Primary Sources in History: Breaking Through the Myths

Using primary sources in history classes is all the rage. But if teachers are not reflective about the best use of such materials, they may engage students in exercises that are neither historically nor instructionally sound. Mr. Barton points out common misconceptions about primary sources and suggests ways to maximize their educational potential.

BY KEITH C. BARTON

VISUALIZE the following classroom scene. Students walk into history class and pull out packets of primary sources — or, in a more technologically advanced school, they log onto a collection of digitally archived documents. History books are used only for reference, and lectures are virtually absent. Instead, the students work in small groups to analyze each source and evaluate its reliability — determining its argument, establishing who created it and when, and identifying the bias of the author. Later, they compare sources and reach conclusions about the events or time periods portrayed, and they discuss reasons for their differing interpretations.

Sounds like good history instruction, doesn’t it? Well, not necessarily.

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For over a decade, I have suggested, along with many other historians and educators, that teachers make use of primary sources as an alternative to lectures, textbooks, and worksheets. Although such recommendations are nothing new, they have recently begun to attract a larger following. Primary sources can be found on tests, in commercially available packets, in archives on the Internet, and even in textbooks. Many teachers use these resources in inspiring and intellectually rigorous ways. Researchers in social studies and educational psychology, meanwhile, have investigated how students (and teachers) make sense of such sources. Thus, even if their use is not as widespread as many reformers would like, primary sources clearly are the order of the day.

Unfortunately, the use of primary sources in each of these settings often reveals fundamental misconceptions about history. In some cases, scholars who have little experience with historical methods appear to be passing along mistaken ideas about what historians do. In other cases, the use of primary sources seems to be driven less by a concern with historical authenticity than by demands for standards and accountability. The misunderstandings that arise from these practices, if not addressed, will result in classroom procedures that are not only inauthentic but irrelevant and ineffective. The following are seven common beliefs about primary sources. Some have been stated directly, either in academic manuscripts or in books and articles for teachers; others may not have been articulated so explicitly, but they nonetheless represent underlying assumptions of those who define the curriculum or of other educators. But each one is a myth.

**Myth 1. Primary sources are more reliable than secondary sources.** Perhaps this is not the most common belief about primary sources, but it is surely the most ridiculous. Because primary sources were created during the period under study or by witnesses to historical events, some people believe that they provide direct insight into the past and have greater authenticity than later accounts. Secondary sources, in this view, are corruptions of the originals and are prone to successive layers of error and bias. Some children hold exactly this view. They think we know about the past through oral stories that have been handed down over the generations, and each transmission introduces a new round of mistakes, just as in the game of “telephone.”

Few educators would entertain this misconception, yet they may believe that primary sources retain a purity that makes them more reliable than secondary accounts. However, primary sources are created for a variety of reasons, and some of those reasons have nothing to do with objectivity. Sometimes primary sources represent narrow or partisan perspectives; sometimes they were created intentionally to deceive. The speeches of white politicians in the American South during Reconstruction are primary sources, for example, but a secondary work by a modern historian — although published over a hundred years later — is a far more reliable account of the era’s political system, because it does not attempt to justify white political dominance.

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Secondary sources can also exhibit narrow perspectives, but they have the capability of providing more complete accounts than primary ones. Despite historians’ potential biases, as well as their human propensity for error, they normally consult numerous primary sources when investigating a historical episode. Thus their accounts — the secondary sources they create — will tend to be more reliable than those found in any single primary source. Newspapers, another common secondary source, also require corroboration and supporting evidence — at least those printed in the modern era do. This does not make them infallible sources of objective information, but it does mean that a newspaper story has a higher probability of providing reliable information than would a primary source in isolation.

Ultimately, we cannot depend on any single source — primary or secondary — for reliable knowledge; we have to consult multiple sources in our quest to develop historical understanding. Whether a source is primary or secondary has no bearing on its reliability, much less on its usefulness for a given inquiry. The mistaken authority assigned to primary sources sometimes results from a more basic confusion about the range of historical evidence, and this leads to the second myth.

**Myth 2. Primary sources can be read as arguments about the past.** Some scholars suggest that primary sources can be read just as any nonfiction texts are and that this
Involves analyzing the structure and logic of their arguments. In this view, historical inquiry is one type of reading behavior. This myth is based on a misunderstanding of the variety of evidence used in historical investigations. It equates all primary sources with one particular type of document, known as “testimony.” Testimony does involve texts written by those who witnessed (or claim to have witnessed) some occurrence. The collection of accounts by participants in the Battle at Lexington Green is a well-known example of this kind of source: officers, militiamen, and bystanders all gave accounts of what they remembered of the battle.2

Such testimony, however, represents only a small portion of the sources used by historians. Historians use census records, tax rolls, court proceedings, wills, deeds, photographs, advertisements, physical artifacts, and many other sources, none of which can be read as testimony, because none was created to present an argument about what happened — or at least, not to present an argument about what historians are investigating. Historians ask questions of sources that the people who created them had no interest in, and in many cases the creators could not even have conceived of the questions historians ask.3 Census records in 19th-century America, for example, were created to provide demographic information to the government, primarily for the purpose of determining congressional representation. Historians, however, use them to examine issues such as changing family structures and economic relations — questions that the records themselves were never meant to address.

In some of my own historical work, I have investigated how the hiring of slaves in antebellum Kentucky was motivated by changing norms for domestic labor (as women were no longer expected to perform household drudgery) and how such hiring was made possible by the expansion of market relations in the countryside.4 I relied, in part, on newspaper advertisements that offered slaves for hire, on guardians’ records that detailed who hired the slaves of deceased owners, and on correspondence requesting to hire slaves from Brutus Clay, one of the state’s largest slaveholders. These records were not created to provide testimony about the interrelationships of slave hiring, the market, and domestic labor in antebellum Kentucky. They were created to get the business of hiring done, by people who may not even have recognized that market relations and domestic norms were changing. Moreover, the creators of these records certainly weren’t interested in documenting such changes either for one another or for a historian of the late 20th century. (Nor did they realize they were living in the “antebellum” period.) The belief that primary sources function as textual arguments lays the foundation for the third, and most common, myth concerning primary sources.

Myth 3. Historians use a “sourcing heuristic” to evaluate bias and reliability. This is the most pervasive myth about primary sources — at least in educational settings — and it demonstrates a fundamentally misguided understanding of how historical knowledge is constructed. In this view, historians examine primary sources and speculate on the extent to which they can be trusted to present accurate accounts of past events. This involves two sets of considerations: first, the ability of the creators of the sources to accurately know those events (Were they present? Were they deceived in some way? How soon did they produce their account?) and second, their interest in conveying events accurately (Were they trying to cover up something? Were they trying to curry favor? Were they blinded by prejudice of one kind or another?). This perspective on historical methodology leads to classroom exercises in which students are given sets of sources and taught to evaluate the bias that may result from authorship, purpose, time of creation, and so on — a process often referred to as “sourcing.”5

This view of primary sources is flawed for a number of reasons. First, as noted above, it can apply only to the class of sources known as testimony, which constitutes only a small portion of the sources used by historians. When a source does not attempt to provide testimony, its reliability is rarely questioned because there is no reason to do so. It is the very fact of the existence of the source that constitutes historical evidence. For example, Brutus Clay’s account books contain numerous contracts with neighbors who hired slaves from him. There are no questions of bias or reliability to be asked.
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Of these contracts, because it is their very existence that provides evidence of slave-hiring. Unless Clay was so mentally disturbed that he spent his days fabricating these contracts, there is no reason to think that such hiring did not take place. Historians do not work under the assumption of a worst-case scenario in which people in the past invented misleading details of their daily lives to fool future scholars.

Moreover, even when working with certain kinds of testimony, questions of bias and reliability may be irrelevant. Like many slaveholders, Brutus Clay placed notices in his local newspaper to announce the availability of slaves for hire; these often began by advertising “Good Cooks and Washers.” One could easily conclude that such advertisements were not reliable, because Clay was trying to convince hirers that his slaves were worthy. Thus he had a motive for referring to them as “good” cooks and washers, whether they were or not. But historians are unlikely to be interested in whether these slaves really were good cooks and washers; historians are interested in how slaveholders appealed to potential hirers, and again, it is the very existence of the advertisements’ text that provides evidence to answer this question.

In many circumstances, historians seek out sources precisely because of their bias. To understand a variety of viewpoints that were operative during the U.S. civil rights movement, for instance, historians — and students — would need to read sources written from the perspectives of Malcolm X, George Wallace, the Black Panthers, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and others. Each of these would be “biased,” in that each advocates a particular social and political agenda, but that does not make them useless as sources of historical knowledge. Quite the contrary. It is the unique bias of each source that helps us understand the range of viewpoints people held at the time. A great deal of historical analysis is devoted to just this question: What were the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of people in the past? To answer the question, biased sources must be used, because that bias constitutes evidence of peoples’ ideas. As Seán Lang points out, historians do not ask, “Is this source biased?” (which suggests the possibility of unbiased sources), but rather, “What is this source’s bias, and how does it add to our picture of the past?”

This is not to say that recognition of bias is unimportant. All historical research involves consideration of bias, but it only occasionally involves examining the bias of particular sources, as many classroom exercises and research tasks suggest. Rather, historians are more interested in the bias that results from the types of sources that are used. Any set of sources constitutes a selection from among all the possible records that were created, or that could have been created. Some people (or institutions) left behind records whereas others did not, and some records have survived whereas others have not. Therefore, historical remains are biased toward those who produced records that have survived to the present.

For example, evidence for patterns of life in the Colonial Era is weighted toward the literate and elite, because these are the people who most often created enduring records. No individual source is necessarily unreliable, but the overall body of evidence is weighted toward particular segments of the population and is unlikely to be representative of those who left behind less evidence of their ideas or behavior. In evaluating historical accounts, students should learn to look for the relationship between the kinds of claims made and the types of evidence used, but this is a far cry from having them look at individual sources and try to “spot the bias.” The mistaken belief that historians’ chief task is the evaluation of bias in individual documents has led to the next two myths of primary sources.

Myth 4. Using primary sources engages students in authentic historical inquiry. This myth often constitutes the implicit rationale for including primary sources in textbooks, on tests, or as part of classroom exercises. The mere presence of primary sources appears to lend authenticity to historical exercises. That is, historians use such sources, and if students use them, they too must be engaged in historical inquiry.

This myth stems from a lack of understanding of how historians use primary sources, and so it may be the most fundamental misunderstanding of all. Historians do not often use sources in any of the ways that are usually identified by educators. That is, they are not primarily concerned with “sourcing” them, corrobo-
rating them, or explaining their meaning. In fact, it would be rare for historians even to use the phrase “primary sources,” except in a bibliography. What historians work with is evidence. Primary sources are one of the most important forms of evidence, but the difference between these two concepts shows just how far educators’ ideas diverge from the work of historians.

One common use of primary sources is to engage students in a “document-based activity,” either as a classroom lesson or as an assessment activity. At its simplest level, students may be given a single primary source and asked comprehension questions. For example, a copy of the Northwest Ordinance may be accompanied by questions such as “What does this say about slavery? About fugitive slaves?” At a more sophisticated level, students are given a variety of primary source documents, often written from conflicting viewpoints, and asked to respond to an essay question using the entire set. One Advanced Placement document-based question, for example, asked, “To what extent had the colonists developed a sense of their identity and unity as Americans by the eve of the Revolution?” The sources provided included private correspondence, a speech in the British Parliament, a declaration by the Continental Congress, published works from the 18th century, a list of relief donations, and the famous “Join, or die” illustration.

Neither activity engages students in authentic historical inquiry. The first requires only basic comprehension of a text, yet it is difficult to complete because of the antiquated and legalistic language of the document. The second is more complicated, but it is no more authentic, because the task has been created outside the context of historical research. That is, the sources have already been chosen, and the students are simply asked to explain what they mean. But historians do not work with “source packets,” and they would never allow anyone else to select their sources for them. Historians ask questions about the past, and they seek evidence that will help answer those questions. They select the evidence themselves, and they do so precisely because of its authorship and purpose. They do not analyze sources in the ways suggested either by document-based questions or by research on sourcing, because they have no reason to work with other people’s collections of documents.

Myth 5. Students can build up an understanding of the past through primary sources. Many of us are prone to the belief that, if a little is a good, a lot must be better. So if working with primary sources helps students better understand history, then spending all their time with such sources will improve students’ understanding immeasurably. Evidence suggests that this assumption is incorrect. But it makes little sense to think that knowledge of a subject as vast as history could be built up entirely through piecemeal analysis of primary sources. How many thousands of sources would students have to consult to develop an understanding of the Industrial Revolution, or the history of women’s rights, or the reasons for the Vietnam War? Students don’t need to consult 200 years of census records to learn how the population of the U.S. has grown; they can simply be told or read it in a book. They should know that someone has consulted the records, but doing so themselves would be a misuse of their time.

Moreover, students’ ability to make sense of primary sources depends directly on their understanding of the contexts in which the documents were produced. Students can learn a great deal about slavery from advertisements for runaways, for example, but to do so they need background information: what life was like for slaves, what their legal status was, what the geography of the region was, and what means of transportation were available. Similarly, students will be able to interpret Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech only if they know that African Americans at the time faced
segregation and legal discrimination, that the speech was part of a larger movement for civil rights, and that King was a leader of that movement. They also must understand his references to the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation, or else the speech will be unintelligible.

None of these things can be read directly from the sources themselves; students need to encounter explanations of these topics in secondary sources — a teacher’s description, a passage in a trade book, or a file in some electronic medium. Historians do the same. Although they use primary sources as evidence, they would be unable to do so without knowledge of the larger framework of the past, and this comes from having read the secondary works of other historians. Without prior knowledge, sources are literally incomprehensible, and it is impossible to construct meaning from them.

Myth 6. Primary sources are fun. Although numerous publications have described students’ motivation and enthusiasm when using primary sources, such sources are not inherently interesting, and students do not always enjoy working with them. Educators in the United Kingdom, where “sourcework” has featured prominently in history classrooms for many years, have become acutely aware of how sources can be used in ways that are neither exciting nor motivating — and certainly not fun. The use of primary sources is an expected part of history classrooms in both primary and secondary schools there, but sources sometimes become the focus of isolated lessons that are separated from specific historical knowledge or meaningful inquiry. That is, teachers sometimes simply assign sources to see if students can extract information and identify bias, and such “sourcework for sourcework’s sake” becomes mechanistic and dull. British history educators even have a name for this practice: “Death by sources.”

The nature of a source does not derive from the kind of object it is (i.e., a letter versus a textbook), but from the purpose it serves in a historical investigation. If a historian (or a history student) wants to know how textbooks of the 1940s portrayed interactions between Native Americans and Europeans in the 18th century, then those textbooks are primary sources; for information on the interactions themselves, however, they are by no means primary. Similarly, if we want to know what George Washington thought about British treatment of prisoners of war, his letters are primary sources, but if we want to know how those soldiers actually were treated, the same letters are secondary sources. The simple fact that a document is a textbook or a letter provides no indication of whether it should be classified as primary or secondary.

Furthermore, some sources defy categorization altogether. A documentary about World War II, for example, seems like a secondary source because it was produced by someone not present during the war, yet it may be composed entirely of photographs, newsreel footage, and interviews with participants — each one of which is a primary source. However, these primary sources will have been edited to shape the overall account that is presented in the film. Can a collection of primary sources be transformed into a secondary source simply because it has been arranged in a particular way? If so, then there can be no primary sources at all, because we do not have complete and unmediated access to the past: all historical sources have been shaped by the circumstances of their creation and preservation.

Ultimately, we might be better off jettisoning the misleading distinction between primary and secondary sources altogether. A more inclusive phrase such as “original historical sources” might help counter the belief...
that sources can be sorted into neat categories that are independent of any broader historical inquiry.

WORKING with original historical sources can be more interesting than reading from a textbook or listening to a lecture. Such sources can create personal connections to history, as students read the words written by living, breathing humans like themselves. (Students don’t typically view textbook authors as real people.) Visual evidence such as photographs, artwork, and advertisements, meanwhile, can tap into alternative forms of prior knowledge and increase access to history for students who do not respond well to written texts. And material artifacts that students can touch and manipulate — such as old tools, clothes, or appliances — can be popular additions to the classroom. Indeed, much the same could be said for historical fiction, games and simulations, or role plays and dramas. What, then, are the unique contributions of original historical sources, the functions they can serve better — and more authentically — than other approaches? There are at least four:

1. To motivate historical inquiry. Much of the potential of original historical sources lies in their ability to stimulate curiosity, just as “discrepant events” do in science. Science teachers often use physical demonstrations (such as objects of unequal weight falling at the same speed) to pique student interest and create cognitive dissonance. Students usually cannot explain such events using their prior mental frameworks, and when they face tangible evidence of such limitations, they might be motivated to engage in further study and investigation. People generally strive for more consistent and comprehensive views of the world, and direct observation can reveal gaps and fault lines in previous conceptual understanding. In history, original sources can serve much the same function.

Startling or unusual sources — whether physical artifacts, visual images, or written text — often provoke questions. Elementary students who explore household objects from the 19th century, for example, may wonder what their purpose was and how they were used. Photographs of white resistance to school integration can lead middle school students to ask what was going on, why it was controversial, and what happened to the people involved. And secondary students who examine certificates of indenture, advertisements, property lists, and legal statutes from the early Colonial Era can develop hypotheses about relationships between race, nationality, religion, and legal status. All these questions should lead to self-motivated inquiry. But such questions will not develop automatically, because few sources are inherently interesting. Teachers must help develop students’ engagement through careful probing and discussion.

2. To supply evidence for historical accounts. Most scholars who advocate the reform of history education argue that students need to understand how historical accounts are created. This argument has been the impetus for much of the attention to original sources in recent years. There are, however, at least three ways in which sources can contribute to this goal, and educators need to strike a balance among the three. The first is the most familiar: in order to learn that historical accounts are tentative and that they are based on incomplete and sometimes conflicting evidence, students can be given a set of documents, such as those in the Lexington Green activity, and asked to reach conclusions about questions such as “Who fired the first shot?” This is similar to a laboratory exercise in science in that it provides practice with authentic materials, but the outcome is known in advance — even if, in this case, the outcome is that we cannot be certain who fired first. Such exercises are important, but they should be used sparingly. Students need to learn about the indeterminacy of historical sources, particularly if they have never encountered the topic before, but the goal of such lessons should be to prepare students to investigate more open-ended questions.

Such open-ended investigation involves using evidence to build supportable accounts of the past, and this should be one of the main activities of the history classroom. Evidence comes in part from original sources, but it can also come from those usually classified as secondary. A student presentation on how women did laundry in the early 20th century, for example, is likely to be based on what students have read in encyclopedias and trade books, and it may also involve illustrations taken from magazines of the time, artifacts...
such as irons, and perhaps interviews with great-grandparents. Similarly, students who investigate desegregation are likely to use trade books and reference works, memoirs of participants, photographs and televised news footage, and newspaper articles from the 1950s and 1960s. In both these cases, the students would be doing just what historians do: using a variety of sources to support conclusions about what happened and why. The only time they are likely to rely exclusively on original sources is when they are investigating a topic for which there are no secondary sources—such as the history of their own family or perhaps of the local community.

One further use of sources as evidence deserves mention. Although it is not often seen in schools, it should be. This involves the careful analysis of how sources have been used as evidence in the accounts produced by others. When students read a textbook or a trade book, when they watch a documentary, or when they hear someone refer to how life used to be, they should immediately ask, “What kind of evidence is this based on?” The purpose of such questioning is not to dismiss every historical account as “just an opinion.” It is, instead, to understand better the strengths and limitations of those accounts and to appreciate how conclusions and perspectives might vary if different evidence were used. Students should be able to recognize, for example, that an account of gender roles in the 19th century that is based on popular magazines may represent expectations of the white middle class, while census records could provide a different picture. Indeed, some people may not have shared the expectations or experiences depicted in the magazines at all. This is perhaps the most authentic use of primary sources, because in our adult lives most of us only occasionally create our own historical accounts, but we are surrounded by the accounts of others, and we need to view them with an appropriately critical eye.

3. To convey information about the past. A basic principle of instruction is that lectures are appropriate when students will learn from them just as well as if they had located the information on their own. Students don’t need to read the Northwest Ordinance to find out that it provided for the return of slaves who had escaped to certain states in the North. Telling them that information is just as effective — and much more efficient — than having them scour the document to locate it themselves. Sometimes, though, original sources can be a more effective way of conveying information. Teachers who want students to visualize a miners’ strike in the 1920s aren’t going to laboriously describe the scene in words; they’re going to show photographs. Similarly, oral or written explanations of historical changes in architecture, fashion, or technology won’t be nearly as effective as having students look at pictures or artifacts that represent those same changes. This kind of information is best conveyed through visual media, and original historical sources can supply such images.

Other times, written historical sources are more eloquent and thoughtful than secondary ones, and so students should study them directly. We still listen to the “I Have a Dream” speech, not only because it had an impact on historical events but because we want to know what Martin Luther King said and how he said it. There’s no point in trying to paraphrase the speech — King got it right, and we can learn what he said through direct engagement with his words. Similarly, the Declaration of Independence, the Seneca Falls Declaration, and many other public documents represent clear and inspiring statements of principle, and studying them only through lectures or textbooks — without reading the original text — would devalue them. By contrast, students can learn about the significance of some documents without reading them directly; they would lose nothing in a paraphrase of the Northwest Ordinance, for example, or even of the Magna Carta.

4. To provide insight into the thoughts and experiences of people in the past. Some historical information can simply be conveyed, but other times students have to work harder to construct meaningful understanding. This is especially true when they are trying to understand the lives and experiences of people in the past. Students could read in a textbook that life was difficult for settlers traveling West in the 1800s, but that would provide them with only superficial knowledge. Thoughtful engagement with original historical sources, such
as diaries, letters, and published works, would enable students to construct a more complete understanding, with more specificity and detail. Similarly, reading the words of 18th-century Native Americans would allow students to develop greater insight into the meaning that settlement, removal, and warfare held for people affected directly by those events. The greater depth and richness of original sources in these cases allows students to construct a more complex and nuanced understanding of past life than most textbooks or lectures are likely to do.

This is one of the most rewarding uses of original historical sources, as anyone who has struggled to understand people in the past will recognize. Just what were these people trying to say? What did they think about the choices they were making, and what reasons did they give for their actions? How did they feel about their lives and circumstances, their triumphs and tragedies? What hopes and dreams did they entertain, and what were their everyday feelings and opinions? Textbooks and lectures, by themselves, cannot easily communicate such thoughts and experiences, and even the most eloquent historians include quotations from original sources throughout their works. By carefully reading these sources and considering their meaning, we reach our own conclusions about how people in the past experienced their lives. In this way, original sources are used not just to establish the existence of historical trends and events but to provide insight into the meaning they held for people who lived through them.

Effective use of original historical sources requires careful attention to their educational purposes. Each of the myths in this article derives from the assumption that analyzing sources constitutes an end in itself — as though meaning inheres in the sources rather than in the uses to which they are put. The instructional activities that result from this assumption and its associated myths can history instruction. If students work with sources in isolation — “sourcing” them, spotting bias, answering comprehension questions — then they will not learn very much historical content, they will not learn how historical knowledge is constructed, and they will not learn to use evidence to reach conclusions about issues that face them as citizens.

Each of these important goals of learning history depends on using sources within a context of inquiry. Such inquiry requires that students develop and pursue meaningful questions, that they make informed choices about the evidence that can be used to answer those questions, and that they gain experience drawing conclusions from evidence. This process requires more than the analysis of original sources themselves. It requires learning about historical context through lectures, books, or other media; it requires learning about the range of historical evidence; and it requires learning how sources are used as evidence in the accounts produced by historians and others.

Original sources should certainly be a centerpiece of the history classroom, because they are the foundation of historical knowledge. However, their use should be informed by a more complete and reflective understanding of their utility, rather than by popular but misguided myths.


