

Teaching with Primary Sources

By Oregon Historical Society

Primary sources are the fundamental materials that furnish the raw data and information out of which historians understand the past. The OHP refers to primary sources as "historical records." Using primary sources, or historical records, is particularly important for students at all levels because it enables them to consider multiple perspectives and to compose informed interpretations. When students research and interpret primary sources, they begin to understand that history is constructed of multiple experiences and points of view.

Below are suggested approaches for using primary sources, including maps, photographs, manuscripts, newspapers, artifacts, ephemera, and oral histories. Teachers should use these approaches in conjunction with the documents offered in the OHP. The following approaches address several of the Oregon Common Curriculum Goals:

History• Understand and interpret events, issues, and developments in the history of a family, local community, and culture. • Understand and interpret the history of Oregon. • Analyze cause-and-effect relationships, including multiple causalities. • Understand, recognize, and interpret change and continuity over time. • Identify and analyze diverse perspectives on and historical interpretation of historical issues and events.

Social Science Analysis• Acquire and organize materials from primary and secondary sources. • Explain various perspectives on an event or issue and the reasoning behind them. • Identify and analyze an issue. • Define and clarify an issue so that its dimensions are well understood.

Geography• Understand and use geographic skills and concepts to interpret contemporary and historical issues. • Use maps and other geographic tools and technologies to acquire, process and report information from a spatial perspective. • Understand how people and the environment are interrelated. • Understand economic, cultural and environmental factors that influence changes in population and evaluate the consequences of the resulting increases or decreases in population.

English• Demonstrate evaluative comprehension of a variety of printed materials. • Connect reading selections to other texts, experiences, issues, and events. • Communicate knowledge of the topic, including relevant examples, facts, anecdotes, and details appropriate to the topic, audience, and purpose. • Communicate supported ideas using oral, visual, written, and multimedia forms in ways appropriate to topic, context, audience, and purpose.

Approaching Maps

Maps serve as representations of geographic, political, or cultural features. Maps are visual records of the knowledge that people value, and they point to belief systems as well as boundaries. Teachers may effectively use maps to illustrate concepts that may otherwise be difficult for students to understand, such as settlement patterns, trade routes, economic growth, and development.

- Have students compare and contrast old and new maps to look for transportation patterns, population centers, business districts, natural resources, parks and green spaces, and changes in natural resources. Ask the class to make predictions about future changes based on these comparisons.
- Have students examine local maps/cities/areas for names of streets and cities. Ask them to consider for whom or what streets, areas, and cities are named. Have students use this information to address the question of preservation and who or what is important in local, regional, state, national, and global cultures. For example, students might consider whether names represent primarily business people, men or women, explorers, or Native Americans.
- Have students use maps of exploration to learn about patterns of travel and settlement. Have them observe routes taken, geographical features, potential difficulties encountered, etc. Using background knowledge of technology available during these time periods, have students write narratives of historical fiction, describing the journey, what they viewed, and what difficulties they encountered.

- Have students examine current maps with major highways and shipping routes and compare these to historical trade route maps of different time periods. They might consider why certain routes came about, how explorer routes influenced modern transportation, or what the impact of these routes have been on political or social developments.
- Have students look at maps that depict population and economic centers, and describe the physical/natural features that may have contributed to the development of these areas. Students may develop ephemera that demonstrate these natural features in order to promote these areas.

Approaching Photographs

Photographs provide powerful visual depictions of an event, but may also show a photographer's bias. When students see how photos provide evidence of their own lives and history, they begin to see how photographs provide a historical record.

- Have students examine a series of historical photos. They will select one photograph and one figure from that photograph. Students should then research the time period within which the photograph was taken in order to develop a sense of historical context. For example, if they chose a photo of Chinese railroad workers, they will research Chinese immigrants, why they were doing that work, what opportunities were available to them, what were the likely consequences of being there, etc. Next, have students write an historical narrative/biography/character sketch of an individual in the photo. Student work needs to reference time, place, events, and whatever else is known or could be realistically assumed about the person and time period. Finally, students should write a piece that describes what happened the day the original photograph was taken. Students also could create a drama depicting the events in the photo or describing the way the person selected from the photo reacted to these events.
- Have students look at photographs of building/city scenes. Students should then research architectural developments, observing changes in craftsmanship, style, materials, etc. Have students consider what local resources were used or not used in the buildings and how transportation is represented? Finally, have students design a model that depicts a specific time period using details from their research.
- Place a series of photographs around the room that depict workers in different industries in Oregon during a specific time period. Have students develop a chart that identifies the types of work, ethnic groups represented, working conditions, etc. Ask students if there are there any patterns that show up in the photographs?
- Have students look at photos of city street scenes. What businesses were there? What does the photos tell us about the time and values of the people in the photos? Which businesses are still around? Have them compare these photos to business maps of the same era.
- Have students find photos of buildings/places that have been demolished. Students should write a persuasive letter to the city council of the town, regarding why this building or place should have been maintained. They should answer the following questions, What is the historic significance of this building? What does it represent?
- Have students photograph their local communities. They need to consider what people, places, or things are of historical significance and what items represent their time period and place.

Approaching Manuscripts

Diaries, journals, telegrams, and other written documents provide students with evidence of daily life during other time periods. Primary source manuscripts include letters, journals, census records, or diaries. Manuscripts may provide personal observations about events or individuals, allowing students to analyze facts, opinions, and evidence or data not located in textbooks.

*When using a manuscript, students should begin by identifying where the manuscript was produced, who produced it, to whom it was addressed, and the date on which it was created.

- Provide students with a copy of a historical letter. Have the students consider the following: Who is the author? To whom is the letter addressed? What is the purpose/message of the letter? What is

the point of view or bias of the author? Is the letter convincing? What conclusions or inferences can you make about the author? What do you think happened as a result of the letter?

- Have students read through several entries in a historical journal. Discuss the information found. Have students write the next entry in the person's journal, based on information in previous entries.
- Have students examine two census records to observe population changes. Students should identify whether counts were made by reference to ethnic groups, religious groups, sex, age, etc. Place students in small groups and ask them to hypothesize as to why population changes occurred, and predict what later census counts might be. For census records regarding immigrant groups, have students research what was happening in the country of origin that might have contributed to changes in population in the U.S. or Oregon. Ask students to identify if there were any laws in the U.S. or Oregon that might have contributed to changes? Ask the students to predict how these changes influenced Oregon. Look in the subsequent Census data to examine their hypotheses.
- Have students compare historical census records to current census numbers. Use www.census.gov as a source. Students should consider how people were categorized, where different ethnic groups lived, and if those categories have changed over time. Have students create a population chart or map chronicling shifts in population.
- Have students examine a manuscript and determine what information is fact and what is opinion. Ask them to consider whether the manuscript is a reliable source of information?
- Have students read and study a historical journal. Each student should select a day described in the journal and create an illustration of that day based on the information and descriptions in the journal.

Approaching Newspapers

Newspapers contain periodical records of events, trends, crises, and celebrations. Newspapers are printed and distributed, usually daily or weekly, and contain news, articles of opinion, features, and advertising. A newspaper's use of interviews and first-hand accounts makes it ideal for social studies teachers in search of readable primary source documents.

*When examining a newspaper or news article, students should begin by noting the newspaper name, place and date of publication, and article title.

- Have students examine advertising in a specific time period of a newspaper. They should examine what was sold, what the prices were, and how those items compare to items today. Contrast these older advertisements to more current newspaper advertisements, and note the differences in advertising purpose, audience, and technique.
- Have students read through old newspaper articles, noting the topic, time period, and article title. Have students identify how an article is written. What facts are given? How are opinions argued?
- Have students examine the style and language of *Oregonian* articles over time. Begin by having the class read the lead paragraphs from historical periods about a specific issue. They should then compare the use of language, titles of individuals, tone, bias, coverage, explanations, etc. Ask them to answer the following: Is the language more formal in the older paper? Are there any unfamiliar words, phrases, and individuals from the historical articles? Ask students to discuss whether the newspaper stories changed over time.
- Have students compare sections of the newspaper from historical and current issues. Was there a sports, business, or entertainment section? Ask students to note the differences and similarities they find.
- Have students examine newspapers to compare events over time. For example, how has a local festival or event been described in newspapers over time? How long has this event been going on? According to the newspaper articles, what is significant about this event?

- Have students compare how an important event is described in two newspaper (e.g., the *Oregonian* and the *Oregon Journal*). Read parallel editorials about the event in both newspapers. In what ways do the newspapers reflect different readership and political positions?
- Have students research a specific tribe or immigrant group that is part of Oregon history. Then have them carefully read newspaper reports on that tribe or immigrant group. How did newspapers cover these groups? With this information, have them create a newspaper to represent this group during a specific time period.

Approaching Artifacts

Artifacts, such as clothing, furniture, cooking supplies, tools, or art, are the characteristic products of human activity at any particular time and place. They give us clues about a particular culture and the stage of technological development. Artifacts, or photos of artifacts, may provide evidence of the technology of the time, activities and values of the people, and examples of technologies.

*When examining an artifact, students should first attempt to identify where it came from and the time period in which it was created.

- Have students examine a piece of clothing or an outfit. Students should answer the following questions about the item: What was the climate? What natural resources and technology were available at the time? From what is the item made? For what was this item used? How can you tell? Have students create accessories to accompany this artifact.
- Have students examine a cultural artifact, such as sculpture, a drawing, or a carving. As a class, discuss the following: Who created this artifact? What might it represent, or what might it be used for? Have students use another artistic medium to describe the artifact, such as poetry, song, dance, or drawing.
- Have students examine artifacts that would have been used daily during a specific time period. Students should attempt to describe what the item might have been used for. Ask students to consider what the item tells them about life during this time. Would this have been a common or an unusual item? Why?
- Take the class to a local cemetery and examine information found on tombstones. Have students note images and symbols. As a class, analyze what these representations mean. How do the images or the type of information change over time? Are there any references to historic issues or events? Students could also make grave rubbings to compare and share in class.

Approaching Ephemera

Ephemera are the material that record people's everyday lives, including ticket stubs, brochures, playbills, and posters. Ephemera are printed objects intended for one-time use. They demonstrate how people interact with their culture. The study of ephemera contributes to students' media literacy skills by allowing them to analyze items for historical context. Students of all ages can learn to analyze and understand social history by studying materials that were produced at the time, as well as by creating ephemera of their own.

- Have students create ephemera that represent historical events or individuals. Make sure the ephemera makes use of historically accurate words, phrases, and information.
- Have students identify and analyze examples of ephemera for current events or issues. Students should answer the following about each piece of ephemera: What do the items represent? What will this item indicate to people in the future about the contemporary moment? Is this an item that people would save? Why or why not?
- Have students imagine that they are in charge of encouraging visitors to the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition. Students will research the fair and create a travel brochure for newcomers.
- Have students research the history of a local annual event (e.g., the Rose Festival, the Pendleton Round-Up, or the Woodburn Parade). Students should note the duration of the event, identify

ephemera that represent the event, and determine how many people participate. Have students write a letter to the editor that describes how this event represents or does not represent their city or area.

- Have students look at current ephemera that represent industry, travel, and business. Have students analyze what symbols, words, or pictures are used to demonstrate the specific area they chose. Next, have students research ephemera from the same area but produced in another era (see the OHP "Search" function.) What is different? What is the same?
- Place students into groups to create pamphlets promoting local events or festivals. Include photographs, drawings, descriptions, natural resources, sites, and events.

Approaching Oral Histories

The reactions and experiences of people to significant events (such as wars, moon landings, etc.) and to daily life are recorded in oral histories. Oral histories are obtained in interviews with persons who have led significant lives or have lived through times when significant events occurred. Oral histories, whether from the actual recordings or through written transcripts of recordings, can provide students with a view of how events affect people and with the personal details that are often missing from textbook descriptions.

Because there is a need to analyze the value and cautions of an oral history and for students to understand how oral histories are conducted, teachers should discuss purpose and methodology with students prior to sending them out to produce oral histories. Provide students with an example of an oral history and have them dissect how the oral history is conducted. Students should consider the question order, the types of questions that elicit the most information, and what the interviewer does correctly and/or incorrectly.

- Have students read oral histories and then research the events, issues, or individuals described. Next have them portray individuals in the oral history in an interview or roundtable discussion.
- Have students conduct an oral history interview of the oldest person they know. Before the interview, students should research the time period during which the interview subject was a teenager or young adult, and then develop questions about what the interviewee remembers of these events.
- Have students read oral histories, and then have the class create additional questions for the interviewee. Have one student research and then act as the individual in the oral history and try to answer questions in the persona of that individual.
- Have the class read oral histories that describe historical events. Students should compare the oral history to what textbooks say about the event. Are they similar, or quite different?
- Have students read or listen to oral histories, and then write a play about the events and people described.
- Have students write an obituary of the person documented in an oral history. Students should include a sketch of what they think the person looked like, using evidence from the oral history.

Oregon History Project

<https://www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/teaching-with-primary-sources-2/>