

## Unit 1, Lesson 9: Distinguishing Primary and Secondary Sources

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### Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will be separated into groups that either witness or do not witness events and create accounts based on either observing the events or reading witness accounts to develop an understanding of the difference between primary and secondary sources, as well as their relative values.

### Delaware Standard(s)

- **History Standard 2a, 4-5 [Analysis]:** Students will draw historical conclusions and construct historical accounts from primary and secondary source materials
- **History Standard 3, 4-5 [Interpretation]:** Students will explain why historical accounts of the same event sometimes differ and relate this explanation to the evidence presented or the point-of-view of the author.

### Big Ideas

- Primary source, secondary source, account

### Essential Questions

- Is this a primary or a secondary source? Why do historians like primary sources so much?

### Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that:

- primary sources are sources that date back to the time when an event occurred
- secondary sources are sources that are created after an event has occurred
- both primary and secondary sources have value
- historians value both primary and secondary sources but primary sources are considered evidence that backs up conclusions that are considered believable

### Resources

- [Lesson 9 Google slides](#)
- Class set of 4" x 6" index cards

### Procedures

1. Prior to class use a marker to place the numbers 1 or 2 on a class set of index cards. Label 3/4ths of the index cards with the number 1. The remaining quarter should be labeled with a 2.
2. Group Students: Place students in groups of four. Give three students in each group index cards labeled number 1. One student in the group gets a card labeled number 2.
3. Ask each student with the card labeled 2 to do something that will prevent them from seeing or hearing what is described in Procedure 4 (e.g., put their heads down, leave the room, or face the back of the room). The students with the number 1 cards should face the front of the room.

4. Create or present an event (see a, b, c below) without alerting the students as to what their task will be. Once the students with the number 1 index cards are facing the front of the room, you have three options to continue the lesson.
  - a. Spend 30 seconds or so doing as many things as you can such as erase the board, put a transparency on the overhead, knock over an object, rearrange a bulletin board, tap a desk, look out the window and yawn, etc.
  - b. Show a segment of a video in which there is uncertainty regarding what happened.
  - c. Flash a drawing of a complex scene or set of diagrams on a screen or Smartboard.
5. After the 30 seconds have elapsed, ask the "Number 1" students to write down or draw on the index card everything they witnessed from the moment the "Number 2" students put their heads down in as much detail as possible.
6. Give the "Number 1" students a few minutes to complete their accounts. Once they have finished, have them pass their index cards to the "Number 2" student in their group and ask Student 2 to write a description (an account) of what happened while their heads were down. Give the "Number 2s" a few minutes to write down their interpretations of what happened.
7. Invite each of the "Number 2s" to share their accounts. Record the similarities and differences between the "Number 2" accounts on the board.
8. Ask the students to respond to the following questions:
  - a. What made the "Number 1" accounts different from the "Number 2" accounts?
  - b. How would one explain why the accounts pieced together by the "Number 2" students were different? [\[they relied on different evidence\]](#)
  - c. Were all of the "Number 1" accounts exactly the same? If not, why not?
  - d. Which accounts should be considered the "best" sources of information by those who are given the task of describing the events of the past – the Number 1 accounts or the Number 2 accounts? Why?
  - e. What does this exercise help us to understand about the nature of historical accounts?
9. **Debrief the Activity**

Tell the students that information such as that found on the "Number 1" cards are called *primary sources* while that found on the "Number 2" cards are called *secondary sources*. Ask students which index cards were primary sources [\[#1 cards\]](#) and which were secondary sources [\[#2 cards\]](#)?
10. **Develop Academic Vocabulary** – share the following definitions with students and emphasize the importance of understanding them as part of steps in mastering history standards and “doing history.”
  - a. Foundational Definition: Primary sources are sources of information that date back to the time when an event occurred. They are often created by people who witnessed an event
  - b. Foundational Definition: Secondary sources are sources created after an event has occurred. Secondary sources are often based on information found in primary sources.
11. **Offer and Solicit Examples** – students often have a very narrow understanding of primary sources. They believe that primary sources are documents. Primary sources can be many things

including but not limited to bones, pottery, arrowheads, clothing, jewelry, artwork, photographs, diaries, guns, newspapers, books, devices, ships, planes, cars etc. If something dates back to the time being studied, it may be a primary source.

Examples of Primary Sources	Examples of Secondary Sources
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A person’s birth certificate</li> <li>● The bus that Rosa Parks rode on</li> <li>● The diary of Christopher Columbus</li> <li>● A dinosaur bone</li> <li>● The original paper containing Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech</li> </ul>	<p>A book written about Rosa Parks 10 years after she died.</p> <p>A ship built in the year 2020 to look like the ship that Christopher Columbus sailed on.</p> <p>A movie about dinosaurs like Jurassic Park.</p>

**12. Highlighting Misconceptions**

- a. **Primary sources are better than secondary sources.** Primary sources are not always better than secondary sources. Primary and secondary sources both have value. They are just different types of sources. But primary sources are considered evidence by historians that make conclusions or interpretations found in secondary sources more or less credible.
  
- b. **Primary sources are the first or main sources used by historians.** Students often believe that primary sources are the first or main sources used by historians. While it is possible that a primary source ends up being the first or main source used by a historian, this is not the definition of a primary source. In fact, most historians read secondary sources first to get an idea of what is already known about a topic that they are researching.

**Check for Understanding**

Ask students to turn over their index cards and write down the definitions of primary source and secondary source and give an example of each.