Promoting Student Learning Through Primary Source Inquiries

An Opportunities to Learn Checklist

History teachers often are not concerned only with teaching students about historical events, but also with helping them to learn the skills and practices of authentic historical investigation. By interrogating primary source documents, students can learn to see history as an ever-evolving interpretive process, rather than an agreed-upon and already constructed narrative. As teachers develop inquiry-learning tasks that utilize primary sources, it is useful to consider not only skill and content goals, but also the constituents of effective inquiry learning experiences for students.

The following checklist offers a set of research-based criteria for assessing the quality of an inquiry task in which students are exploring a question or theme using primary sources. It focuses attention on the quality of students' experience—in particular, whether they have *opportunities to learn* by doing nine things that empirical research and literature on effective practice suggest are important for learning. It has been created to support teachers and curriculum developers in evaluating and improving the primary source learning activities they are designing for classroom use. It is important to stress that no single learning task is likely to include all nine of the elements listed; however, the checklist can be a useful reference point in developing stronger overall lessons and inquiry learning tasks featuring primary sources.

In addition to definitions of each element, and positive and negative examples, we've included relevant literature and resources. Where possible, we have included links to information that is freely accessible, but we also point to academic articles, some of which are behind paywalls, where we felt they were useful.

This checklist was created as part of Education Development Center's (EDC) ongoing work with the Library of Congress' Teaching With Primary Sources Consortium Group. EDC has been working as a research and development partner with the Library over the past 20 years, helping to make its historical documents available to classroom teachers in useful ways. Questions or comments about this checklist, or EDC's other work, may be directed to Noah Goodman at ngoodman@edc.org.

Ask: Do learners have opportunities to ...		**Examples**	**Contrasting Examples**
☐ Engage with a **meaningful question?**	*Meaningful* questions ask learners to build their own explanation, evaluation, analysis, or argument about a topic or problem. Less meaningful questions treat historical sources simply as *information* about the past.	• *Why were some people opposed to women voting, before 1920?* • *What were these WWII posters trying to get Americans to do?* • *How are arguments about immigration in 1900 similar to today's?*	• *What is the chronological order of these documents?* • *Who created this document?* • *Find all the examples of patriotic symbols in the documents.*
Related literature: • Questions, Frameworks, and Classrooms (Source: C3Teachers.org, C3 Briefs, by John Lee, Kathy Swan, SG Grant, Dan Rothstein, and Luz Santana) • Questions about Questions: NCSS and UbD (Source Granted, and... ~ thoughts on education by Grant Wiggins. author of UbD)			
☐ Engage with developmentally **accessible sources?**	Learners are able to handle the *number*, *length*, and *language* of the sources. Relevant themes in the documents are reasonably accessible.	Sources have been ... • selected • shortened • adapted ... to address the needs of readers.	• Sources are too many, or too long. • Language is too complex . • Learners need too much background knowledge to read with understanding.
Related literature: • Is it ever okay to tamper with the past? Modifying primary sources to make them accessible (Source: History Tech Blog, by Glenn Weibe) • Tampering with History: Adapting Primary Sources for Struggling Readers (Source: NCSS Social Education, September 2009, by Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin)			

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☐ **Look closely at each source**, guided by supporting *questions* or *prompts* ?	Supporting *prompts* are often generic, asking learners to notice details, make inferences, pose questions. Guiding *questions* are document-specific, and direct attention to important content or features of the text.	Observe / Reflect / Question: ● *What details do you notice?* ● *What inferences can you draw?* ● *What questions does this raise?* ● *What patriotic symbols does the author use, and why?* ● *What does the title say about the creator's viewpoint?*	No supporting prompts or questions are provided. OR Only *generic* prompts appear, when understanding of the document requires specific guiding questions.
Related literature: ● Inquiry Design Model at a Glance (Source: C3 Teachers) ● The Question Formulation Technique (QFT) in Social Studies (Source: Andrew P. Minigan, The Right Question Institute)			
☐ Access **background knowledge** as needed to understand and interpret the sources?	Learners often need to — Activate their own prior knowledge of the topic — Develop a picture of the historical world in which the sources were created and circulated	Questions at the outset elicit learners' prior knowledge Information is provided about ● *The Sources*—e.g., creator, date, audience, etc. ● *The Time Period* — e.g., contextual text, timeline, maps	Learners' prior knowledge is not elicited. Information that learners need to interpret and understand the sources (e.g., re: the sources or time period) is missing.
Related literature: ● Slavery in America: Building Background Knowledge (Source: Teaching Channel)			

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☐ **Evaluate the perspective,** purpose, or possible bias of the sources' authors?	Identifying and evaluating an author's viewpoint or bias is a critical skill in all new standards. It's also necessary in order for students to understand the document's subtext. Assessing bias in historical sources requires historical knowledge and imagination.	Identify which documents are pro-suffrage and which are anti-suffrage. How do you think this document's creator felt about [X]? Assess the author's viewpoint — was it reasonable at the time? Now?	Learners are not asked to identify author's viewpoint or bias. OR Learners are invited to judge bias by present-day standards, without recognizing its cultural role and consequences at the time.
Related literature: • Listen to a historian sourcing a document (Source: Historical Thinking Matters)			
☐ **Develop a claim** in response to the question?	Learners need a chance to formulate their own response to the question—in writing or verbally. A *claim* is more than an opinion; it is a statement that the speaker believes he or she can support with examples or evidence.	"Before 1920, some people worried that if women had the right to vote, it would lead to family breakdown." "These WWII posters are trying to get Americans to put aside racial feelings, and work together for the war."	Learners are not asked to articulate their own claim. OR Learners share opinions or feelings, rather than claims or statements. • "I think women should have had the vote in 1776." • "The poster showing a child in a bomb shelter is scary".
Related literature: • Meeting the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts: Argument Writing (Source: NCSS)			

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☐ Synthesize details from sources and **explain how the details support their claim?**	The ability to cite evidence from documents in support of a claim or explanation is a key skill in all new standards. Explaining *how* the evidence supports one's claim is a critical—and often missing—piece.	Verbal prompts: ● *What in the document makes you say that? What else?* ● *Are we seeing this in all documents?* Written prompts: ● *Support your claim by citing evidence from documents and your knowledge of the period.* ● *Be sure to explain **how** the details support your claim or inference.*	Learners are not asked for textual evidence for their inferences. OR Learners are encouraged to cite evidence, but not to explain how the details support their idea.
Related literature: ● Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence (Source: NCSS) ● From Source to Evidence? Teachers' Use of Historical Sources in Their Classrooms (Source: The Social Studies, by Stephanie Van Hoover, David Hicks, & Hilary Dack)			
☐ Engage in **classroom talk** that helps them clarify and support their responses?	Novice learners need to share and compare with their peers the inferences they've come up with, and the evidence they have found for them. Routines for "accountable talk" are useful here.	Teacher: "Turn and talk with a partner, using these prompts:" ● *What's your conclusion?* ● *What evidence is there for that?* ● *I agree/disagree with you, because in the documents I found …*	Learners work on their own; thinking is shared only with the teacher. . OR Learners are asked to share observations and ideas, but not to connect to what others say or discuss evidence for their ideas.
Related literature: ● Content-Area Conversations (Source: Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Carol Rothenberg) ● Classroom Talk, Knowledge Development, and Writing (Source: Research in the Teaching of English, by William Sweigart)			

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☐ Receive and respond to **feedback from teachers or peers**?	Learners benefit most from feedback on their performance when it is goal-referenced, specific, and actionable.	Teacher/Peer: ● *You're saying that this document is opposed to women's suffrage.* ● *I'm not sure how the detail you point to (the woman leaving to vote) supports this.* ● *Can you clarify?*	Teacher/Peer: ● *Very good.* ● *I really like what you said.* ● *Think some more before answering.* ● *Revise, and add more evidence.*
Related literature: ● Seven Keys to Effective Feedback (Source: Educational Leadership, by Grant Wiggins) ● Focus on Formative Feedback (Source: Review of Educational Research, by Valerie J. Shute)			