



Top Ten Tips for Facilitating an Effective Primary Source Analysis

from the Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog



September 13th, 2011 by [Stephen Wesson](#). *Examining primary sources at the 2011 Library of Congress Summer Teacher Institutes*
This is a guest post from Stacie Moats of the Library of Congress.

The first time I tried facilitating a primary source activity during my post-graduate museum education studies, I only had to guide my peers' analysis of a single artifact for five minutes. Yet so much of what I learned from this experience later proved invaluable to me when teaching with primary sources "for real."

During the Library's 2011 Summer Teacher Institute, teacher participants took turns facilitating a primary source analysis activity for their peers. Afterwards, Library staff asked them to share what they learned from their practice teaching experiences. Below is a Top Ten Tips list based on participants' most frequently cited tips for facilitating an effective primary source analysis.

#10. Choose wisely.

Selecting a primary source for analysis that will capture the interest of students is a critical first step. Pick accessible and appropriate sources based on knowledge of your students that will make a connection to both curricular and personal interests.

#9. Be prepared.

Do your homework on the selected primary source's background information and historical context; pre-select questions to guide student analysis; and determine how to use the source within a larger unit of study to meet your desired learning outcomes.

#8. Model the analysis process.

One participant put it simply, "Model, model, model."

#7. Ask for evidence.

Challenge students to "make your hypothesis: I think ___ because ___" and redirect them if necessary by referring back to the primary source for details.

#6. Listen... and learn.

“Listen to what students are telling you; don’t just assume you know what they are going to say.” Or, as another participant wrote, “Less teacher talk, more student talk.”

#5. Encourage—and enjoy—the unexpected.

“Offer positive encouragement of the process,” and remember that you “must let the students explore different avenues than what you may have had in mind.”

#4. Make student thinking visible.

Use techniques to help students see their thinking. For example, “Point out on the painting/picture what the students mention so everyone sees it” and “Allow all questions and observations to be heard and/or recorded.”

#3. Know your questions, not the answers.

“Resist answering questions,” “Have faith in yourself and in your students; take a risk!” and “Reinforce there are no wrong answers” because “this is about student thinking.”

#2. Keep it simple.

“Don’t try to do so much” and “Allow discussion to develop on its own – not too guided.”

And the most frequently cited tip for facilitating a primary source analysis from the Library’s 2011 Summer Teacher Institute participants?

#1. Wait! Give students more time.

“Giving students time to observe, reflect, question, and share,” is crucial, as one participant pointed out. As another participant wrote, “Don’t jump the gun. Give students time ... to develop their ideas.”

Visit the Library of Congress [Teachers page](#) to find the [primary source analysis tool and teacher’s guides](#) to assist in facilitating student analysis of a variety of primary sources.

Resource:

“Top Ten Tips for Facilitating an Effective Primary Source Analysis « Teaching with the Library of Congress”,
<http://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2011/09/top-ten-tips-for-facilitating-an-effective-primary-source-analysis/>