



BHH Teacher's Guide

Primary Source Analysis Activities

Using NARA and KWL Guides

There is an art and science to analyzing primary sources. Science is present in the methodical steps students take to observe and contextualize a document. Art is inherent in individual students' responses and interpretations of sources. When children are taught to engage in both the art and science of historical inquiry, they learn history at the subject's ground-zero: the encounter between an individual and records of the past.

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) facilitates this encounter by providing primary source analysis worksheets. The worksheets ask questions that encourage students to look closely at documents, to read between the lines, and to synthesize prior knowledge with new observations. The NARA worksheets on the BHH website have been revised; the directions and questions are phrased a bit more simply for children in grades 4 through 6. The original worksheets are available at: http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/analysis_worksheets/worksheets.html.

When you analyze historical documents with children in younger grades, you may wish to build **KWL** charts instead of using NARA worksheets. The nature of the K, W and L categories can be fluid depending on the activity. The actual categories are less important than the purpose of the activity as a whole, which is to help children self-guide and self-reflect on their learning. BHH offers two sample KWL charts: a unit guide and a document analysis guide. While the unit guide may also be used to direct photo analysis, it is designed to help students 1) take inventory of prior knowledge, 2) record questions the unit activities raise, and 3) reflect on their learning at the conclusion of the unit.

The K is usually for "Know" – what do we already know about the topic at hand? In photo analysis, this category can be used to record both student's observations and historical prior knowledge. For example, when your class examines a photo of people gathered at Ellis Island your students may observe people burdened with luggage and know it is because many immigrants arrived carrying most or all of their possessions. When your students observe people are wearing many layers of clothes but do not know why, you may wish to list the observation, followed by the word "why" and a question mark.

The W is "What" – what do we want to know about the photo that we don't already? Because several of your student' observations in "K" will be followed by "why?", you can draw a line directly from the observations to a corresponding question in W. For example, in your Ellis Island W column you would include "Why



did some immigrants wear so many layers of clothes?” W can also include a list for “where” – where can we look for answers to our questions?

The L is usually for “Learned” – at the activity’s conclusion, what did we learn?

Essentially, this is the K updated. For example, “Some immigrants layered their clothes, wore them all at the same time, because their boxes and suitcases and trunks were full of other things. They carried their clothes by wearing them.” You may wish to keep various KWL charts on hand as you make your way through a unit; you never know when you will come across information that will help answer one of your Want to know’s.

A separate KWL is provided to more specifically guide students through document analysis. The **K** in this chart asks students to list what they observe in a document or photo. The **W** asks students to interpret those observations, to form assumptions about what, why, and when the action in the document or photo is taking place. It also asks students to inventory the questions generated by the document that the students can’t begin to form educated guesses about, and to plan where to research their questions. Finally, the **L** is where students reflect on what they’ve learned at the conclusion of their interaction with a document. If you wish to follow a tight structure, you can list in **L** the answers you found to the questions in **W**.

Sometimes you will not find answers to your questions. That’s an important lesson in itself: We often live with history mysteries that can’t be solved. Unanswered questions reinforce students’ understanding that history is based on primary sources and consequently is limited by the preservation and availability of those sources, and our ability to understand them.