

Primary Sources: Encouraging Elementary Students to Learn and Wonder

Editor's Note

I recently had a first grade teacher email me to ask for a primary source. She had been introducing her students to daily Socratic-style seminars and was wanting to move from the text-based items they had been using to a visual springboard for her next session. Learning that they were also studying maps, I knew that I could find a primary source map that would lead to an engaging dialogue.

This teacher's inquiry highlighted one of the things that I love about primary sources: they can lead to great discussions. That is because a compelling primary source can have a bit of mystery. Unlike a nonfiction text where the information is there for the taking, primary sources are incomplete. That may seem like a drawback, but those gaps encourage students to interpret and wonder about a topic through the analysis of that primary source. However, to look at a primary source purposefully, students need a primary source analysis strategy.

In my book *The Elementary Educator's Guide to Primary Sources*, I explore several analysis strategies. These strategies work with kindergarten as well as upper-elementary students. There are variations and adaptations to all of them, but what is similar is that they encourage elementary students to engage with historical items and documents to learn and wonder.

As I've used these primary source analysis strategies with my elementary students over the years, I've learned lessons that help make their learning and my teaching more meaningful.

Help Students Focus by Framing the Analysis

We look at everything in context. Before sharing a primary source, let elementary students know why they are looking at the item. Saying, "As we start to look at different types of maps, I want you to analyze one that was made long ago," can help students focus on the item as a map and not focus on nuances that may not be the target of the intended learning.

Be Ready to Be Flexible

In the example, you want students to focus on the item as a map, but I am always prepared for them to look at parts of the map that I was not anticipating. In the map of the solar system, if students want to discuss the shapes of the planets and not the order, I want to be flexible. If I can't be flexible because my learning objectives are too specific, a primary source analysis might be better suited to another lesson.

Student Collaboration is Key

We ask students to do many things independently. A primary source analysis should not be one of them. Elementary students sharing their observations, reactions, and wonderings model the analysis process for other students. More importantly, it can encourage other students to see, think, or wonder about something that they may not have on their own.

Listen Like their Learning Depends on It

As independent as students are during a primary source analysis, I still play an important role in the process. Students can share a lot of different types of thinking with the group. To help students during the process, I must be listening. There can be misconceptions that can be addressed, a focus that may be off target, or a question that I can pull other resources to help a student answer. Helping students with any of these things is dependent on me listening carefully and reacting appropriately to guide students during the analysis process.

With my first grade colleague, I shared an early map of the solar system with the earth at the center. I knew it had enough identifiable information to make elements familiar, but enough that was unexpected to make them question and wonder. To see these primary source analysis strategies in action, take a look at two lessons that show possible uses of this same primary source with a [first grade class studying maps](#) and a [fifth grade class studying space science](#).

MLA CITATION

Bober, Tom. "Primary Sources: Encouraging Elementary Students to Learn and Wonder." *School Library Connection*, January 2019, schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2186194.

<https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2186194?topicCenterId=2247903>

Entry ID: 2186194

