

# Using Primary Sources

Lesson Video: Grades 3-5

# Overview

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**Teacher:** Kathleen Waffle  
**Grade:** 5  
**School:** John Muir Elementary School  
**Location:** San Bruno, California

**NCSS Standards-Based Themes:** Time, Continuity, and Change; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; Culture

**Content Standards:** History, Civics, Economics, Anthropology

## Video Summary

Examining primary sources and artifacts from the past gives students the chance not only to study history but to become historians and anthropologists themselves. Fifth-grade teacher Kathleen Waffle attended a summer teaching institute at Colonial Williamsburg to learn more about primary sources from the colonial period and how to use them with her students. After completing the institute, Ms. Waffle developed a unit to help students learn what life was like as the colonies began to experience economic growth.

In lesson shown in this video, students examine two primary sources from the colonial period: an advertisement and a contract. Students use a graphic organizer to analyze an advertisement placed in the *Virginia Gazette* by a colonial silversmith. Then they work with a partner to translate a contract of indenture between a master and apprentice, rewriting the terms of the contract in their own words. Later in the unit, students interview local businesspersons to compare current business practices with those in colonial times, undertake a longer research project on life in the colonies, and put on a colonial fair.

## Standards

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*Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each grade level. This lesson correlates to the following standards for middle school students:

### **I. Culture**

Explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference.

# Standards, cont'd.

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## II. Time, Continuity, and Change

Demonstrate an understanding that different scholars may describe the same event or situation in different ways but must provide reasons or evidence for their views; identify and use processes important to reconstructing and reinterpreting the past, such as using a variety of sources, providing, validating, and weighing evidence for claims, checking credibility of sources, and searching for causality.

## VII. Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Explain and illustrate how values and beliefs influence different economic decisions; use economic concepts to help explain historical and current developments and issues in local, national, or global contexts.

## Content Standards: History, Civics, Anthropology, Economics

# About the Class

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## Classroom Profile

"I wanted students to understand that looking at artifacts of the past is a window into history. Just like historians, they can glean information from people's lives, and make connections between the past and present." —Kathleen Waffle

Kathleen Waffle teaches fifth-grade history at John Muir Elementary School in San Bruno, California. Located 12 miles south of San Francisco, San Bruno is a residential community, and the students at John Muir Elementary School reflect its changing demographics and increasing diversity.

Ms. Waffle started the year with units on the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, and presidential elections, helping students make connections between important historical decisions and documents and the elections taking place that fall. Students chose political parties, organized campaigns, and held a school-wide mock election that coincided with the presidential election.

After the election, Ms. Waffle transitioned back to pre-colonial times, with units on Native Americans and exploration of the New World, before moving on to colonization. By the time the class began the lesson shown in the video "Using Primary Sources," they had a solid grasp of early American life.

The inspiration for Ms. Waffle's unit on colonization came from a summer teaching institute at Colonial Williamsburg, where she and other participants lived in a reconstructed eighteenth-century village for nine days. During the institute, Ms. Waffle developed a lesson on using primary source documents to teach students about the daily life of colonial Americans. In the lesson, students analyzed and interpreted an actual eighteenth-century newspaper advertisement and a labor contract to learn about economic development, trade, class divisions, and the relationship between employer and apprentice in colonial America.

Year at a Glance
Bill of Rights and Constitution
Presidential Elections
Native Americans
Exploration
<b>Colonization</b>
Road to the Revolution
American Revolution
Building a New Nation
Westward Expansion
Immigration

# About the Class, cont'd.

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Economics and geography were yearlong themes. Students explored the impact and limitations of land use both in colonial times and throughout American history. After the unit on colonization, the class went on to study the American Revolution.

## Lesson Background

Read this information to better understand the lesson shown in the video.

### **Content: Primary Sources**

Examining primary sources—such as original photographs, maps, letters, diaries, journals, and legal documents, as well as electronic versions of these articles—helps students understand that history is about the lives of real people. However, because most primary sources were not written for students living in the twenty-first century, you will need to guide students as they analyze and interpret the artifacts. Start with short selections or excerpts. Identify unusual vocabulary in advance, or ask students to list unfamiliar words as they come across them. Above all, use primary sources as a basis for student research to raise questions about larger social and historical issues.

Primary sources are a bridge between the present and the past. They provide students with an opportunity to interpret original, unedited data for themselves, rather than passively accepting the interpretations of others. Using primary sources also encourages students to look at history from multiple perspectives and place historical events not just in chronological order but in a social context. Comparing analyses of primary sources teaches students that there are often several different interpretations of the same document. This realization helps students understand the pitfalls of relying solely on secondary sources when doing research. Finally, through the use of primary sources students come to realize the value of supporting historical interpretation with physical evidence.

### **Teaching Strategy: Working Together To Organize and Translate Primary Sources**

Students can work together to derive meaning from primary sources. In this lesson, students work in small groups to find information related to categories supplied by the teacher. Working together helps students decode the often archaic language in primary sources, discover the multiple, sometimes changing meanings of words, and in the process, improve their reading comprehension skills.

Students can record their findings in a graphic organizer. A graphic organizer is a visual representation of information that shows, at a glance, how key concepts are related. Some graphic organizers, like timelines, illustrate the chronological order of events over time. Others, like Venn diagrams, compare and contrast. Some graphic organizers, like concept maps, are useful tools for brainstorming. Recording information in a graphic organizer helps students focus on important points and clarify relationships. It also helps students retain what they learn. In this lesson, students use a type of graphic organizer to categorize their findings, cite supporting evidence for their claims, and later, compare historical and current business practices.

# Watching the Video

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As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

## Before You Watch

Respond to the following questions:

- What do primary sources bring to a student’s learning experience that secondary sources do not?
- What are some of the most effective primary sources you use?
- What are some primary sources that you find most difficult to use with your students? Why?
- How do you prepare students to work with primary sources?
- Why is it important to use both primary and secondary sources? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

## Watch the Video

As you watch “Using Primary Sources,” take notes on the instructional strategies Ms. Waffle uses to help students understand different primary sources and construct their own views of colonial life. Write down what you find interesting, surprising, or especially important about the teaching and learning in this lesson.

## Reflecting on the Video

Review your notes, then respond to the following questions:

- What struck you about the lesson in terms of classroom climate, background information, lesson preparation, teaching strategies, and materials used to teach this lesson?
- What kind of preparation do you think preceded this lesson to make it challenging, yet successful for students?
- How was the graphic organizer used in the lesson, and how might it be used in future lessons?
- Why do you believe Ms. Waffle asked students to compare the colonial contract activity to other work they’d done with primary sources?
- How did Ms. Waffle encourage her students to focus and persist in the face of challenging tasks?

# Watching the Video, cont'd.

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## Looking Closer

Here's an opportunity to take a closer look at interesting aspects of Ms. Waffle's lesson.



### Analyzing Colonial Advertisements: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately two minutes into the video. Watch for about five minutes.

Ms. Waffle gives each group a reproduction of a colonial advertisement to analyze, explains the assignment, and asks students to interpret the ad.

- What evidence do you find that Ms. Waffle wants students to take responsibility for their own learning?
- What evidence do you find that she wants students to construct meaning for themselves?



### Translating a Colonial Contract: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately 17 minutes into the video. Watch for about six minutes.

In the second half of the lesson, Ms. Waffle reviews the definition of *indenture* and asks students to translate a colonial contract in their own words.

- Why do you think this is a valuable activity for the students?
- What benefits does it create for student learning?

# Connecting to Your Teaching

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## Reflecting on Your Practice

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them in a group.

- How do you decide which primary sources to use when you construct a lesson or unit?
- What factors do you believe are important as you introduce primary sources to your students for the first time?
- What student groupings, teaching methods, and graphic organizers might you use to support student focus and success?
- How do you judge students' success when they use primary sources?
- Consider how your class might differ from Ms. Waffle's. What are some ways you could adapt the lesson to suit your students?

## Taking It Back to Your Classroom

- Ask students to bring in primary sources from home—letters, photographs, and diaries of their ancestors—or primary sources found in books or on the Internet. Ask students to share the sources and discuss what can be learned about the past from them.
- Have students analyze a primary source, asking questions such as, Who wrote the source? Why? When? Where? and What were the consequences? Then have students analyze another primary source about the same event that provides a different point of view. Ask students to compare the sources, suggest reasons for the different points of view, discuss the credibility of each source, and reflect on how they might determine which point of view best represents the event.
- Ask students to choose a topic of interest and find primary sources related to that topic. Ask them what each source can teach them about the topic. Discuss whether the authors of the sources have different points of view about the topic and why they might hold those views.
- Ask students to interview a family member or older friend and record their reaction to some recent historic event or aspect of culture. Explain that such firsthand accounts become the primary sources of the future.
- Introduce several types of graphic organizers to your students over time. Then select several primary sources and ask students to use the graphic organizers to represent the main points of each source.
- After working in pairs or groups to analyze and interpret primary sources, ask students to reflect on how this method is helpful to their learning.
- Discuss the idea that primary sources are not just documents. Many types of artifacts are used to give us “primary” information about the past— but they are, of course, open to interpretation. Read David Macaulay's book *Motel of the Mysteries* with your class to underscore the complexity of different interpretations. Ask your students to pick five current documents or artifacts and, acting as historians/anthropologists 500 years in the future, offer whimsical (but plausible) misinterpretations of their primary sources.

# Resources

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## Print Resources for Students

Fisher, Leonard Everett. *The Printers. Colonial Craftsmen*. New York: Benchmark Books, 2000.

Kalman, Bobbie. *Colonial Times From A to Z*. New York: Crabtree Publishing, 1997.

Tunis, Edwin. *Colonial Craftsmen and the Beginnings of American Industry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Tunis, Edwin. *Colonial Living*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

## Print Resources for Teachers

Carson, Mary Kay. *Colonial America: A Complete Theme Unit Developed in Cooperation With the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*. New York: Scholastic, 1999.

Hakim, Joy. *Making Thirteen Colonies: 1600–1740., 2d ed. A History of U.S., vol. 2*. New York: Oxford University Press Children's Books, 1999.

Howarth, Sarah. *Colonial Places. People and Places*. Brookfield, Conn.: Millbrook Press, 1994.

Traugh, Steven. *Pre-Colonial Times Through the Revolutionary War. Voices of American History, vol. 1*. Cypress, Calif.: Creative Teaching Press, Inc., 1994.

## Web Resources for Students and Teachers

Archiving Early America: <http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/>

An excellent source for 18th-century source material, this site features the Early America Review and other chronicles of colonial America.

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation: <http://www.history.org/>

This site offers resources on colonial America for students and teachers, and provides information on their summer institute for educators.

History Online: <http://www.jacksonsd.k12.or.us/k12projects/jimperry/colony.html>

History Online presents a large collection of links to primary sources relating to colonial America.

Index of Source Material: U.S. History: <http://odur.let.rug.nl/%7Eusa/D/index.htm>

This is a comprehensive index of primary source documents from the colonial era to today.

Library of Congress Collection Finder: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/phcoll.new.html>

From this site, students and teachers can search for specific information in the Library of Congress American Memory online collection.