

# ENGAGING STUDENTS WITH LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRIMARY SOURCES IN THE ELA CLASSROOM



7

STEPS TO GETTING STARTED  
WITH PRIMARY SOURCES

5

PLACES TO FIND FREE  
PRIMARY SOURCES

5

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN  
SELECTING PRIMARY SOURCES

## Why Should I Use Primary Sources in My English Language Arts Classroom?

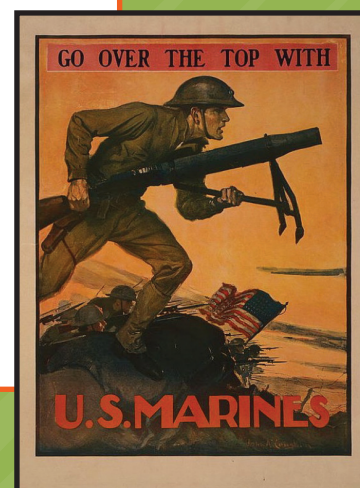
Primary sources in all formats—including but not limited to photographs, posters, newspapers, and oral histories—offer multimodal accessibility for students to develop skills and processes that move critical thinking and curiosity beyond the traditional texts in the English classroom. Engagement with primary sources encourages students to make inferences, activate prior knowledge, find patterns, and construct knowledge related to the context and creation of standard class texts.

Primary sources can

- enhance the study of a literary work by offering context for the work's time period, location, and characters.
- stimulate student curiosity and promote engagement.
- help students to develop critical thinking skills.
- build questioning skills as students do a close reading of primary sources such as photographs, sheet music with lyrics, manuscripts, and newspapers.
- promote visual literacy when using prints and photographs, auditory skills when using music or sound files, and both when using video items.
- give students a look at what people of the past valued as well as how they presented information before radio, television, and the internet.
- provide opportunities for students to investigate events and time periods from a variety of viewpoints.
- encourage students to make personal connections with people of the past.

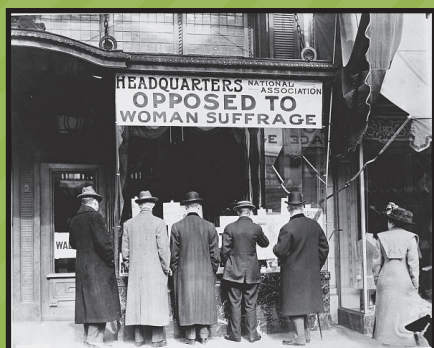
## WHAT ARE PRIMARY SOURCES?

According to the Teachers Site at the Library of Congress, "Primary sources are the raw materials of history—original documents and objects that were created at the time under study. They are different from secondary sources, accounts that retell, analyze, or interpret events, usually at a distance of time or place."



Go over the top with U.S. Marines [1917]

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2015/03/the-great-gatsby-establishing-the-historical-context-with-primary-sources/>



National Anti-Suffrage Association

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2014/05/primary-sources-and-research-part-iii-evaluating-sources-and-using-evidence-2/>

# 7

# STEPS TO GETTING STARTED WITH PRIMARY SOURCES

## 1

Choose a class text (fiction or informational) that will be enhanced by incorporating primary sources.

## 2

Using one or more of the resources provided below, search for primary sources that will connect to the study of the class text.

## 3

Choose one or more primary sources.

## 4

Primary sources can be paired or bundled, but when working with primary sources for the first time, students may be more successful working with a single source.

## 5

Decide how students will interact with the primary source—on a presentation board, on a laptop, on a tablet, or on a piece of paper—and what they will do to extract information and construct understanding.

## 6

Download the Library of Congress Teacher's Guide that corresponds to the item(s) you have chosen (<https://www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/getting-started-with-primary-sources/guides/>). The teacher's guide works best to prompt students when they are unsure how to analyze primary sources. Select a question or two from each column of the guide to focus and promote students' thinking.

## 7

Depending on how familiar students are with analyzing primary sources, it may make sense to ask students to record responses in the columns of the Primary Source Analysis Tool one at a time, beginning with the "observe" column, then moving to "reflect," then "question." After repeated work with primary sources, students will be able to move between the columns as they interact with primary sources.

"The Library of Congress is the largest library in the world, with millions of books, recordings, photographs, newspapers, maps and manuscripts in its collections. The Library is the main research arm of the U.S. Congress and the home of the U.S. Copyright Office." <https://www.loc.gov/>

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## Other Places to Find FREE Primary Sources

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is the nation's record keeper. They collect and preserve in perpetuity 1–3% of "documents and materials created in the course of business conducted by the United States Federal government." Their locations include the historic building in Washington, DC, as well as many of the Presidential libraries across the nation that have their own digital holdings. <https://www.archives.gov/>

"The Smithsonian Institution is the world's largest museum, education, and research complex, with 19 museums and the National Zoo." <https://www.si.edu/explore>

The holdings of the White House Historical Society "include exclusive imagery of life at the White House, its famous residents, historic rooms and furnishings, diplomatic events, holiday celebrations, and more." <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/digital-library>

The Gilder Lehrman Collection includes items from "five hundred years of American history, from Columbus's 1493 letter describing the New World to soldiers' letters from World War II and Vietnam." <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection>

Many national and local museums and historical houses as well as college and university libraries have digitized collections of primary sources.



## Tips for Searching for Primary Sources

- ✓ **Use broad general terms instead of specifics.** You will have more success and possibly find unexpected items if you search for "Frederick Douglass" instead of "the life of Frederick Douglass."
- ✓ **Use the tools offered by the site to narrow the search by location, date, and format.**
- ✓ **Remain open to what you may find.** Going into a search looking for a specific item may result in frustration. There are many amazing items available through the suggested sources, and serendipitous discoveries often lead to richer discussions with students.
- ✓ **Search more than one institution.** While the Library of Congress and other institutions have a wealth of options, often more specialized collections will have items more appropriate for your lesson.
- ✓ **Consider reaching out to local libraries and nearby colleges and universities.** They often have historical records and other primary source materials that may not yet be digitized but could be scanned or photographed for classroom use.
- ✓ As students grow more comfortable working with primary sources, you may ask them to **find items to use with literary works or writing prompts.**

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## QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN SELECTING PRIMARY SOURCES

What learning standards or essential questions am I addressing?

# 1

Will this primary source meet the needs and interests of my students?

# 2

Will my students be able to place this primary source in historical context?

# 3

Will my students be able to identify a point of view?

# 4

Will I be able to use this item successfully in my own classroom setting?

# 5

### Plan more time than you might expect for a lesson with primary sources:

- ➡ At first, students may not have much experience working with primary sources and will need time to interact with the items.
- ➡ To unlock the full power of using primary sources to develop critical thinking skills, allow students ample time to observe, reflect, and question before moving on to deeper engagement and connections to literature or their own writing.
- ➡ Many historic manuscripts are written in cursive, and transcriptions will be available for only some items. Most students are not proficient in reading cursive, so they will need extra time and support. Supporting students in deciphering the original manuscript, perhaps by chunking the text or working with partners, will empower them and may engage their curiosity.
- ➡ Using primary sources as writing prompts works best when students are offered opportunities for initial reactions, second looks, and time for extended interactions in order to draw inspiration from the items.

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

# Sample Lesson

One approach to bringing primary sources into your classroom is through the work of Frederick Douglass, activist, orator, journalist, and author whose papers are in the collections of the Library of Congress. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in 1845, is a first-hand account of the life of an enslaved man and his escape to freedom. While Douglass wrote the story of his life to record his experiences, he also worked to bring attention to issues related to slavery and civil rights for free African Americans. To raise awareness about the dehumanizing effects of enslavement, he published the letter "To My Old Master" in his newspaper *The North Star*.

Consider pairing excerpts from these two works. Begin with the letter "To My Old Master" from "Very soon after this . . ." (this is found two-thirds of the way down page 4 of the primary source) through where the paragraph ends on page 5. In this excerpt Douglass discusses the philosophy on which he based his belief in his right to be free.

Pair the letter with a passage from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In a passage from Chapter 7 (paragraph 6, which can be found in images 57–59 of the document mentioned above), Douglass describes the importance of having learned to read, which led him to explore the origins of enslavement.

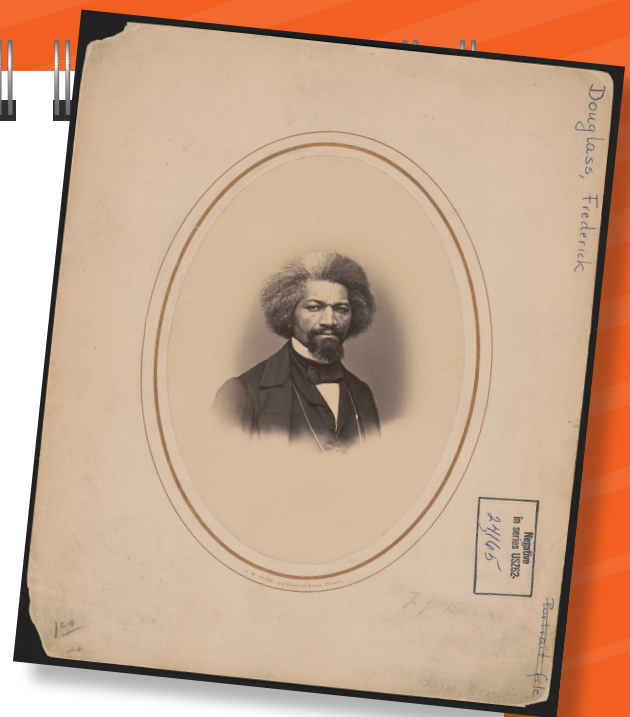
Supplement reading and discussing Douglass's work by listening to oral history interviews from *Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories*. (Written transcriptions are also available.) This collection offers the stories of 26 men and women sharing their recollections in their own voices. The memories of Fountain Hughes about his enslavement and emancipation are particularly rich. Laura Smalley's narrative offers striking detail about her experiences as an enslaved female. Select questions from the Teacher's Guide: Analyzing Oral Histories to help students dive into these resources. Additional strategies for using this type of primary source can be found in *The Civil Rights History Project: Primary Sources and Oral History*. Pair these narratives with Douglass's story to explore the complicated story of slavery in the United States.

Offer additional reading in the form of this narrative by Louis Hughes, a man who did not gain the fame of Frederick Douglass, but who also preserved his story for posterity.

Ask students to compare the accounts:

- In what ways do Douglass's and Hughes's experiences differ?
- Why did Douglass and Hughes choose to preserve their memories publicly?

Engage students in further exploration by asking them to find primary sources related to enslavement in the United States. Encourage them to search also for primary source writings by both the enslaved and the enslavers.



## Resources Mentioned in the Lesson

### **The Civil Rights History Project: Primary Sources and Oral History**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2014/09/civil-rights-history-project/>

### **Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress**

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/frederick-douglass-papers/about-this-collection/>

### **Interview with Fountain Hughes**

[https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1950037\\_afs09990a/](https://www.loc.gov/item/afc1950037_afs09990a/)

### **Interview with Laura Smalley**

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/voices-remembering-slavery/?q=smalley>

### **Louis Hughes's narrative**

<https://www.loc.gov/item/11021103/>

### **Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave**

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/lhbc25385/>

### **Teacher's Guide: Analyzing Oral Histories**

<https://www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/getting-started-with-primary-sources/guides/>

### **"To My Old Master," originally published in *The North Star***

<https://www.loc.gov/item/mfd.21024/>

### **Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories**

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/voices-remembering-slavery/about-this-collection/>



# ADDITIONAL LESSON IDEAS

- **Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven"**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2015/03/edgar-allan-poe-using-primary-sources-from-the-library-of-congress-to-deepen-understanding-of-the-raven/>

- **Inspiring Research Questions with Library of Congress Primary Sources**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2014/02/library-of-congress-primary-sources-inspiring-research-questions/>

- **Primary Sources and Research Part II: Sourcing and Contextualizing to Strengthen Analysis**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2014/03/primary-sources-and-research-part-ii-sourcing-and-contextualizing-to-strengthen-analysis/>

- **Primary Sources and Research Part III: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2014/05/primary-sources-and-research-part-iii-evaluating-sources-and-using-evidence-2/>

- **12 Years a Slave: Primary Sources on the Kidnapping of Free African Americans**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2013/11/12-years-a-slave-primary-sources-on-the-kidnapping-of-free-african-americans/>

- **Of Mice and Men: Exploring the Context with Primary Sources**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2015/05/of-mice-and-men-exploring-the-context-with-primary-sources/>

- **Walt Whitman's War Work: Primary Sources in the English Classroom**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2014/10/walt-whitmans-war-work-primary-sources-in-the-english-classroom/>

- **The Great Gatsby: Establishing the Historical Context with Primary Sources**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2015/03/the-great-gatsby-establishing-the-historical-context-with-primary-sources/>

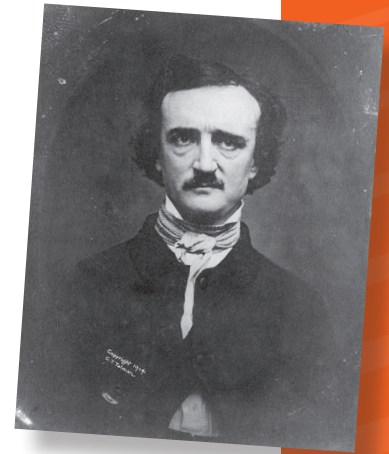
- **Multimedia Moment: Exploring Fairy Tales from Long Ago**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2016/03/multimedia-moment-exploring-fairy-tales-from-long-ago/>

- **Kate DiCamillo: Stories Connect Us**

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2014/01/kate-dicamillo-stories-connect-us/>

- **Additional lesson ideas and sources** can be found on the TPS Teachers Network, <https://tpsteachersnetwork.org/>, which is free to join.



## A Note about Copyright and Fair Use

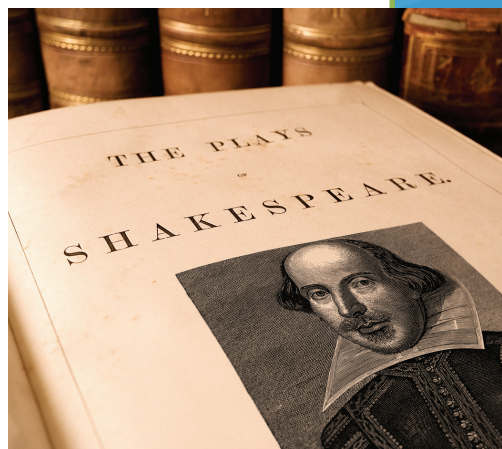
Often, digital works are not available to users offsite if the items are still protected by copyright and not yet in the public domain. Items in the public domain are “no longer under copyright protection or [have] failed to meet the requirements for copyright protection. Works in the public domain may be used freely without the permission of the former copyright owner” (<https://www.copyright.gov/help/faq/faq-definitions.html>).

Items in the public domain are free to be used in any way, including for education purposes with no limits. This is why there are so many versions of Shakespeare’s plays. His works have been in the public domain for many years and are therefore open for interpretation, adaptation, and rewriting as a creator chooses.

Items that are still protected by copyright require extra consideration before being used with students in the classroom. As an educator it is up to you to determine if your use of copyrighted materials may be acceptable under fair use considerations, but you may find it difficult to legally access copies of materials for your use because copyright limits what an archive, like the Library of Congress, can provide online.

Works created by those in the employ of the federal government are in the public domain at creation, which is why many more of the holdings of the National Archives are freely available than those in the collections of the Library of Congress or museums.

The Library of Congress Teachers Site offers guidance on “Copyright and Primary Sources” at <https://www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/getting-started-with-primary-sources/copyright/>.



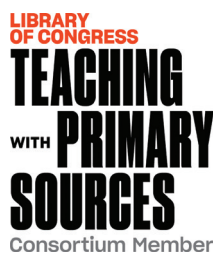
### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rebecca Newland** currently works as co-librarian at a Fairfax County (VA) high school. She previously served two years as the Library of Congress Teacher in Residence. She began her career as a high school English teacher, first in Manchester Township, New Jersey, then in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She holds a BA in English with a concentration in education from Albright College and an MEd from Old Dominion University. She is also certified as a school administrator and teacher of the gifted. Professionally she is interested in ways to entice students to read for both pleasure and information. Her experience as an English teacher and interest in engaging students with poetry has led to her writing a regular post for “From the Catbird Seat,” the blog of the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress. You can find her posts at <https://blogs.loc.gov/catbird/category/teachers-corner/>. Her experience working with teachers while serving as Teacher in Residence has prompted her to investigate and present on ways in which teachers and librarians can use primary sources to spark student curiosity and inquiry as a way to center learning on student interests and motivation.



**NCTE** is devoted to improving the teaching and learning of English and the language arts at all levels of education. The Council promotes the development of literacy, the use of language to construct personal and public worlds and to achieve full participation in society, through the learning and teaching of English and the related arts and sciences of language.

SEE MORE QUICK-REFERENCE GUIDES AT [GUIDES.NCTE.ORG](https://guides.ncte.org)



Since 2006, the Library of Congress has awarded Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) grants to build a nationwide network of organizations that deliver educational programming, and create teaching materials and tools based on the Library’s digitized primary sources and other online resources. Each year members of this network, called the TPS Consortium, support tens of thousands of learners to build knowledge, engagement, and critical thinking skills with items from the Library’s collections. NCTE engaged in ongoing work with the Library of Congress starting in 2019 to connect the ELA community with the Library of Congress to expand the use of primary sources in teaching.