AMH Primary Source Guide

Introduction to Historical Primary Sources:

Primary sources are the witnesses to historical events. They can take many forms, and can include diaries, newspaper articles, coins, photos, clothing, and many more. The only requirement to make something a primary source is that it was created during the time period in which a historical event occurred. Historians use these raw sources of information to create a secondary history explaining the events of the past.

Science behind Primary Sources:

By using primary sources in the classroom, history becomes experimental and experiential in nature. In a way, this mimics the conditions of a scientific lab. Students become historical investigators by creating a hypothesis, and then using primary sources to test whether their theories are accurate. As schools move toward encouraging STEM subjects, primary source activities are a way to keep history relevant by emphasizing the subjects social science value.

Specific Historical Skills that can be taught by Primary Sources

- Author Bias: When students study only from textbooks, they may have the impression that history is static and composed of immutable facts. In fact historical interpretation is always changing depending on how historians read primary sources. By letting students become mini-historians, they can understand the impact of human bias in history.

- Tip of the Iceberg (what have we lost to time): As part of the natural bias in history, students should understand that our conception of the past is formed by incomplete information. Objects from middle and upper class homes tend to survive better and catastrophic events such as floods and fires can wipe out whole troves of information. In societies where writing did not exist, our image of their lives can be even more distorted. By studying primary sources, students can understand that history is like a thousand piece puzzle where only a hundred of the pieces exist.

- Difficulty identifying time and place (incomplete information): Sometimes primary sources do not come with identifiers making it impossible to tell what time period it originated from and who created it. However, by virtue of surviving such primary sources should not be ignored. Students can use such sources to expand analytical thinking to try and discover how they can be best identified.
• Idioms. Can we ever put ourselves in the shoes of those centuries past?: Although historians like to believe that they can correctly interpret social norms from the past, often the way feelings and social customs were expressed in the past are alien to present social norms. By learning about the differences in societies past and present, students gain more empathy.

All this leads to independent thinking and allows students to organically start to create history instead of simply consuming textbook information. As a result they will more readily understand and remember historical facts.

How to Approach reading primary sources with students:

• Documents: For documents, students must first become used to different spellings and handwriting. This in the historical world is called paleography. After it can be determined what the document is saying, students should find identifying features. Does the work mention an author, date, or identifying event? From there, possible biases can be determined. The students should read through the document and match the information given with their prior theories about the author and time period. What does this document say about the historical event?

• Objects: With objects, students should first describe everything they see. Can they identify the time period and possibly the maker? Where is it from? The students should hypothesize about the use of the objects. What was its function in society and why was it important? Why might a museum want to display this object?

• Photos: First students should identify when and where the photo was taken? Who took the photo? Why was the picture taken? Does the picture have any unusual effects (an aerial or strangely toned?)

• Multimedia: Who created it? Why did the author choose to convey his or her thoughts in this way? What does it tell us about the time period in which it was made? What was the purpose of this primary source and its implications for analyzing the events of the time period?

• Recreation: What was recreated? What time period is it from? How accurate is the reproduction? How does this help historians to determine the object’s historical value?