oral text, while warning about the tendency toward reductionist thinking. And finally, Mr. Erikson provides an opportunity for students to explore immigration trends using census records. His purpose is to help students use quantitative data in building an argument.

The reader is encouraged to think of the historical literacy strategies as the warp, and the various types of evidence as the woof in weaving together a comprehensive historical literacy program. Students with historical literacies are confident in working with a wide array of historical texts because they understand the nature of historical thinking, possess strategies for working with evidence, and are capable of thinking complex thoughts about history. This section is designed to explore the texts and ways of thinking about texts that will foster this literacy.

Mr. Dunn is teaching a unit on the European colonization of North America in an 11th grade U.S. history course. He wants to show students the way many cultures from Europe, America, and Africa blended in the colonies. He thinks that students have misconceptions about the relationship between individuals from the three continents. He wants students to understand that Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans were all active agents of change. He thinks about the best possible texts that he might use. He could show a clip from the Disney movie *Pocahontas* to illustrate the interaction, but he is afraid that it might reinforce stereotypes and misunderstandings. The textbook has a long section about the English colonies but it doesn't portray Native Americans or Africans as meaningful contributors to colonial life, but merely as victims. He wonders whether there are primary sources that students could access that illustrate the complex relationships. He researches online and discovers John White, a Nipmuck Indian, who died in London, England in 1679 (Pulsipher, 2003). He decides that John White, formerly known as John Wampus, has an interesting story that is intertwined with major colonial events such as King Philip's War. He finds relevant, interesting primary and secondary sources on John White and determines that White's story will provide an engaging case study through which students can explore Native American and English relationships in the early colonies.

Mr. Dunn establishes the following objectives for a pair of lessons on John White and Native American/English relations in the British colonies:

1. Students will explore the complex, continuously changing relationship between Native Americans and European colonists in North America, considering examples of both cooperation and conflict and viewing both groups as active agents of change.
2. Students will differentiate between primary and secondary historical sources and develop strategies, including sourcing and corroboration, which are associated with effectively using historical evidence.

Mr. Dunn prepares a collection of documents that includes several primary and secondary sources including records of court proceedings, a petition by a Native American group, a letter written by King Charles II, and carefully selected excerpts from a historian’s analysis of John White’s life. He creates a legible transcript of one document that is particularly challenging to read. He notices the difficult vocabulary in another, defining unfamiliar terms in the margins of the text. He rewrites a third document, simplifying the language so that students will be able to comprehend it.

Mr. Dunn spends two days investigating this topic with his students. On the first day, he assesses students’ prior knowledge. He begins class by engaging students in a short discussion of the Native Americans and English settlements of New England. During the discussion he asks students to think about the possible ways that Native Americans might have reacted to the arrival of colonists.

“If I would have been there I would have got all the Native Americans together and killed all of the Europeans while we still had them outnumbered,” Jordan suggests.

“Yeah, but they couldn’t see the future,” Amber responds. “How were they supposed to know that they would be outnumbered back when there were only a few colonists here?”

Mr. Dunn makes a mental note of students’ inability to comprehend the historical context of colonization or to view events from a historical perspective. He notes, for instance, that Jordan projects his understanding, in hindsight, onto Native Americans. Further, neither Jordan nor Amber appears to understand the realities that existed between Native American groups at the time of the colonists’ arrival. He uses the discussion to discover students’ background knowledge, their misconceptions, and their ideas about the 17th century American colonial frontier.

Once he has a sense of students’ background knowledge, Mr. Dunn lectures for several minutes on the human and physical geography of colonial New England. He points out, for example, that there were many different Indian nations living in the region, some of them allied with each other and some of them enemies. He also teaches that tribes varied in size and strength, with some posing a grave threat to colonial settlements and others more vulnerable to the whims of colonists and rival tribes. He reminds students that there were different reactions within Native American groups to the arrival of the colonists, just as there were differences in opinion among the colonists on the best ways to interact with Native Americans. As his lecture ends, he informs students that they are going to do a case study of one Nipmuck Indian who viewed the arrival of the colonists as an opportunity to build his own personal wealth, adopting a dual Native American/English identity to negotiate the sale of much Native American land to English colonists. In the end he was viewed as a traitor by both groups.

Mr. Dunn introduces students to John White, by giving some basic facts and by revealing a few puzzling pieces of historical evidence that directly confront students’ misconceptions. Students are told, for instance, that his original name was John Wampus (sometimes spelled Wompowess or Wompas) but it was later fully anglicized to John White. Students are surprised to hear that he attended Harvard and later resided in a house in Boston. Mr. Dunn clarifies that a handful of Native Americans were admitted into Harvard in the 1660s and 1670s in hopes that they would become Christian ministers who would convert their people to both Christianity and to English culture. Mr. Dunn tells students about one of John White’s schoolbooks from Harvard, now lost, but described in the historical record. The inscription “John Wompowess his booke” appeared on the front inside cover. On the opposite page near a sketch of a meetinghouse in different handwriting was written, “John Savage his meetinghouse the king of it I say.” Mr. Dunn explains, “You probably thought vandalizing textbooks was a new activity, but it appears that it has been going on for a long time. It looks like John White wrote his name in his book, and someone else wrote an insult on the opposite page. There’s a story in these two sentences that might help us to understand John White’s life within the context of Native American and colonist interaction.” He asks students, “Who might have written this insult and what did they mean by calling John Wampus ‘John Savage?”

“I’ll bet it was written by a White person who was trying to put him back in his place as a ‘savage’ so that the Whites could feel superior,” argues Jordan.

“I think it was another Native American who didn’t like John Wampus acting like a White man. He refers to him as John ‘Savage’ to remind him who he really was,” suggests Anthony.

A few other students voice their opinions. Mr. Dunn leaves the question unanswered, though acknowledging that either explanation is possible. He explains that students will look at evidence to reconstruct a better picture of John White, his life, and his context. As Mr. Dunn lectures, he continues to ask questions. “Why might a Native American have taken an English name? How did he gain admission to Harvard? Why was he in London at the time of his death? Why did his own people, in 1677, petition the Massachusetts magistrates not to allow him to represent them in future land dealings? What did his life suggest about general trends in Native American/English relations?” Students add to the list of questions — “Did other Native Americans feel like he was selling out his people? How did the White people feel about Native Americans like him, who adopted English lifestyles? Did they welcome them into their society? Did the English ever marry Native Americans?” As students speak, Mr. Dunn writes their questions on the board. After creating a good list of questions, Mr. Dunn announces that he has gathered documents that they will use to answer their questions.
“But before I give you the text set, I want to take a few minutes to help you be smarter in the way you work with the documents,” he explains. “Imagine that you observed a traffic accident on your way home from school today, and police officers took your name and phone number and said they might call later to find out exactly what happened. Imagine that you went home from school and told your mother about the accident. Later, a police officer calls your home. Would the officer want to talk to you or your mother?”

In the discussion that follows Mr. Dunn helps students distinguish between primary and secondary sources. He introduces students to bias by asking, “What if one of your friends was the driver of one of the cars involved in the accident. Would the police officer want to talk with you or your mother? Does the source of the information matter?”

Mr. Dunn makes a connection between investigating an accident and investigating historical controversies. He points out that in both cases the investigator must sift through evidence that might be incomplete or contain contradictions. He asks students what an investigator might do when faced with contradictory evidence.

“Look at which side has more pieces of evidence,” Connie recommends. “That’s one way to work with evidence, but what might be a problem with simply keeping score of the number of pieces of evidence?” Mr. Dunn probes.

“One really good piece of evidence might outweigh lots of other evidence so you can’t just count how much there is on each side,” Connie admits.

Mr. Dunn agrees and explains, “Historians definitely have to distinguish between weightier and less weighty, reliable and unreliable evidence. I want to tell you about two things that historians always do when they are working with evidence.”

He continues talking explicitly about historians’ strategies of sourcing and corroboration. After discussing each strategy briefly, he passes out the text sets and says, “Let me show you what I mean. Take a look at the first document. Historians always start by looking at the source. It’s called sourcing. Down at the bottom of the first page I can see that it was written by Jenny Pulsipher in 2003. What do I know about it immediately?”

When students flounder a little, he restates the question, “Is this a primary or a secondary source?”

Students acknowledge that it is a secondary source. Edgar suggests that it must not be very reliable, reminding Mr. Dunn that the police officers wouldn’t want to talk to his mother to find out about the accident. Mr. Dunn agrees that primary sources have some advantages over secondary sources, but suggests that secondary sources might also be of value.

“How can we find out about this source? Can we trust that she is an expert?” he asks. Eventually, with Mr. Dunn’s guidance, the students decide to do an Internet search to find out about Jenny Pulsipher. They discover that she is a history professor who specializes in English/Native American relations during colonial times, recently publishing a book on the topic.

“She sounds like a reliable source,” Dillon concludes.

“But I thought secondary sources weren’t as reliable as primary sources,” Shelby expresses with frustration. “You’re confusing us, Mr. Dunn.”

Mr. Dunn laughs. “This is a messy process, Shelby. You can probably start to understand why history books sometimes disagree with each other. Doing history involves a great deal of interpretation even after careful investigation. We’ve discovered that this text comes from a professor with a good reputation as a scholar. What else can we do to evaluate this secondary source?” he asks, getting back to the original issue. “Would a police officer simply talk to one witness and then think he/she had all the evidence?”

“We can see how it matches the other evidence, especially the primary sources,” Shelby concludes.

“That’s a great idea, Shelby. This is a strategy that historians call corroboration. Historians compare documents for similarities and differences. Corroboration goes together with sourcing to help us judge how reliable a document is.”

Mr. Dunn passes out a graphic organizer that he designed that has a place to record source information, a brief summary of the source, and how the source compares to other sources students have investigated (see Figure 5.1). He encourages students to make notes in the cells related to the first text and to continue filling it out as they evaluate the other texts. He points out that also included in the graphic organizer is a place to take notes on evidence as it relates to their original research questions, and space to record new questions that arise as the sources are explored.

“Let’s look at one more text together before the bell rings,” Mr. Dunn suggests. They examine a petition written by John Wampus to Charles II, King of England, explaining his plight. “What do we do before reading the letter?” he asks.

“We look at the source,” several students call out simultaneously.

Mr. Dunn spends the rest of class considering the source, corroboration the story it tells with the first text they read, and reflecting on the context. As the bell rings he collects the text sets and dismisses the class.

The next day Mr. Dunn forms students into small groups and assigns them to take most of the class exploring their text set, which includes a variety of primary sources and carefully selected excerpts from secondary sources. He reminds them to use sourcing and corroboration to make sense of the texts. While students work, he circulates, listens to their discussions, makes suggestions, and asks questions.

With about ten minutes left in class, he reminds students about some of their misconceptions from the beginning of the day before. “Yesterday, someone suggested that the Native Americans should kill all of the colonists. What are your thoughts on this idea now?”
Research questions:

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<th>Source</th>
<th>Source analyses</th>
<th>Summary of content</th>
<th>Similarities to other texts</th>
<th>Differences from other texts</th>
<th>Other notes</th>
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<td>Text 1</td>
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Evidence that helps answer your research questions:

New questions that you have as you read the documents:
1. 
2. 
3. 

FIGURE 5.1 A graphic organizer for supporting students’ work with primary sources.

“Well, it sounds like some of the Native Americans, like John White, were glad the colonists were there and used them to make a lot of money. It might have been hard to unite a tribe to fight against them,” Sandra suggests.

“Yeah, and you said that the different tribes were sometimes enemies — so that would have made it even harder to fight them,” Jordan elaborates.

After a brief discussion of their misconceptions, he allows each group to report on what they found about one of their original research questions. As the bell rings, students leave class with a more sophisticated understanding of Native American/White colonial relations, and they have had an opportunity to evaluate primary and secondary sources using historians’ strategies of sourcing and corroboration. Mr. Dunn understands that this is just a beginning, and that he will need to continue to remind students about these important historical literacies and provide opportunities to practice throughout the school year.

Helping Students Learn with Primary Sources

As described in the introductory chapters of this book, written records provide the foundation of historical inquiry, and primary sources, such as those gathered by Mr. Dunn, are historians’ preferred format of written record. However, as also reported in previous chapters, students have a difficult time working with primary sources the way historians do. They typically view texts — all texts, of any format — as conveyors of information. Their focus is on reading, remembering, and regurgitating. In contrast, Mr. Dunn wanted students to adopt a criterialist epistemic stance, using documents as evidence in building historical understanding. Mr. Dunn knows that familiarity with historians’ heuristics would give students the tools needed to evaluate documents as evidence. This chapter discusses a) historians’ heuristics of sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization, and how they can be taught; b) helping students read primary sources; c) how a teacher can help students critique and use primary sources to construct historical interpretations; d) ideas for selecting appropriate primary sources; and e) allowing students to produce primary sources.

Historians’ Heuristics of Sourcing, Corroboration, and Contextualization

Even in the proper classroom setting, students are not likely to be able to work well with primary sources unless they have the tools to do so. I found that fostering debate and discussion without giving students tools for working with evidence created a potentially chaotic environment where unsubstantiated claims, voiced with passion, could win out over reasoned, evidence-based interpretations, presented with less gusto. In Chapter 2, I introduced historians’ strategies and habits of mind for working with historical sources. As described there, historians’ approach all sources with skepticism, consider the source of each text, determine the reliability of various sources through corroboration, maintain an openness to alternative interpretations, place themselves in the physical and social context of the document’s creation, and fill in gaps in the evidence with reasoned speculation. Mr. Dunn’s lessons included instruction on two of these heuristics: sourcing, and corroboration, which, when added to contextualization, make up the three most basic of historians’ heuristics (Wineburg, 1991).
Sourcing

Students must be taught that when they begin to explore an unfamiliar text they must look first at its source. A reader cannot comprehend, critique, or use a text as historical evidence without establishing where it came from. When sourcing, students should identify the type of document they are working with and adjust their reading accordingly. For instance, after identifying a document as a letter a student should attend to the signature, to identify who wrote it; the greeting, to identify the recipient; and the date, to see when it was written. Other types of texts elicit different reading procedures. Students should always consider whether the author had first-hand knowledge of the event. Further, if investigating an event that pits two sides against each other, such as a battle, a political campaign, a sporting event, or a trial, the position of the author is important. The author's social standing, educational background, and even physical location during an event can influence the content and value of an account. For example, a person holding public office may have more to gain or lose by the way an event is portrayed. Students should think about the intended audience and its impact on a text. For instance, the tone of John Wampus's letter to King Charles II is obviously very different from the tone of the graffiti in the textbook. Much of this difference is a result of the intended audience. Students should consider the purpose of a text and look at the timing of its creation. Was it produced immediately following an experience, or years later, when some of the details might have been forgotten but a broader perspective of the event might have been gained?

When considering the source, there are few absolute rules that can be taught to students. The value of the record is based on the questions being asked, the range of sources available, and the content of the text. At times private writing, such as journal entries, is more valued than public records, such as sworn depositions, and sometimes it is not. At times, close personal involvement in an event yields the richest resources, and sometimes distance creates a more valuable perspective. In spite of the flexibility required in sourcing, all historians demonstrate that the use of any evidence should begin by a consideration of the source (Wineburg, 1991). Mr. Dunn recognizes the challenges of sourcing for young students. Whereas the students want firm rules, i.e. primary sources are always more reliable than secondary sources, he suggests that the evaluation of multiple texts is a messy business and that multiple strategies must be used together.

Corroboration

The graphic organizer that Mr. Dunn prepared reminds students to pay attention to the source of the text and encourages them to use corroboration across texts. Corroboration helps students determine the validity and reliability of sources. Texts with descriptions that are substantiated by other sources are deemed more reliable. Texts with content that is contradicted by other sources present a greater challenge to students. Differences between texts might include omissions of specific details by one or more source, unique inclusions, or outright disagreement on basic facts. Students must be taught to notice and seek explanations for discrepancies, which can often be accomplished through sourcing. There might be a simple explanation for discrepancies, such as the different physical location of eyewitnesses. In such cases, two divergent accounts might both be judged reliable. At times the differences between accounts might require students to make judgments between opposed texts. In such cases corroboration, sourcing, and other heuristics can help. Mr. Dunn's graphic organizer is intended to help students corroborate by asking them to record similarities and differences between texts.

Contextualization

Students must learn to use the physical and social context of a document's creation to help them comprehend, critique, and use it as evidence. This heuristic of placing oneself in a historical setting has been labeled contextualization. Important things to be kept in mind in contextualization include an awareness of the geography surrounding an event; the time of day or year that the event occurred; the cultural and social setting of the event, such as traditions or etiquette; a biographical awareness of participants, such as the tendencies of a general or politician; a linguistic awareness of the changing meaning of words across time; and a historiographic awareness of how an event has been perceived by historians. It's not surprising that students' lack of background knowledge makes contextualization difficult for them. In fact, there is some indication that students have a harder time using contextualization than they do sourcing or corroboration (Nokes et al., 2007; Reisman, 2012). Not wanting to overwhelm students with too many new ideas in a single day, Mr. Dunn did not provide explicit instruction on the strategy of contextualization during this lesson. However, he used the story of John White to help his students understand the complex social context of Native American/colonist interaction. He will spend time explicitly teaching about contextualization later in the school year.

Teaching Historians' Heuristics

In spite of historians' nearly universal use of these three heuristics, Mr. Dunn understands that history students do not instinctively engage in sourcing, corroboration, or contextualization. It is up to him to help them develop these historical literacies as part of his overall goal of helping them learn to read like historians. He understands that teachers can increase students' ability to work well with primary sources by explicitly teaching these strategies (Nokes, et al., 2007), so he builds historical literacy mini-lessons into his curriculum.

Mr. Dunn provided explicit strategy instruction on sourcing and corroboration. He openly discussed the heuristics with students, naming the heuristics,
elaborating on the processes used in implementing them, and suggesting why the heuristics were effective and important. He modeled both sourcing and corroboration for the students. He thought aloud as he questioned one of the sources in the text set—pointing out that it was a secondary source. He walked them through the process of researching the authority of a source through the Internet. He also modeled how two heuristics, sourcing and corroboration, could be used together. Additionally, he provided a setting where students could practice these heuristics with support. The graphic organizer provided a gentle reminder that students needed to pay attention to the source and how the documents compared and contrasted with each other. The graphic organizer facilitated corroboration by easing the process of making direct comparisons across texts. It provided a place to summarize the content of each text in order to create a record that students could cross-check against other sources as they were analyzed. Further, working in groups allowed students to think aloud, to get feedback on their ideas, and to observe others use heuristics. His circulating during group work allowed him to support the use of heuristics, to further use the language of the heuristics, and to offer praise when students used the heuristics appropriately.

In addition to explicit instruction on sourcing and corroboration, Mr. Dunn provided implicit strategy instruction on contextualization. Though not mentioning the strategy by name, his questioning prompted students to immerse themselves in the context of the time and his short lecture gave students background knowledge that was useful in doing so.

Helping Students Read Primary Sources

When working with primary sources, students often need support in each of their four roles as readers: code breakers, meaning makers, text users, and text critics described in Chapter 3. These roles suggest that working with texts is an active process. Teachers can further promote students’ active engagement by encouraging them to ask questions and seek plausible interpretations using primary sources. Additionally, they can help students view primary sources as evidence rather than as conveyors of information. I consider each of these notions in this section.

Code Breakers and Meaning Makers of Primary Sources

Before students can adopt the role of historian and reason with historical evidence, they must be able to decode and construct meaning with primary sources— to “read” them. Teachers should be aware that basic comprehension of primary sources can present challenges for students for a number of reasons. First, decoding is difficult when texts are age-worn or written in illegible handwriting, as primary sources often are. The reading of old texts can be such a challenge that among historians there are specialists, paleographers, who focus on the decoding of old handwriting. Students who must work hard to decode a text (i.e. read it) have fewer remaining cognitive resources with which to conduct an analysis (Nokes, 2011). Mr. Dunn compensated for this challenge by preparing a transcript of one document, which he presented beside the original so that students could use both. Second, comprehension is difficult when texts are written using challenging language, unfamiliar vocabulary, or terms that have a different historical meaning. Mr. Dunn addressed this problem by choosing some simple texts, one being only a single sentence in length, and by defining difficult vocabulary in the margins of another text. Researchers have suggested that teachers also help students understand the evolving or contextualized meaning of some words and in some cases even translate documents into simpler language that students can comprehend (Stanford History Education Group, 2012). Additionally, allowing students to work as a class or in small groups to read texts, as Mr. Dunn did, can provide scaffolding for students. The graphic organizer he prepared had a place for students to summarize their understanding of each text— allowing Mr. Dunn to assess their comprehension of the documents and providing them a place to refer back to when corroborating across texts. In summary, students cannot engage in the analysis of documents that they cannot comprehend. Mr. Dunn took measures to help students decode and comprehend the primary source materials he provided.

Critiquing and Using Primary Sources

Mr. Dunn is trying to create a classroom where students are expected to evaluate texts and use them as evidence to answer questions related to historical dilemmas. He has carefully structured his classroom to promote historical literacies. He uses the analogy of a witness at an accident scene to help students understand their identity as investigators of the past and the role of accounts as evidence. The purpose of his lecture is not simply to transmit information but to help students understand the context of historical questions. The explicit instruction that he provides is intended to help students evaluate texts as historians do, using sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization. The structure of his activities promotes questioning, a search for answers to questions, and further questioning. His assessment, in this case the graphic organizer, is meant to evaluate students’ ability to engage in historical thinking processes, rather than their arrival at a predetermined conclusion. Thus, Mr. Dunn’s lesson plans facilitate the critique and use of documents in authentic ways by creating an environment where students ask questions and seek plausible interpretations using documents as evidence.

Asking Questions and Seeking Plausible Interpretations

Mr. Dunn has found puzzling resources, the types of texts that historians would use, in order to promote students’ spontaneous and authentic questioning. He poses questions that allow multiple interpretations. But more importantly,
classroom activities revolve around not only his questions, but authentic questions that students develop under his guidance. At the outset of the case study on John White, Mr. Dunn is uncertain how students will interpret the texts or which questions they will consider. He is quite confident, though, that he has selected resources that will promote students’ learning of concepts that are central to the required curriculum—Native American and White relations.

It is possible for teachers to use primary sources without promoting historical literacies. As I mentioned in a previous chapter, when I observed several history lessons, the most common way teachers used primary sources was to present short, one- or two-line quotes in order to illustrate a point made during a lecture. The teachers typically read and explained the primary source to students with few opportunities for students to interpret (Nokes, 2010a). In the worst cases, the primary sources were used for the same purpose that textbooks and lectures are typically used—to convey information to students. In the best cases, teachers used primary sources as evidence of a point they were trying to make. But even when primary sources were used under these circumstances, there was no explicit discussion of strategies like sourcing or corroboration, no explicit distinction made between primary and secondary sources, and no critique or questioning of the source.

Thus, exposure to primary sources does not build students’ historical literacies unless teachers create the appropriate conditions. These conditions include introducing historical controversies or mysteries without an agreed upon interpretation; allowing students to semi-independently develop original interpretations based on the evidence; bringing in multiple contradictory texts that provide room for differences of opinion; permitting students to disagree with their peers, the teacher, textbooks, and even historians; and encouraging students to explore their own interests using both teacher-provided text sets and their own independent research. There is little opportunity for historical thinking when teachers simply offer, as factual, their interpretations of primary sources, expecting students to remember rather than to question and seek plausible alternative interpretations. On the other hand, in classrooms that not only tolerate but appreciate diverse opinions, students feel safe in positioning themselves in historical debates. I have found that students in settings that appreciate independent questioning and allow alternative evidence-based interpretations are more likely to work with primary sources in a discipline-appropriate manner.

**Viewing Primary Sources as Evidence**

As part of the process of helping students understand the nature of history and the role of historians, students must consider documents evidence rather than repositories of facts or conveyors of information. The graffiti in the textbook is not comprehended literally—suggesting that John Wampus was the king of his own meetinghouse. Instead, Mr. Dunn’s students use it as evidence of the attitudes of others toward an Anglicized Native American. In the process of working with historical evidence, students must acknowledge that primary sources were typically not written for the purpose they are now being used. As a result, the author may assume background knowledge that students and historians lack. Some knowledge of the historic and geographic context may be necessary to comprehend the text. Aware of this, Mr. Dunn lectured briefly on the human and physical geography of New England in order to build the necessary background knowledge before expecting students to comprehend and evaluate the texts as evidence.

To illustrate further, I sometimes use a note Eisenhower wrote prior to the D-Day invasion to teach students that victory in World War II was not inevitable, to help students understand the risk of the attack, to help them understand the personality of Eisenhower, and to help them comprehend the nature of historical evidence (see Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3). If students read the text with the attitude

![Figure 5.2](image-url) Eisenhower’s unreleased press release of the Normandy Invasion (Courtesy of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, National Archives and Records Administration, Abilene, Kansas).
that they are gathering information, they would learn that D-Day was an American failure, that the Allies fell short in their attempt to establish a foothold in France, and that the attack occurred in early July. All of these “facts” that could be gathered from the document are untrue. In order to learn with this text, students must understand the context and purpose of its creation: that it was written as a potential press release that could be used in case the invasion failed, that Eisenhower had written an incorrect date on the note, that he discarded the note after the invasion succeeded, and that an aid had retrieved the note from the trash as a relic. Students’ purpose in reading this document is drastically different than Eisenhower’s purpose in creating it. Students use it to answer questions they have developed—what kind of a man was Eisenhower, for example—and not simply to gather facts about D-Day. Thus, in the use of documents as evidence, the student/historian determines how the document is most useful.

Selecting Appropriate Primary Sources

As we help students adopt the role of historians, in addition to creating an investigative classroom climate and teaching historians’ literacy strategies, we must choose appropriate primary sources. Mr. Dunn’s careful selection of texts is an important factor in the success of his activity. There are several criteria that he used. First, the content should be appropriate for the age and maturity of the students. Violent or otherwise questionable content in some documents, particularly informal, private writing, may be inappropriate in some educational contexts. Second, as much as teachers would like students to analyze some difficult texts, the fact remains that if a student can’t read it, they can’t reason with it. Thus, teachers should choose primary sources that are at or below students’ reading ability, or adjust instruction or modify texts in order to facilitate students’ comprehension. Third, selected primary sources should promote instructional objectives. Mr. Dunn’s lesson planning began with a consideration of objectives, for which appropriate texts were uncovered. With the nearly inexhaustible supply of texts available, including primary sources, teachers should ask themselves, “Is this the best possible text to use to reach my instructional objectives?”

Teachers should be purposeful in their selection of texts for document-based activities. Students are more likely to engage in sourcing when there is variety in the perspectives of the sources. When possible, text sets should contain documents with both contradictions and similarities in order to promote corroboration. And texts should vary in their reliability so that students can begin to distinguish between more and less trustworthy sources. Additionally, providing texts that represent multiple points of view can expose students to alternatives to the canonized historical narrative to which they have become accustomed. Further, texts from a non-majority perspective may carry greater appeal with minority students. I found that students were not as likely to engage in sourcing or corroboration or to question the reliability of texts if they were given only one text or multiple texts with a common point of view and similar content.

Mr. Dunn intentionally chose a wide variety of genres for students to evaluate. Doing so allowed students to practice recognizing the subtle differences, strengths, and weaknesses of various forms of evidence. Without exposure to various text types such as diaries, written on a daily basis, and memoirs, written after a lifetime of experiences, students might fail to acknowledge the subtle differences between genres. However, as students work with new genres of historical evidence they have the opportunity to discover the unique characteristics of each. Mr. Dunn provided students with both primary sources and a secondary source including a petition, graffiti, court proceedings, a letter, and excerpts from a journal article.

The following is a list of some written primary source documents that I have used with students. Creative teachers will be able to create an endless list of useful texts for historians and, thus, for students:

- Letters, notes, and emails (both informal, private letters and more formal, public letters)
- Official government documents such as laws, state constitutions, or treaties
- Speech transcripts
- Diaries, memoirs, personal histories, and autobiographies
- Newspaper articles, obituaries, want ads, and letters to the editor
- Accounts written by contemporary non-witnesses
write descriptions and reactions to the events in order to create a historical record. Students' records can be compiled into a book or on a web page documenting important events and providing a record for future historians. Production of such records puts students on the other side of history — a perspective that can improve their understanding of the work of historians who interpret the past based on the types of records students will have produced. Students can also create oral histories by interviewing individuals with connections to historical events such as the Civil Rights Movement or the Vietnam War. Additionally, some history teachers assign students to build time capsules with written records and artifacts for a similar purpose — to create a record that individuals might use at some future date to understand current conditions. By carefully selecting items for inclusion, students gain a different perspective on the role of evidence, particularly primary sources, in the construction of understandings about the past.

Chapter Summary

Primary sources provide a foundation upon which the discipline of history is built. However, students face several challenges in working with primary sources. Teachers, like Mr. Dunn, help students overcome these challenges by supporting their comprehension of texts by creating transcripts of hard-to-read documents and by simplifying the language in primary sources. Teachers help students adopt the role of a historian by teaching them historians’ strategies for interrogating primary sources — particularly sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization. History teachers promote the effective analysis of primary sources by creating safe classrooms that honor questioning, by encouraging students to view documents as evidence, and providing them with regular opportunities to semi-independently develop original interpretations of historical events throughout the school year. Producing primary sources helps students understand the nature of evidence in the study of history.

Helping Students Create Primary Sources

In addition to working with primary sources, students can learn about the nature of history by creating primary sources themselves. Students’ personal reflections on national, world, or even personal events, written in a history class, create a source that can be used by future historians, or by the students themselves, as they learn how to do history. For example, Bain (2005) had his students write about their experiences on the first day of school. In a subsequent class session he asked students to analyze the various diverse accounts of that day. As students analyzed the accounts they had created, they recognized the profound effect of point of view on the content of primary sources. Additionally, students, realizing the impossibility of constructing a complete record of the first day of school, gained a better understanding of the work of historians in determining what to include and what to omit in their determination of historical significance.

When historical events occur during the course of a school year, such as the inauguration of a president or a national emergency, teachers have students