

Comparing Primary and Secondary Sources

Lesson Plan

Description

Students learn to differentiate between primary and secondary sources. Working in groups, students will evaluate an example of both source types, considering the advantages and disadvantages of using each in historical research. Students will become aware that there are different perspectives on historical events by critically examining their sources. This lesson can be used as an introduction to a First World War unit.

Recommended Grade Range

All provinces and territories except Quebec: Grades 7 to 12,
Quebec Secondary Cycles I-V

Objectives

Students will:

- understand the difference between primary and secondary sources;
- brainstorm a list of document types in each category;
- work individually and in groups to analyze critically historical sources;
- consider the advantages and disadvantages of using both primary and secondary sources;
- explain their findings to the class as part of a class discussion.

Estimated Time

2-3 class periods

Materials Required

- Internet/computer lab access for 1 class period;
- Copies of the Primary Document Analysis Worksheet;
- Copies of the Secondary Source Analysis Worksheet.

Lesson

Introduction:

Ask students if they can define primary and secondary sources. Make note of their definitions on the board. Summarize their ideas in a working definition for the class, or provide students with an existing definition.

A primary source provides a firsthand account of events recorded during or shortly after the events described occurred.

A secondary source of information is one that was created later by someone who did not experience first-hand or participate in the events

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Ask students to brainstorm types of documents they think would fit into each category.

Primary sources might include diaries, letters, eyewitness testimonies, official reports, home videos, or speeches.

Secondary sources might include textbooks, essays, scholarly articles, biographies, or encyclopaedias.

Once you have determined that the class is comfortable with the definitions, organize students in small groups (3-4 students). Have each group select a primary source document from the [archival documents section](#) of the First World War web site, and a secondary source article from the site covering the same topic as their primary source. You may also choose to use the materials in the [resource packs](#). Students should print these out and return to the classroom. It will be helpful for each student in the group to have a copy of the documents they have chosen.

Distribute the Document Analysis Worksheet and Secondary Source Analysis Worksheet to each student, and have students individually complete both worksheets using their chosen documents. Ask students to pay special attention to the similarities and differences in the perspectives provided by each source, and include examples/quotes from their documents where possible.

Once students have individually completed their worksheets, distribute one blank copy of each worksheet to each group. Ask students to consolidate their results in the new worksheet, fleshing out their responses and discussing their answers as they work. Circulate throughout the class providing support and feedback.

Reconvene the class and discuss students' findings. What kind of information is provided by the primary source? Is it different from information provided by the secondary source? How? Which type of source do students think provides the most accurate information? Why?

Conclusion

Once groups have summarized their findings, draw two tables on chart paper or the board. One chart will be for primary sources, and one for secondary sources. Each chart

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should have two categories: 'Advantages' and 'Disadvantages'. Have students contribute ideas for each category, and note these on the charts.

Ask the class to consider the work of historians. Which sources do students think historians use most often? Why? How can primary and secondary sources be used together?

Assessment:

Have the class hand in their group and individual worksheets. Answers should be thoughtful and analytical, and, where appropriate, include examples to support their conclusions. Ideally, the group worksheets should combine the insights of all group members.

You may also wish to assign participation marks based on student contributions to class discussions and observations made during group work.

Extension Activities:

- Ask students to choose a First World War-related topic and build an annotated bibliography on the subject using both primary and secondary sources.
- Have students evaluate their textbooks by conducting further research on a topic covered by the book using primary and secondary sources. Do they agree with the interpretation of events provided by the textbook? Why or why not?
- Using the First World War Photograph and Document Packages section of the Canadian War Museum's *Canada and the First World War* Web site, direct students to use the information in the documents to tell the story of the event or phenomena presented. Have students compare their interpretations - even if students are using the same facts, the final narrative may still be different.
- Lead a class discussion about issues of perspective in sources of history. Talk about some of the ways to gain awareness of bias or point of view and what role this awareness may play in their own interpretations or conclusions.

Secondary Source Analysis Worksheet

Name:

Date:

*A secondary source of information is one that was created **later** by someone who **did not** experience first-hand or participate in the events.*

Instructions: As you read your document, remember that secondary sources do not just present facts – they provide an *interpretation* of events. Look for the ways that the author presents his or her interpretation.

What is the title of the document?

Who is the author?

Who is the author's intended audience?

What topic is the author addressing in this work?

What is the author's argument (or thesis) about this topic? Provide evidence from the text.

What evidence is provided to support this argument? List specific examples.

Secondary Source Analysis Worksheet

Are there any contradictions in the argument? If so, provide examples.

Do you trust this source? What are some of the ways you can tell if a source is reliable?

What do you think motivated the author to create this source?

What is your overall impression of the interpretation? Is it convincing?

List some **facts** presented by the author:

List some **opinions** presented by the author:

What questions does this interpretation raise?

Where could you find answers to these questions?



Secondary Source Analysis Worksheet

Primary Document Analysis Worksheet

Name:

Date:

A primary source provides a firsthand account of events recorded during or shortly after the events described occurred. Primary sources can include newspaper articles, government documents, diaries, photographs, and maps.

Instructions: Examine your primary document. Remember to consider all aspects of the document, including the motivations of the author and the historical context in which it was created.

What kind of document is it? (diary, newspaper, letter, etc.)

Who created it? What do we know about the author?

When was it created?

Where was it created?

Why do you think it was created?

Does the document's author show bias at any point? Where? Cite specific passages.

Primary Document Analysis Worksheet

Who was the intended audience for this document?

What do we know about that audience?

How does this document make you feel?

List three things you learned from the document:

List three questions the document raises:

Where might you find the answers to these questions?