

Navigating Primary Source Materials on the Internet

As you navigate the wonderful primary source materials on the Web, you will find that there are unlimited ways to use these materials to support learning across the subject areas.

How Can Primary Source Materials Help Me?

Why should teachers use primary source materials in the classroom? Thomas Jefferson stated it best when he wrote a letter to John Adams in 1817, "A morsel of genuine history is a thing so rare as to be always valuable." There has always been the chance to view these valuable morsels in museums and collections but now, with the digitizing of many of America's treasures, teachers and students have easy access to these materials from the classroom and from home. Nothing makes history come alive more than a primary source.

What Are Primary Sources?

Sometimes there is a bit of confusion when trying to determine what constitutes a primary versus a secondary source. The Library of Congress' Learning Page, found on the American Memory site, states it simply for students using this definition:

Primary sources are actual records that have survived from the past, such as letters, photographs, [and] articles of clothing. Secondary sources are accounts of the past created by people writing about events sometime after they happened.

The Reference and User Services Association of the American Library Association expands the list of types of materials that may be considered primary sources to include letters, manuscripts, diaries, journals, newspapers, speeches, interviews, memoirs, documents produced by government agencies, photographs, audio recordings, moving pictures or video recordings, research data, and objects or artifacts such as works of art or ancient roads, buildings, tools, and weapons.

Another organizational tool for identifying, searching, collecting, and arranging primary source documents is outlined by Kathleen Craver in her book entitled *Using Internet Primary Sources to Teach Critical Thinking Skills in History*. She presents an

argument for classifying the materials into groups based on the method of transmission of the materials. She suggests organizing primary source materials into written, oral, visual, and electronically-transmitted sources. Students can then think about the purpose of each type of transmitted source and decide which type would best meet their needs. Craver states that written transmissions can "be used to confirm, deny, or explicate the accomplishments and reputations of famous people" and visually transmitted sources, such as architectural form, can be examined "for their shape, size, construction materials, and functions."

Primary Resources on the Web

There are literally millions of digitized primary source materials on the Web. Let's begin our journey with a look at a few ports of call to visit on your tour.

The **National Archives** is charged with managing and preserving all the records of the United States government. The Web allows the National Archives to share digitized versions of this type of information and create online exhibits that put the items into a social context. This site includes a section for students and teachers called the Digital Classroom, which includes lesson plans and forms to use when locating and utilizing documents from this large collection. www.nara.gov

The **American Memory Collection** from the Library of Congress houses over 100 digitized, thematic collections of the library's holdings in various transmission formats, from music and videos to handwritten documents and diaries. Teachers and students can find everything from a collection devoted to Jackie Robinson to one that chronicles the events of 9/11. The Learning Page includes a tremendous amount of support material including basic research skills, forms to use when documenting online sources, lesson plans, and more. lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/index.html

Two Subject-Specific Portals

There are many subject-specific portals to primary sources that can be used to support teaching and learning. Here are two of my favorites.

Ad*Access, funded by the Duke Endowment, provides scanned-in

newspaper and magazine advertisements found in both U.S. and Canadian media from 1911–1955. The browseable categories include ads dealing with radio, television, transportation, and World War II. Students can immerse themselves in the culture by viewing these advertisements. Students in science can see the evolution of the telephone as an important technological innovation. Art students studying media literacy can compare ads from different periods and examine them for audience appeal, bias, and more. scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/adaccess

Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project contains digitized versions of some of the American cookbooks in this large archival collection spanning the years of 1798 to 1922. The site includes a video tour of their collection that also presents information about the importance of cookbooks as a primary source document. The video points out that cookbooks include more than recipes—they may feature remedies for ailments, advice on the use of various cooking utensils, and additional materials that would give students a better understanding of the time period in which the cookbook was produced. digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks

Having easily available digitized artifacts from many cultures and various time periods exposes students to a wealth of material. So, batten down the hatches as you navigate these primary source materials on the Internet and include them in your lessons and units!

References

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