Students often ask, “Is this a primary source?” Primary sources are the surviving original records of a period, including documents, recordings, artifacts, and photographs. Created by individuals, teams, organizations, governments, cultures, and even by the natural world itself, primary sources are clues to the past that we can scrutinize, weigh, interpret, and reinterpret at a later time.

Secondary sources, created at a later time, take the form of encyclopedic or concise summaries or interpretations of primary sources. Students use certain criteria (e.g., objective, authoritative, accurate) to evaluate the information contained in secondary sources.

Occasionally, secondary sources serve as primary sources when they reveal the thinking or state of knowledge during a particular time period. For example, from this figure from the 1910 Encyclopaedia Britannica we can deduce that Pluto had not yet been discovered.

A primary source is an incomplete picture—a “slice” rather than a summary. We might value a primary source as credible even though it might not be objective, authoritative or accurate. For example, we may judge a creator to be truthful but not objective, or content may be relevant but rife with stereotypes. A citizen-journalist may gain authority from being at the right place and time even though this eyewitness has neither the expertise or credentials of a reporter.
Historians use certain “moves,” i.e., ways of thinking about primary sources in order to understand and evaluate them. These strategies used in historical inquiry can be taught to students.

Before reading, a student evaluates the date and origin (called sourcing):
1. Who wrote this?
2. When was it created?
3. Why is this only a partial perspective?
   - What is the author’s “lens” or background?
   - For what purpose or audience was this written?

A student reads closely in order to summarize and understand the argument:
1. What claims does the author or creator make?
2. What evidence is provided to support those claims?

A student corroborates the evidence and claims with other sources:
1. Where is it on a timeline with other sources?
2. Where does it differ or agree with other sources?
3. What is missing from both?

Finally, the student contextualizes the source within the period during which it was created:
1. How has the source been shaped by the time and place?
2. How does the source reflect the ideas of the period?
3. How might someone living at the time view this source?

FROM FACTS TO FRICTION TO INQUIRY
An unpublished primary source is cited to the library archive, museum, or personal collection in which it is found. (If the source belongs to a student-author, we suggest that a copy be digitized for an appendix or mounted online in order to give the reader access to it.) A published primary source is cited to the publication in which it is found (e.g., an anthology, atlas, newspaper, magazine, website, blog, legal case reporter).

However, sometimes web sources have “lost” their context; we aren’t given their origin. For example, recently a teacher asked us how to cite Martin Luther’s “95 Theses” from the Yale Divinity School Library site (www.yale.edu/adhoc/etexts/theses.htm). If students don’t know enough about this document to catch the misspelling of Wittenberg and do not have publication information or a date, they could cite it only as a webpage with a description, written in sentence style rather than as a capitalized title.

An acceptable MLA citation:

Of course the teacher could simply tell students not to use this particular online resource despite being hosted on a Yale server. But if the teacher’s goal is to engage students in historical thinking, this represents a missed opportunity. Credibility is best understood when students are asked to apply criteria contextually. When challenged to locate more information about the source in order to cite it within an historical context, students discover that “95 Theses” is a popularized title for “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences,” which was written in Latin in 1517.

Revised citation:

After a quick comparison of the beginning of several versions of this primary source, students recognize that Yale’s modernized text is only one of the translations available online, i.e., there is no single authoritative text. In other web sources they notice that scholars suggest that the story of Luther’s nailing the document to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, is apocryphal. Rather he distributed them to particular church authorities for discussion and support, but not until the text was translated from Latin into German, reproduced on the printing press and distributed throughout Europe was its widespread public acceptance assured. After a brief foray into citing, sourcing, and corroborating, students have learned more about evaluating a primary source and are primed to investigate Luther and the spread of the Protestant Reformation.

Common Core standards recommend using short research projects throughout the year to build students’ knowledge and skills. In addition to short, impromptu investigations based on citations, teachers can choose from ninety short lessons with sets of primary source documents from U.S. and world history created by Stanford’s History Education Group and available in Reading Like a Historian, http://sheg.stanford.edu/. The companion site Beyond the Bubble, https://beyondthebubble.stanford.edu, offers short, formative assessments of historical thinking along with rubrics and student work samples. Thanks to brief research projects using citing, sourcing, corroborating, and contextualizing, students have regular opportunities to move from facts to friction to inquiry.

Common Core
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.2 Research to Build and Present Knowledge: Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Debbie Abilock, a former school administrator and school librarian, co-founded and directs the educational vision of NoodleTools, Inc., a full-service teaching platform for academic research, which has answered over 35,000 questions from educators.