

Analyze Visual Original Sources

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Teaching students to analyze primary sources teaches them to think and work as historians – to take the fragments of evidence left to us, and draw meaning from the same. Yet students often leap to that end point – making meaning – without stopping along the way to really reflect on the source they're examining. Here are some suggestions for helping them slow down in their analysis, and connect their conclusions to the larger historical landscape.

1. Pre-read

Every time you give students a visual source with which to work – a map, a photograph, an illustration, a piece of art, a poster – ask them to pin down exactly where and when the item was created, and by whom. If there aren't readily apparent answers to those questions, ask them to make an educated guess. (Who would feasibly be in a position to produce anti-Nazi propaganda posters in World War II, for example?) Ask them to reflect on this basic information – how might it shape the illustration they're looking at?

2. Take Inventory





Have students list absolutely everything they see in the visual source. For example, in examining Paul Revere's illustration "*The bloody massacre perpetrated in King Street, Boston on Mar. 5, 1770,*" (available at the National Archives of the United States), they might list:

- seven figures in military uniform firing weapons
- one figure in a military uniform who holds a raised sword or cane
- two wounded men lying on the ground
- one wounded man being cradled by bystanders
- at least twenty-two bystanders (all in hats)
- a dog
- five distinct buildings on the right
- three distinct buildings on the left
- two large buildings in the center of the illustration; one might be a church
- a night sky with a partial moon
- activity inside the buildings (indicated by smoke emitting from a chimney)
- all the participants appear to be male
- all the participants appear to be white

Stress how important it is to make painstakingly sure you have listed as much as you can. Historians don't always know at first glance what will turn out to be the significant details in a source.

3. Comprehension

After the students have compiled their lists, compare answers among the class as a whole – some will not have noticed things that others did. Ask the students to summarize the scene the illustration depicts. For example:

- This illustration depicts a crowd of unarmed men being shot by representatives of the military. The shooting has taken place at night, in a neighborhood crowded with buildings.

This is your moment to check that your students understand what they're seeing, and not mistaking military men for revelers on the way home from a costume party, for example, or small dogs for symbolic raccoons.

4. Analysis

Ask your students to put together everything they've observed about the source, including who created it, when, and where, and begin to form hypotheses about what's going on. For example:

- The men doing the shooting seem to have been commanded to do so by the man slightly to their rear. Holding up a cane, or sword, is a sign of authority. He's leaning forward as if he's just taken action, and the illustration shows the soldiers just as they fire.
- There had been problems in Boston before 1770. This might represent an escalation of those old conflicts between colonists and the British government.

As a class, test the evidence that supports these hypotheses. Is it strong? Does it raise further questions? Have they learned something in previous classes that might further illuminate the illustration? Ask the students to compile the questions they still have about the event the source depicts – these will help direct the class in corroborating their findings.

5. Corroboration

There are multiple ways in which students can corroborate their conclusions about a single piece of evidence, and compare their findings to others that have been published. One way is to compare a primary source to another primary source.

Let's imagine this iconic image from the Depression was the first source the students analyzed:



Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother. 1936. Caption: Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother of seven children. February 1936.

After the students have pre-read the image and caption, listed what they see in the photograph, summarized the event, and posed further questions they'd still like answered, you can supply them with another photograph from the same session:



Caption: Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32, the father is a native Californian. Destitute in a pea pickers camp, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Most of the 2,500 people in this camp were destitute.

In repeating the analytical steps they undertook for the first photograph, students can pinpoint the ways in which image differs from the first. How does that change the conclusions they drew from the first image? Why or why not? What new conclusions suggest themselves?

How does a third image change things?



Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32. Father is a native Californian.

Or a fourth?



Nipomo, Calif. March 1936. Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children and their mother, aged 32. The father is a native Californian.

(Larger versions of these images, and information about Lange's photography, can be found at the Library of Congress' website: http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/128_migm.html)

This exercise demonstrates to students that single sources are both vastly important if we're to build an understanding of the past, but of limited usefulness if we don't place them into a conversation with other pieces of evidence. (You could develop this further by asking students to go out and find another primary source that relates to the original in some way, and bring that to the next class for everyone to compare their findings.)

Another way to have students corroborate and compare their hypotheses is to have them turn to their textbook. What does the text say about the events depicted in the image they analyzed? What larger political or social considerations might have shaped the events illustrated or photographed? What might have influenced someone to create the item in the first place?

Third, you can turn students loose on the library or the internet (or both). Ask them to come to the next class with more information about the event you've been studying – and, crucially, to be able to tell others where and when that secondary information was produced. Compare their findings – where are there agreements and disagreements? Can they hypothesize as to why there are different interpretations?

End the exercise by returning to the very first image the students analyzed and ask them to reflect upon how it has taken on different meanings because of their subsequent work. How do they imagine this reflects something about the work professional historians do? How will this change the way they approach textbooks, or monographs with all their infinite footnotes?