



Analyzing Original Sources

The BHH Five Processes

In Bringing History Home classrooms, children analyze original written and visual sources in tandem with four other processes that help them develop historical understandings. Sam Wineburg's argument for teaching students to actively read history sources describes succinctly *why* we emphasize source analysis in our project: "Language is not a garden tool for acting on inanimate objects but a medium for swaying minds and changing opinions, for rousing passions or allaying them...If students (do not understand this) they become easy marks for snake-oil vendors of all persuasions."¹

Wineburg's research identifies historical thinking skills that inform *what* BHH is designed to prepare students to do with sources. By conducting think aloud studies in which he asked both novices and experts to vocalize their thoughts as they read historical texts, Wineburg identified three strategies or heuristics history experts use to interpret evidence. In *sourcing*, historians inventory a text's attributes to take into account how elements such as the author, date and place of creation of a piece of evidence influence how the evidence should be interpreted (Wineburg, 1990). In *contextualizing*, historians consider how the historic context of a piece of evidence influences interpretation (Wineburg, 1992). And in *corroborating*, historians compare various pieces of evidence to better understand how to most accurately interpret each (Wineburg 1997). For BHH students, we added a fourth strategy, *observe*, in which students carefully inventory all the elements in a piece of evidence before they begin analyzing and interpreting those elements.

The acronym, SOCC (Source-Observe-Contextualize-Corroborate) helps students and teachers remember the strategies and the order in which they are initially deployed when we analyze evidence.

Source:

When we approach a piece of historical evidence, our first step in reading should be to take inventory of the *who, what, when, where and why* of the source's creation. That is, before reading or examining a piece of written or visual evidence, we should *source* it; that is, peruse it for information about the creator, what type of source it is, the date and location it was created, and why it was created.¹¹ From these attributes, we may infer the intended audience for the source and the relationship between the writer and the audience. All of which leads us to a series of questions.



How does our *sourcing*, or understanding of the information in a source's attributes, influence how we can accurately question that particular piece of evidence...

- ✧ Does our prior knowledge about the attributes help us determine how to question the document? In BHH, we call this *Contextualizing* and we'll look more closely at that skill below.
- ✧ Do we need to seek information in additional evidence or accounts to help us determine how we can accurately question this evidence? We call this *Corroborating*, and again, we'll look more closely in a moment.

Observe:

Careful, neutral observation is the second skill we deploy when investigating evidence. This step involves taking inventory of the elements in a visual or written piece of evidence, without jumping to conclusions about those elements. For example, when we observe a photograph of African Americans picking cotton, we identify only that, rather than assuming that we see slaves or sharecroppers or independent farmers working their own land. In order to determine the economic and legal status of the people in the picture, we must put

what we observe into play with the source attributes, the context of the picture, i.e. what we know about the history of African Americans and farming in the United States (if that is the country in which the image was made), and possibly other pieces of evidence or secondary texts.

Contextualize:

This means that as we read a piece of evidence, we try to understand it in the context of the time and place in which it was created. In other words, we use the information we gleaned in our *Sourcing* to situate the evidence in a particular time. We then use our prior knowledge of that particular time to help us decide how to interpret the evidence.ⁱⁱⁱ In our example of African Americans working in a cotton field, we use the image's source attributes -- date of creation, 1890, and location, the United States -- to contextualize the image with our prior knowledge of the end of legal slavery in 1865. By contextualizing the image, we infer that the people in the photograph are not slaves.



Corroborate

This process refers to what we must sometimes do to accurately interpret a single source, and then to use it as part of a wider history investigation. Almost always, when we are deciding how to question and interpret a piece of historic evidence, we must compare that single piece with other pieces.^{iv} If we read a letter from one Norwegian pioneer woman to her sister in New York City, can we generalize from that letter? Can we accurately conclude that it tells us all there is to understand about that woman's life as a pioneer, and about all other pioneer women? No; that would be an inaccurate use of the letter.

By itself, we can only question this letter to learn what it suggests about one woman's correspondence in one moment in time. To determine whether the events conveyed in the letter were exceptional or typical of the woman's experiences as a pioneer, we must compare it with other letters she wrote to different people during different times of her life. And if we want to determine whether the author's life was similar to other pioneers' lives, then we must compare her letters with those written by other pioneer women.

Just as we wouldn't start children off with calculus in math, we don't expect students in history to dive into source analysis at an expert level. We do, however, want to help them develop accurate ideas about the nature of historic sources right off the bat. Otherwise, students develop misconceptions that hinder their engagement in history as an interpretive and evidence-based enterprise.

British researchers who have studied student conceptions of history identified student ideas about the nature of historic evidence. In some of these ideas, historic sources are...

❖ *Pictures of the past.* In this conception, students haven't given thought to the origins of historic evidence. Sources are not questioned, they don't have authors or contexts. They simply provide direct access to the past.

❖ *Testimony.* The past is reported either well or badly by its witnesses. In this idea, the criteria for assessing and comparing evidence is to simply ask whether a source is biased or unbiased, "right or wrong", true or untrue.



✧ *Scissors and Paste.* The past can be probed even if no individual reporter gets it right: we can pick out true statements from different reports and piece together. This shares a similar misconception with the *Testimony* idea, in that students who hold this perception of historic evidence still perceive that history is a process of locating and discerning existing true statements,

✧ *Evidence in isolation and in context.* The weight evidence will bear depends on the questions we ask of it. Sources can be understood only in their historical context. We must know the creator's intent and the influence of the surrounding culture on the creator in order to accurately interpret a source. Rather than assessing evidence using a truth test, we assess evidence according to the questions we can accurately ask of it, taking into account the author and influences on the author.^v

This last concept of the nature of historic sources is the most powerful for students. It allows them to engage accurately in the nature of historic evidence and interpretation, and avoid simplistic true/untrue assessments of evidence. To guide you students successfully toward this powerful concept of history, you may wish to keep in mind the BHH distillation of misconceptions identified in existing research, and strategies for avoiding them. On the following pages, you will find tables that distill the SOCC strategies for interpreting a source accurately, and activities that will help your students develop expertise in analyzing sources.



Source	
<p><i>Creator(s)</i></p> <p><i>Type of Evidence</i></p> <p><i>Date created</i></p> <p><i>Where created</i></p>	<p><i>Strategies to help students become good pre-readers...</i></p>
	<p>Stop and Source!!</p> <p>Use this phrase to help students remember to always begin by taking inventory of evidence attributes in the column ← to the left.</p>
	<p>A Source has a Story, too.</p> <p>Consider whether students can make use of source attributes. Do they know enough about the author and or type of evidence to make use of it in interpreting the piece of evidence? Do they know enough about the authors' values, perspectives, etc. to inform their reading of the document? Choose pieces of evidence that will help your students understand why we source and how we can use that information.</p>
	<p>Avoid The Bias Bugaboo!!!</p> <p>Help students understand that we use sourcing to help us determine which pieces of evidence are best suited to answer particular questions, rather than to create a true-false litmus test for evidence.</p>



Observe	
<p><i>List the elements in the image or passage:</i></p> <p><i>People</i></p> <p><i>Things</i></p> <p><i>Places</i></p> <p><i>Animals</i></p> <p><i>Environmental Elements</i></p>	<p><i>Strategies to help students become good observers...</i></p>
	<p>View images in quadrants to isolate the elements and make a full inventory.</p>
	<p>Use literacy strategies to support student's decoding of written evidence.</p>
	<p>Model your own process of observation so students learn to monitor their thinking and recognize when they are jumping to conclusions and moving beyond observing. Help them recognize when they make the leap to infer something that cannot accurately be inferred without additional information.</p>



Contextualize	
<p><i>Creator(s)</i></p> <p><i>Type of Evidence</i></p> <p><i>Date created</i></p> <p><i>Where created</i></p>	<p><i>To help students make use of historic context to decide how to question a source...</i></p>
	<p>Conduct explorations that continually move between accounts and evidence , details and themes.</p>
	<p>Construct Timelines</p>
	<p>Predict and Infer</p> <p>Select sets of evidence that inform secondary sources/accounts.</p>
	<p>Map historic trends, events, movements, populations, business centers, etc.</p>
	<p>Frequently conduct brief reviews of learning</p>
	<p>Explore related themes!</p> <p>Students use analogy and direct connections to make their way into new topics.</p>



Corroborate	
<i>Additional Sources</i>	To help students use additional sources to help them interpret a single source...
	Read multiple accounts and analyze various pieces of evidence
	Engage students in making connections between evidence, accounts, and prior knowledge
	Take note and point out when the class comes across similar or contradictory elements in evidence and accounts.

ⁱ Wineburg, S. (2001) On the reading of historical texts, in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Pp. 76-77

ⁱⁱ Wineburg, S. (2001) On the reading of historical texts, in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Pp. 76-77

ⁱⁱⁱ Wineburg, S. (2001) Reading Abraham Lincoln: A case study in contextualized thinking, in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

^{iv} Wineburg, S. (2001) Historical thinking and other unnatural acts, in *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Pg.20

^v Lee, et.al. (1993) *Progression in children's ideas about history: Project CHATA*. Paper given at the Annual Conference of The British Educational Research Association.