

## Bridging Time with Primary Sources

Feature

---



by Connie Williams, November 2016

*"The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." J.R. Hartley*

It was 8:45 a.m. and the library was already filled with students from a 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class, two classes of seniors and one class of juniors. They were talking amongst themselves, mostly quietly, when in walked an elderly woman accompanied by her friend. Vera moved slowly, but had a spark to her step and a keen eye to the crowd. The students quieted down as she walked up to the table, laid down her bag, and unpacked her pictures. We put them up on the board behind her. As she finished and sat down, we adjusted the microphone and I spoke to the students.

Vera, a survivor of Hitler's Holocaust—one of the last—was invited under the auspices of a new project of local community members called The Story Project. She came to tell her story... and the students listened. Rapt. They heard Vera, fifteen years old at the time, tell of the line she stood in next to her mother as they faced Herr Mengele. With the lifting of a thumb, Vera's mother disappeared to the right, never to be seen again, while Vera was sent to the left and the labor camps. The long journey to today took many twists and turns, and today—at ninety years old—Vera shares her story so that students can connect to what it was like in that time, under those circumstances. We were fortunate to have two days of speakers from The Story Project, each bringing their own or their parents' tales of the war, camps, and the long road to safety and freedom.

Primary sources are those documents, images, audio, artifacts—and people—from the time of an event. Letters, diaries, pictures, speeches, and movies are just a few examples of primary source documents that bring history to life. Many primary sources were not designed to be published or shared, but years later they provide a peek into the mind of their creator allowing us to consider an event or time period from a unique point of view.

Our students, listening to Vera and all our other speakers, were engaged not only while listening to them speak, but also for days afterwards. Several students came up to the speakers to give hugs, share their own family story, and make a connection. A few came to me days later to thank me for the experience; they had gone home to tell their parents about it and elicited conversations about their own histories.

### **Power to Bridge Time**

Primary sources have the power to bridge time, making the past come alive for us today. C3 Social Science Standards (Dimension 2: Historical Sources and Evidence) require students to be able to use primary sources as evidence to promote an argument or point of view. Science Next Gen Standards require students to use empirical evidence to support an argument or a reasoned stand on an issue or subject.

But will any primary source work? Can we head back to our closets and bring forth documents or artifacts that instantly engage and prod us to question and look further? I would posit that the answer is yes. How many times have we been to antique shops or estate sales and discovered something that we want to bring to class because it will fit in perfectly as a great story to share? But, in order to help us discern whether a stack of postcards, a kitchen tool, a chronometer, or a pile of legal documents is a goldmine of information—or junk—we need to sort out a few things.

### **Identify the document in-hand** ("I see...")

Take a moment to look—really look—at the object. First, describe it to yourself in concrete terms: "This is a set of postcards that had a rubber band around them. When I spread them out to look at them, they had pictures on one side and an address [the same one with the same name] on the other side next to some writing. It was from

'Susan' to 'Grace Alexander'."

At this point, we can begin to formulate some questions: who is Susan and who is Grace? Are they related? What is the date? Where did they come from and where did Grace live when these arrived? We might, at this point, generate some interest from the person who found these postcards in the back of the closet. But, what about students who have no connection to Grace and Susan or have never seen a postcard before?

### **Identify the source** ("I think I see...")

The next steps continue the unpacking by looking at the item itself: it's a postcard written by Susan to Grace. The postmark can tell us Susan's location, Grace's location, and the date the card was sent. The salutation is to "mom" so Grace is probably Susan's mother. Her address is in Columbus, Ohio. The picture on the front tells us something about where Susan was at the time. In this case, when we spread out the postcards, we can see that one comes from Bryce Canyon, one comes from Carlsbad Canyon, another from the Grand Canyon, and yet another from Zion. The dates are scattered throughout 1925.

### **What does it tell us?** (Identify the content and context)

We can begin making inferences at this point: because the cards are all from national parks, perhaps Susan is on vacation. The contents of the letters tell us Susan is travelling with her new husband, Charlie, and they are driving to these parks...a honeymoon? A holiday trip?

How could we—why would we—use primary sources such as these in the classroom? We first have to identify our goal. Are we introducing a new topic in such a way that students will *want* to know more? Do we want to use these postcards as a way to help students see a larger context for a particular topic and help them narrow it down into a smaller one for further individual or small group research?

If we're introducing them to a new topic, once the postcards have been unpacked, you can easily begin a switch to your topic. Are you studying transportation? How would Susan and Charlie get to these national parks? You can now use Susan and Charlie as examples of the train, canals, and emerging auto technology—and the even newer air technology—to begin your unit on transportation at the turn of the century and after World War I.

Should your unit be on conservation, a look at the national parks as a social, ecological, and cultural movement could begin with Susan's possible interest in visiting these newly designated parks.

Using the Question Formulation Technique ([rightquestion.org](http://rightquestion.org)) to move students to identify topics of interest, could elicit questions such as: How did they get there from Ohio? Did they have roads? If they drove a car, what route could they take? Where did they buy gasoline? What if they broke down? When did the national parks open? Why were they established and by whom? Why Zion (or any of the particular parks)? What would they find at Zion? What is the weather like in Zion? Did the national parks affect any Native Americans? What was their point of view? Did women travel much by car back then? Did they do daring things like this? Could I study more about women and cars or women and adventures? What about Ohio—what was it like there? What do the letters tell us about Grace's life?

One set of postcards can build a personal connection to a topic given the proper guidance. Topics throughout a unit on 1900–1920 can be covered using Susan and Charlie and Grace as the connectors. Primary sources can also be used to add depth to a unit as you are working through it. For example, in a unit on transportation, stop and introduce Susan, Grace, and Charlie via the postcards. Since students will have information about transportation already in hand, they can look at these documents with a more textured eye. They can now spend a moment away from the class schedule to look deeper: teach maps skills by looking up the roads (to search pre-vetted state archival maps type: <year> highway maps <state > site:.gov into your search engine) and set them loose to see if they can find their way. For this particular trip: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/back1102.cfm>.

Regardless of the topic, primary sources can create the connections necessary for a wide variety of lesson goals. Whether we're using them to spark inquiry, to delve deeper in a unit, or to use as an assessment tool, they are readily available through an Internet search, a trip to an antique or thrift shop, or even checking out someone's attic.

Research should be fun, messy, sometimes difficult, and hopefully so engaging that when it is time to come up for air, the world seems different because ideas and perceptions have changed. Primary source materials bring a serendipity that can lead researchers into interesting places. Give a student a newspaper from late November 1963 and let her unpack it to discover President Kennedy's assassination, local reactions to the assassination, the cost of clothing as seen through ads, local issues of the day, the obituaries, the weddings, and the comics.

Any primary source can ignite interest if given the spark it needs: time to sit with it, directed unpacking, question building, and an assigned task. Primary sources open connections between disparate things and create a "big picture" where the past is no longer that strange place we don't understand because "they do things differently there."

MLA CITATION

Williams, Connie. "Bridging Time with Primary Sources." *School Library Connection*, November 2016, [schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2046614](https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2046614).

<https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2046614?topicCenterId=2247902>

Entry ID: 2046614

COPYRIGHT 2026 ABC-CLIO, LLC