# Using Primary Sources

## Suggested Subject Levels: 9 and 10

## Subject: History

## Suggested Ontario Curriculum Expectations:

* **Methods of Historical Inquiry and Communication**
  + Distinguish between primary and secondary sources of information (e.g., primary: artifacts, diaries, documents; secondary: books, articles), and use both in historical research;
  + Evaluate the credibility of sources and information (e.g., by considering the authority, impartiality, and expertise of the source and checking the information for accuracy, underlying assumptions, stereotypes, prejudice, and bias);
  + Formulate and use a thesis statement when researching a historical topic or issue; analyze information, employing concepts and theories appropriate to historical inquiry (e.g., chronology, cause and effect, short- and long-term consequences);
  + Distinguish between fact, opinion, and inference in texts and visuals found in primary and secondary sources;
  + Identify different viewpoints and explicit biases when interpreting information for research or when participating in a discussion;
  + Draw conclusions and make reasoned generalizations or appropriate predictions on the basis of relevant and sufficient supporting evidence.

## Topic: Benchmarks of Historical Thinking

## Content: Analyzing Primary Sources

## Working Definition:

“Primary documents are those records created in the past, at or close to the time under study, which have survived into the present. Historians have traditionally used a wide variety of written records, from personal diaries created by a child to statistical records kept by government departments, as the foundation for their historical investigation. More recently, historians have been drawing on non-document records, including photographs, moving pictures, the spoken word and even architectural plans or botanical (plant) inventories to find clues about how people lived in the past.”[[1]](#footnote-0)

Also: “Primary documents provide a unique perspective on historic events and situations. Unlike textbooks, which provide a retelling of the events from the perspective of the author, primary documents are treasures that have emerged from history intact. They are time-capsules that provide windows into the past.”[[2]](#footnote-1)

## Goals (Aims and Outcomes):

Students should be expected to develop understanding of the term “Primary Source Evidence” through scaffolding and independent tasks.

## Objectives (Performance and Behavioural Indicators):

Student should also be able to:

1. Identify and use primary and secondary sources to evaluate questions
2. Demonstrate an understanding that historians are selective in the questions they seek to answer and the evidence they use and that this influences their interpretation of history

## Materials (Aids/AV/Technology):

Computers with Internet Access

## Introductory Activity (Focusing Event):

A series of scaffolding activities and lessons can be required to facilitate students’ understanding of the importance of primary sources in historical analysis, as well as the development of practice analyzing primary sources.[[3]](#footnote-2)

### A. Evaluating the Quality of a Historical Document

The evaluation of historical documents begins with an assessment of three things, the source’s authenticity, its scope, and its relevance to the research questions asked. To this end, students can be given lists of questions to ask of historical documents when they shall encounter them. The students consider the relationship between historical research and investigations of other sorts.

Students must ask of primary sources:

1. Is the origin and location of the primary source known? Why is this important for my research?

2. Is the source authentic? How can I find out?

3. Is the information here complete? Are there parts missing? How will that influence my assessment? Is this source to be found elsewhere?

### B. Assessing the Kind of Information within a Primary Source

While all historical documents will provide some kind of information regarding the past, the kind of information offered will differ. A picture of an individual and a letter written by that individual will offer the historian insight into a person from the past, but each is a snapshot of a particular moment in time.

Students can be given primary overlapping primary sources, gathered, for instance, from the digitized materials uploaded to the STONES webpage, and asked to consider how different sources offer different information about historical phenomena.[[4]](#footnote-3)

They can inquire, for instance:

1. What was the context in which this source was created?

2. For what purpose was this source created?

3. What historical questions does this help me understand?

4. What historical questions does this offer me no information about at all?

### C. Evaluating the Significance of the Primary Source for a Historical Argument

Ultimately, a primary source is only useful if it provides information relevant to the historical question asked.

For instance:

Does it support the argument/line of reasoning established? Does it debunk that same argument/line of reasoning? Does it bear no relevance whatsoever?

Using the same sources considered when assessing the kind of information a source offers, students can be asked to formulate a hypothetical research question (for instance, relating to the Chinese community history in Kingston, what kinds of clothing were most popular?).

Following the composition of a research question, students write down responses to the following questions they might ask of the documents:

1. What is it that makes this source suitable to my question?

2. Does the kind of information relate to my question?

3. Does this information support or contradict my hypotheses, and/or the arguments of other historians?

4. How does this information relate to other research on similar questions?

## Development Activity (Modeling/Explanation/Demonstration):

Begin by brainstorming with the entire class a list of primary sources that might give information about the past. The teacher can offer prompts/questions, for guidance.

A visit to the local/provincial archives, as a class excursion, could be arranged preceding this lesson. In cooperation with an archivist, the teacher can help expose students to a wide variety of primary sources and help distinguish these from secondary sources.

Divide students once again into groups of 2 or 3 and ask them to categorize the primary sources. Categories can be devised beforehand and distributed/highlighted in class, including, for example: Photographs, letters, newspaper articles, and video. Following the categorization, students can discuss the kinds of information that each source could potentially offer them in historical inquiry.

### Follow-up Activity:

The students can look around their classroom and identify artifacts that might give future historians some snapshot into their own lives.

They might be asked to answer:

1. What kinds of understandings will each of these artifacts yield in the future, regarding our life in school?

2. What misconceptions might these sources provoke?

3. What aspects of our lives will be most difficult to uncover on the basis of material evidence?

## Practice (Guided/Monitored Activity):

There are a wide variety of lessons that teachers can do in the classroom relating to the exploration of primary documents, depending on the time available and the grade level. They might include the following:

1. Students may be asked to keep a journal of the traces, sources, and documents that they are leaving behind for future historians to find and analyze. The students can, collectively, create a time capsule that best represents their lives and leave instructions for future historians, to guide their analyses. How might historians interpret such an attempt to purposefully guide future interpretations of present life?

Students can look for primary sources within their home and, based on this material evidence, write or present a short history of life within their house.

## Independent Practice (Relation to STONES social history research):

Students can be asked to read the text on the Chinese Community in Kingston.[[5]](#footnote-4) Take the tour online or, if possible, in person. A class trip to the sites might be possible.

Students should be asked to jot down, as they emerge, thoughts or feelings provoked by the tour text or sites. They should be asking themselves what the events, individuals, concepts, artifacts and places depicted in the text/tour meant in relation to the past activities on continuity and change in history.

Students can also create a timeline of events described and depicted on the STONES site.

Navigating uploaded artifacts and pictures one the site, (i.e. Queen’s enrolment records of the first Chinese students or government documents/newspapers about the Head Tax imposed on the Chinese in 1885) students should be asked to evaluating the quality of selected primary sources, using criteria/questions identified above in introductory lessons. Further, students should be asked to assess the kind of information the sources contain and evaluate the significance of the document to a particular, hypothetical, historical argument (such as, the Chinese community was not particularly affluent).

Based on a careful reading of the tour script, students should be asked to make two inferences not already made. They could discuss these, in a short paper or in conference with the teacher, using ideas already explored in the unit of study but primarily supporting the validity of these inferences using source materials. A model tool for evaluating this discussion/writing is included in the folder, titled “Rubric for Primary Sources.”

## Accommodations (Differentiated Instruction)

Extra time can be afforded to students.

## Checking for Ongoing Understanding (Formative Assessment/Feedback Opportunities)

Students can journal, following each activity within the units of study, a reflective entry considering their ongoing understanding of the benchmark for historical thinking, as well as its implications for active, participatory citizenship in contemporary contexts.

Teachers can take the opportunity to read these journals and adjust the lessons / course of study to the pace, concerns, and questions raised in the entries.

Student and teacher journals can be shared in online space using a blogging tool such as blogger.com

## Closure (Wrapping up Activities):

Students can be asked to uncover an artifact/primary document/image to be added to the Stones Collection. They can conduct research within their local community, including interviews and the use the local libraries, archives, and Internet. An argument should be made for its inclusion in the collection, explaining the relevance of the source and the kind of information it offers.

1. Definition from: http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/english/educational-resources/primary-documents.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Definition from: http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/english/educational-resources/primary-documents.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. The scaffolding lessons for making sense of primary documents that follow are adapted from a very useful website developed and maintained by the Archives of Ontario: http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/english/educational-resources/primary-documents.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. http://stoneskingston.ca/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Downloaded, or viewed online, at http://stoneskingston.ca/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)