Locate Information Using Primary Sources

1. Focus

Explain Primary Sources

Say: When you research the subject for your biography, primary sources will be especially important to your research. Primary sources are documents created during the time period you are studying that include first-hand accounts of the events. They contain original information that has not been interpreted, or explained, by others. Primary sources give you an inside view to a time and a subject. For a biography, primary sources might include subjects’ diaries, photographs, autobiographies, speeches, letters, and so on. Today we’re going to practice locating information in primary sources.

Model Locating Information in Primary Sources

Display the modeling text on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources. Read it aloud to students.

And, as a fit and necessary military measure for effecting this object, I, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, do order and declare that on the first day of January in the year of our Lord one thousand, eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any state or states, wherein the constitutional authority of the United States shall not then be practically recognized, submitted to, and maintained, shall then, thenceforward, and forever, be free.

Modeling Text

Sample Think-Aloud

Say: The subject of my biography is Abraham Lincoln. I’m lucky because there is a lot of information about Lincoln. Also, the Library of Congress has digital copies of his letters, papers, and speeches that I can view online. These are all excellent primary sources for my research on Lincoln. This piece of writing is from Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. I notice that the style of writing is different from the way we speak and write today. It’s much more formal. What does this tell me? Well, Lincoln lived in a different time, when people often wrote and spoke more formally. But I also think that Lincoln understood that the seriousness of the proclamation and the momentousness of the occasion called for a formal tone.

Say: When we look at primary sources for our biographies, we identify and note details. Ask yourself, where did this document come from? Why was it made? What was happening in history when it was made? Why is it important?
When we look at the document, what looks unusual to us? How are the words arranged? Can you read it? If it’s a photograph, how do the people look?

2. Rehearse

Practice Locating Information in Primary Sources

Display the practice text on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources.

“In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war.... You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to ‘preserve, protect, and defend it.’

“I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies...”
(From Lincoln’s first inaugural address, March 4, 1861)

Practice Text

Explain that this text is from Lincoln’s first speech to the nation as president, and in this part he is directly addressing the dissenters in the South. Invite students to work with partners to read the practice text. Ask them to discuss what they notice about the text. Ask: Do you understand it? What does it mean or say? Why is it important? What can you learn about Lincoln from this? If students have access to a facsimile of the document, ask them why they think there are handwritten notes on it. If your class includes English learners or other students who need support, use “Strategies to Support ELs.”

Share Ideas

Bring students together and discuss what they learned about examining a primary source text.

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: Today we learned about primary sources and locating information in primary sources. Primary sources are important to researching for our biographies because this information is the closest to our subjects’ lives. Primary sources can also give us important information about our subjects and the time in which they lived.

Encourage students to locate primary sources they can use to research their topics during independent writing time. During conferences, reinforce students’ use of this and other strategies using the prompts on your conferring flip chart.

4. Share

Bring students together. Invite students to share the primary sources they used that provided them with relevant information for their biographies.

Strategies to Support ELs

Beginning

Pair beginning ELs with fluent English speakers during the partner activity. Keep in mind that they may not be able to contribute many ideas orally. You will want to work with them individually to reinforce concepts while other students write independently.

Intermediate and Advanced

Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the partner activity. Write the following sentence frames on chart paper and model how students can use them to contribute ideas:

This speech was written because ______.
It is important because ______.
This speech tells me ______.
I wonder ______.

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