 to 17; for the 5th Resolution 20 to 19 only.

{3-2/4}

[cont.]

[Cont.]

On Friday the 31st there having happened a small alteration in the House there was an attempt to strike all the Resolutions off the Journals. The 5th which was thought the most offensive was accordingly struck off, but it did not succeed as to the other four. I am informed the gentlemen had two more resolutions in their pocket, but finding the difficulty they had in carrying the 5th, which was by a single voice, and knowing them to be more virulent and inflammatory; they did not produce them.

{3-3/4}

[cont.]

[Cont.]

The most strenuous opposers of this rash heat were the late Speaker, the King's Attorney and Mr. Wythe; but they were overpowered by the young hot and giddy members. In the course of the debates I have heard that very indecent language was used by a Mr. Henry a young Member of the House; who carried all the young Members with him; so that I hope I am authorized in saying there is cause at least to doubt whether this would have been the sense of the Colony if more of their Representatives had done their duty by attending to the end of the Session.

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