

Teacher's Guide

-Using our Primary Source Packets-

Summary

In this activity, students will analyze artifacts, images, and documents from Maine's history. They will be prompted to draw conclusions about what the sources are and how they are related. Then they will receive more information about the sources and reflect on the topic as a class.

Students may work individually or in groups. Approximate time needed is 45-60 minutes.

Why Use Primary Sources?

Primary Sources are immediate, first-hand accounts of a topic, from people who had a direct connection with it. Some examples are photographs, video recordings, journals, letters, speeches, artifacts, or books and newspapers published at the time.

Primary sources offer a direct window to the past—to how people from another era thought, talked, looked, and lived. Students often find them to be more memorable and relatable. Analyzing primary sources is a way for students to construct knowledge and develop their critical thinking and visual literacy skills.

As helpful as textbooks are, they don't give students a chance to see *how* historians work. Primary sources give students the opportunity to investigate, make connections, and form their own opinions. This is a great exercise in understanding bias and different points of view.

How do I use these packets?

Each packet contains:

1. An introduction that provides a general background on the subject
2. A group of primary sources (documents, images, and artifacts)
3. Labels with information about the sources
4. Analysis worksheets

Setup and Planning

All materials are available for free download from the Maine State Museum's website. There are no physical objects—you can either print materials or students may view them on computers.

We recommend setting aside **a minimum of 45 minutes for a topic**, depending on whether you've reviewed the subject in advance and how many sources you would like the students to work with. 60 minutes allows for more thorough student analysis and interpretations.

Lesson format:

- 1. Teachers present the introduction to their class.**
 - The format is flexible here—teachers may read it to the class, go over select parts of the introduction that fit with the curriculum, or assign the introduction as class reading.

- 2. Individual work: Students work closely with the primary sources.**
 - NOTE—at this point, students should not have the source label information. It's important that they use their own observation skills and guesswork before they get the “answers.”
 - There are several options for setup. We encourage a table of 3-6 students, with sources spread out on the table. Students may choose which they'd like to work with. If there is time and interest, they can analyze multiple sources.
 - Each source should have a corresponding analysis worksheet for the student to fill out.
 - The analysis worksheets are designed to help students get past the barrier of working with unfamiliar materials—getting information from an artifact may seem impossible at first! They are divided into three categories: document, image, and artifact.

- 3. Group work: Students share information, make connections.**
 - Students can go around their table group one at a time and share conclusions about their primary sources. Encourage students to draw connections between the sources—each set has some mysteries to solve.
 - *Are the sources connected in any way?*
 - The teacher should encourage students to draw connections between the different sources, which may seem like unrelated items.
 - *Why are these sources grouped together?*

- *What do they have to do with the topic?*
- *What story do they tell?*

4. Students read labels, talk, and reflect as a class.

- Once students have had the chance to explore their sources, make conclusions, and answer as many of the worksheet questions as they can, the teacher shares the source labels. Either pass out physical copies or read them to the class.
- The class now knows as much about the objects as the museum knows! The teacher opens a class discussion.
 - *Are the students surprised by anything?*
 - *Does knowing more about the sources change what they thought about the topic?*
 - *What more do students want to know now? What questions do they have?*
- [Optional] Each topic has reflection questions. They could be used as in-class discussion prompts, or as a writing assignment.

Possible stumbling blocks

Primary source work can be tough to get used to! Students are often more comfortable getting information by reading words on a page. How do you ‘read’ a photo, or a jacket, or a painting? If you notice students getting stuck on “I don’t know,” encourage them to take small steps and list everything they *do* see—color, shape, size, designs, etc.

This is a great opportunity to encourage students to use evidence to back up their conclusions about a primary source. Does it look old or new? What do you see that makes it look old? You noticed that it’s scratched and kind of dirty--what do you think could have scratched it like that? Does that help you figure out how it might have been used?

Prompt students to look closer and use the evidence they see to form educated guesses. They shouldn’t worry about being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’!

Thank you, and please get in touch if you have any questions!

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