

Why use primary sources?

In words, pictures and sounds the Library of Congress American Memory collections... bring living history into our classrooms.



Develop critical thinking skills...



[The close of a career in New York](#)

Primary sources are snippets of history. They are incomplete and often come without context. They require students to be analytical, to examine sources thoughtfully and to determine what else they need to know to make inferences from the materials.

A high school student states, "I learned that in order to do history, one must be objective and be able to look at a puzzle of historical events and put them together in order."

Understand all history is local...

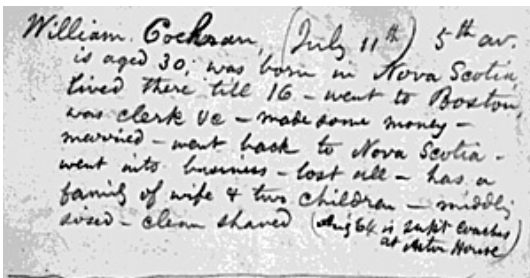


[Charlie Williams and Granddaughter](#)

Local history projects require students to "tell their own stories" about familiar people, events, and places. Memories from an adults' perspective provide a rich glimpse of history that is not available in a textbook. What evolves is the sense that world history is also personal family history, which provides a compelling context for student understanding.

An elementary/middle school teacher reports that, "...finding information about topics that are of importance to our local history is invaluable. Students are excited by the fact that our local history is archived nationally. This gives their immediate cultural area importance in their eyes."

Acquire empathy for the human condition...



[Walt Whitman Notebooks - image 20](#)

Primary sources help students relate in a personal way to events of the past coming away with a deeper understanding of history as a series of human events.

A high school teacher reported that, "In sharing the Whitman hospital letters, I clearly saw a sheen of tears in students' eyes and noted an avid interest in Civil War soldiers as 'people,' not simply as pallid historical figures."

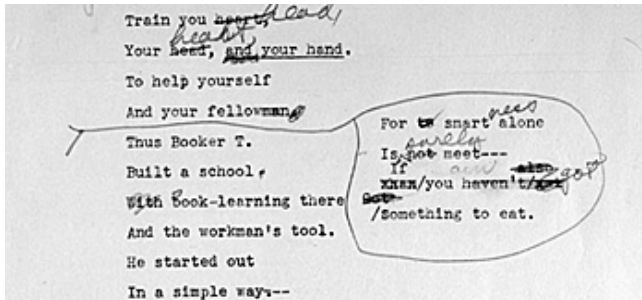
Consider different points of view in analysis...



[A harvest of death, Gettysburg, July, 1863](#)

In analyzing primary sources, students move from concrete observations and facts to making inferences about the materials. “Point of view” is one of the most important inferences that can be drawn. What is the intent of the speaker, of the photographer, of the musician? How does that color one’s interpretation or understanding of the evidence? *A high school teacher states that, “Discovering that two people seeing the same primary source differently creates a kind of dissonance that opens up the meaning of the source and creates new understanding in learners.*

Understand the continuum of history...



[Drafts of Langston Hughes's poem "Ballad of Booker T."](#)

It is difficult for students to understand that we all participate in making history everyday, that each of us in the course of our lives leave behind primary source documentation that scholars years hence may examine as a record of “the past.” The immediacy of first-person accounts of events is compelling to most students.

“Comparisons of events of the past to events our are students are engaged in daily helps to bring “history” to the present and make it ‘live’ for our students.”