



Analyzing Original Sources

The BHH Five Processes

When we do history with integrity, we try to determine which pieces of evidence or sources are best suited to answer particular questions. Fortunately, Sam Wineburg, a cognitive psychologist, has identified some specific techniques that good history readers use to question potential pieces of evidence. As history teachers, it's important for us to be familiar and comfortable with these techniques.

Pre-Reading:

When we pick-up 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 written or visual source, we should look on it for information about the creator, what type of source it is, the date and location it was created, and why it was created.ⁱ 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 *pre-reading*, or understanding of the information in a source's attributes, influence how we can accurately question that particular piece of evidence...

- ✧ Should we question the source to explore the author's perspective on an event or development, or can we use the source to also accurately determine details about an event?
 - ✧ Does our prior knowledge about the attributes help us determine how to question the document? In BHH, we call this *Using Context* 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 *Expanding Use*, and again, we'll look more closely in a moment.

Using Context:

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 pre-reading to help us decide how to interpret a particular source.ⁱⁱ

- ✧ How does our prior knowledge of the time and place when a source was created, and of human nature, help us understand an author's motives for



creating a piece of evidence, or for using the words or images s/he chose to use?

- ✧ Does our knowledge about the audience and author of a source from a particular time and place mean we should question that piece of evidence to determine how the author hoped to influence his/her audience, rather than questioning the evidence to glean an accurate picture of an event or of the author's innermost feelings?

Expanding Use

This process refers to what we must do to accurately use a single source 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 sources.ⁱⁱⁱ 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? That would be silly.

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.

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 three analysis strategies for interpreting a source accurately, and activities that will help your students develop expertise in analyzing sources.



Pre-Reading	
<i>Creator(s)</i> <i>Type of Evidence</i> <i>Date created</i> <i>Where created</i>	<i>Strategies to help students become good pre-readers...</i>
	Stop and Source!!
	A Source has a Story, too. Consider whether students CAN source. 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?
	Avoid The Bias Bugaboo!!!



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



Expanding Use	
<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) 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.

ⁱⁱⁱ 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

^{iv} 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.