

Primary Sources: How do we Know What Happened in the Past?

Grade: 4th - 8th

Discipline: History, ELA

Length: 40 min.

Goals: Students will be introduced to the concept of primary sources and practice close reading and evaluation of historic texts. They will also be able to apply some evaluation criteria to a primary source to determine if it is reliable.

Essential Question(s):

1. What is a primary source?
1. What can we learn from primary sources?
2. How and why should we evaluate a primary source to see if we think it accurate?

Assessment: Students will complete and present an analysis of their two primary source quotes in groups.

Materials/Resources:

- The [Quote Comparison Introduction slideshow](#), best if displayed on a screen so everyone can follow along together.
- [The Battle of Valcour Primary Source Quote Handouts](#), which includes a handout for each group.
- Four copies of [The Battle of Valcour Primary Source Note-Taking Sheet](#) to give to each group.

Vocabulary:

- **Perspective:** A way of viewing an object, person, or situation. A point of view.

- **Primary Source:** Immediate, first-hand accounts of events the person was directly involved in. Primary sources come in many forms, such as journals, letters, newspaper articles, pictures, audio clips, videos, etc.
- **Bias:** Prejudice in favor or against something. This can be something people are aware that they feel or not aware that they feel. Bias can change how they describe events, people, or feelings.

Lesson Summary:

This lesson was created to introduce students to the process of how people determine the narrative of history. It introduces the concept of primary sources, and helps to equip students with some of the tools to begin evaluating those sources. By reading the words of real people from the past, students will begin to grasp the variety of perspectives that existed, and will understand the idea that figuring out what happened in history is complicated!

The primary sources for this lesson focus on one of the most important Revolutionary War events that took place in Vermont, the Battle of Valcour. Feel free to consult the provided background materials on the Battle of Valcour to figure out what relevant information you want to share with your students.

In the activity, your students will be introduced to primary sources about the Battle of Valcour, and will analyze two in particular. These two sources were chosen because one directly responds to the other, even going so far as to quote from it! Students will then discuss the differing viewpoints presented and try to come to their own conclusions.

Outline of Lesson

Introductory discussion (5 minutes)

- Introduce the Battle of Valcour. Relevant information might include:
 - It was a Revolutionary War battle that took place between the Americans and the British on Lake Champlain.
 - It was a naval battle, so it took place between ships.

- There were more groups than just the Americans and the British. There were also Native Americans and German mercenary troops (soldiers you can hire to fight for you) on the British side. There were also people on the shore, family members of the people involved, and other kinds of connected people.
- The battle was won by the British side.
- Ask for ideas about who might have written things about the battle.
 - Based on what you just learned, who do you think might have written about this event? How do you think their stories might be different? What different **perspectives** might there be?
- Introduce the concept of **primary sources**.
 - The things the people involved in the Battle of Valcour wrote down afterward are primary sources. Primary sources are one of the main things we use to help us learn what happened in history.
 - You can briefly introduce some of the different types of primary sources. For example: Letters, journal entries, newspaper articles, etc.

Introduce the sources (10 minutes)

- Show [Quote Comparison Introduction Slideshow](#) to help walk students through the exercises.

Dig into the sources (15 minutes)

- Divide the class into 4 groups.
 - Each group gets a [Battle of Valcour Primary Source Quote Handout](#) and a [Battle of Valcour Primary Source Note-Taking Sheet](#).
 - Each quote handout has a quote from Captain Pringle and the accompanying answer from his lieutenants. If you access the Quote Handouts document, you can print copies for each group. If you want to challenge your students, you can make a copy of the document and remove the modern wording.

- Each group should get one Battle of Valcour Primary Source Note Sheet to fill out as a group. They will answer the following questions: What is your quote from Captain Pringle about? What is your quote from his lieutenants about? How are their stories different? Who do you believe? Why?

Present your point! (10 minutes)

- Have students describe what their quotes are about and how they agree or disagree.
 - Summarize quotes for class.
 - Say what they are arguing about.
 - Say who you believe and why.
- Possible extensions include:
 - Acting out what happened in their quote.
 - Debating their quotes.
 - Constructing a persuasive argument.

Conclusion extensions

- Ask students to create two newspaper headlines representing the two different viewpoints.
- If you have time at the end, we have included the [final paragraph of the letter from the lieutenants](#) that you can interpret with your class.