

Evidence of a Life: An Introduction to Primary Sources

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Audience

College students in intro-level classes. This activity has been successfully run in introductory level history classes but could translate to other classes that involve archival research.

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will be able to explain what primary sources are and how they are created.
2. Students will understand what an archives is and what types of materials an archives collects.

Frame

Information Creation as a Process

Overview

The goal of the activity is to get students thinking about the primary sources they create as they go about their daily lives, in order to prepare them to understand and contextualize the primary sources they encounter in historical research. They will also learn skills that can be transferred to future archival research. This works well as part I of a two-part interaction with classes. Typically, I go to their classroom for this lesson, meeting the students in a room in which they feel comfortable. They then come to the library several weeks later for a research-intensive workshop.

Duration

Approximately 30 minutes, with 10-15 minute optional extension

Lesson outline

Intro [10 min]: Introduce myself. [Give narrative example about doing research on my own family history, including interviewing my grandfather about his experiences in World War II, transcribing his World War II diaries, and asking him to explain his war photos. Show examples of these].

Discuss different ways of getting into the field of archives (MLS vs public history) and different places I've worked. Ask if any students have done archival research before. What did they research? What materials can one find in an archives? Discuss basic differences between an archives and a lending library (unique materials, have to use everything in-house, and specific rules for how to handle materials).

[Activity, 15 minutes]

Archivists like to say that we collect materials of “enduring value” that people, families, or organizations create in the course of their lives or the course of their work, and that these materials hold evidence of

the lives people lived or the functions of the people or organizations that created them. Get into groups of 3 or 4. Imagine that someone in your town has disappeared and that you are a detective or journalist. How would you reconstruct the story of that person's life? What specific information sources could you use? Where would you look for that information? In your small group, spend 5 minutes writing a list of all the specific types of information/documents/evidence you would look for.

Regroup as a class and discuss students' lists of evidence.

- Relate students' current evidence (e.g., text messages, receipts, Instagram and Twitter posts, email, school assignments, etc., interviews with people who knew the missing person) to the types of materials we have in the archives, both analog and digital.
- Explain that these are **primary sources**: they are original records that provide firsthand evidence about a person and their activities. Archives primarily collect primary sources.
- Touch upon **born-digital** materials (e.g., emails, tweets, MS Office documents, digital photos) vs. **digitized** materials (e.g., photos and documents that have been scanned or recordings that have been digitized). Because of the amount of time it takes to digitize things, only a small subset of archives' pre-digital era materials will be available in full-text online.
- Ask students to consider what information you would be missing if all you have left are photographs, or financial records, or court documents. [Give examples of the primary source research done by Tiya Miles in *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*.]
- Discuss the problematic nature of how archivists have defined "enduring value" over the years—whose stories get saved and told?

Comprehension check

[5 minutes]

Give examples of different types of materials. Ask students to explain whether each is a primary or secondary sources.

Optional Extension

[10-15 minutes]

I usually bring materials from our college archives' teaching collection, including student newspapers, yearbooks, and photographs. Students look at these together and see what information they can glean, as well as what stories are left out.