



Introduction to Primary Source Documents

This evening, with the help of a family member or an adult who is close to you, look through the souvenirs of your life that have been saved as you have grown up. Select one item that you are willing to share with your classmates and teacher, and bring it to class. For example, you might choose to bring a photograph, a letter, a diary, a newspaper clipping, a birth certificate, or a report card.

1. During your turn in class, provide the following information about your document:
 - a. What type of document is this?
 - b. What is the date of the document?
 - c. Who created the document?
 - d. How does the document relate to you?
2. Also consider the following questions for your own document and as well as for the documents your classmates bring in:
 - a. What does the existence of this document say about whoever created it?
 - b. What does the existence of this document say about whoever saved it?
 - c. What does the existence of this document say about American life in this era?

Extensions:

1. Have students take notes on others' presentations: Focus notes on what other students claimed could be learned from their documents about American history.
2. Have students consider the entire list of items presented during class and choose the 5 items they would want to include in a time capsule. Define what a time capsule is and tell them the purpose is to provide the most well rounded picture of American society.
3. Discuss: What can be learned about American life from the time capsule artifacts? What cannot be seen? (*poverty, war*) Why not? (*Perhaps students were protected from experiencing these things. Data set is limited since it's based on the possessions of youth.*)
4. Have students prepare a list of an additional 5 items NOT presented in class. Have them assume availability of whatever they want. Size matters – they can't include a Hummer or the Space Shuttle, they won't fit. They also should not plan to bury any people or animals (living or dead) and should assume that the people of tomorrow will not be able to use today's technology. They may want to consider advertisements and print media coverage of trends or events they want to include.
5. Groups can collaborate to refine and then share their lists. Discuss their criteria for determining which items were included and, therefore, what they deemed significant to capture in the history of this era they were presenting in their time capsule.
6. Brainstorm a list of rules for determining significance and develop into statements that the class agrees shaped their decisions. For example: 1) Rare, first-time, or last-time events, 2) Impacts many people in many places, 3) Impacts many areas of human life, 4) Effect lasts across time, etc.
7. Post each period's "Tools for Determining Significance" on colorful posters and refer to them frequently in the course of the school year or semester.

Adapted from National Archives and Records Association "The Digital Classroom." http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/introductory_activity.html (22 January 2003) with suggestions from Robert Bain's "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction" in *Knowing, Learning, and Teaching History*

sig·nif·i·cance / *sig'nɪfɪkəns* / noun : the quality of being important : the quality of having notable worth or influence ▪ *The discovery has great significance to researchers.* ▪ *His age is of little significance.* ▪ *This building should be preserved because of its historical significance.* ▪ *Does the ceremony have any religious significance?* ▪ *Her work has a significance that will last beyond her lifetime.*

SOURCE: Merriam Webster Learner's Dictionary, available at: <http://www.learnersdictionary.com/search/significance>

▪ On your own

- ▶ Review the list of artifacts suggested for our time capsule
- ▶ Identify your top picks and the reasons you think each should be included

Time Capsule : a container holding historical records or objects representative of current culture that is placed for preservation until discovery by some future age

▪ In your small group

- ▶ Decide who will facilitate the discussion and who will serve as the group's recorder
- ▶ Discuss which items you think should be included, supporting your choices with sound reasoning
- ▶ List the arguments for including items with the help of a recorder
- ▶ Come to a consensus on which 7 items best represent the current culture and should therefore be included in our time capsule
- ▶ Review your list of arguments, combine like items, and revise to develop a poster with displaying "Tools for Determining Significance"

For the purpose of this activity, use the list of items below as a starting point for your discussion. You may add additional artifacts, documents, or objects to include but must ultimately pare down the list to SEVEN items.

1. Front page of the New York Times on 11/5/2008 (day after Bin Laden was killed)
2. Script and selected images for "Cape Fear" episode of *The Simpsons*
3. Lyrics to Lady Gaga's "Born This Way"
4. *Fifty Shades of Gray* by E. L. James
5. Graph of unemployment figures, 2007-present
6. Graph of California's per pupil spending for K-12 public school, 1960-present
7. News magazine article on childhood obesity
8. Front page of the SF Chronicle on 11/2/2010 (after Giants win the World Series)
9. *The I Love Trader Joe's Cookbook: 150 Delicious Recipes Using Only Foods from the World's Greatest Grocery Store*
10. *America by Heart : Reflections on Family, Faith, and Flag* by Sarah Palin
11. The original poster for Occupy Wall Street
12. Picture of multi-racial family
13. *Sacramento Bee* election endorsements page
14. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* by Michael Pollan
15. 2012 voting guide with candidates' statements and arguments for and against propositions
16. *Beyond Work-Family Balance: Advancing Gender Equity and Workplace Performance* by Bailyn, Pruitt, and Rapoport
17. An issue of *WIRED* magazine
18. Other ideas for objects, artifacts, or documents that occur to you as you do this activity!