



Chapter 2

How Opinions Become History: Analyzing Point of View

What's Inside?

Skills and Strategies

- Analyze artifacts
- Consider the “history of history”
- Synthesize secondary sources
- Deconstruct historical narratives
- Infer from a map
- Imitate a famous historical poem

Standards

- ✓ Historical interpretation
- ✓ Fact versus opinion
- ✓ How we know what we know
- ✓ Primary sources

Start Locally to Think Globally: Personal Primary Sources

Looking around the room during the second week of school, my students notice a variety of objects on their classmates' desks: a soccer ball for Eric, a pink pencil case for Emily, a tennis shoe for Patrick, and a picture of a family picnic for Ali. Yesterday we spent five minutes defining *primary source*, a term many of them already understood from previous history classes.

"It's something written by someone who was there," says Tom.

"It's an eyewitness account," says Rachel.

The assignment for today was to bring in a personal primary source for discussion, making sure not to tell anyone why the artifact is important.

As I look around the room, I realize that some students have forgotten about the homework until the last minute—thus Patrick brought his shoe, one of the pair he is wearing on his feet, and Emily just pulled out her pencil case from her backpack. However, this is part of the fun of the assignment. I told students they could offer anything that tells something about them, and I'm curious to hear what Patrick and Emily will come up with on the spur of the moment.

The first year I tried this activity, I simply asked students to share their "source" with a partner and explain the significance. The exchange served as an icebreaker and a brief introduction to the study of history. Afterward, however, the exercise seemed little more than show-and-tell, which has its occasional place in middle school classrooms but does not hint at the deeper level of analysis I expect throughout the year. In addition, in my early years of teaching—when I was more nervous, shared less humor with students, and tried to account for every detail in my march toward instructional perfection—I sometimes gave students a hard time (and fewer points) if it was clear that they had grabbed the first thing they found in the hall before class. Now I figure that students will be turning in so many homework assignments during the first six weeks (some of which I'll grade, but many of which I'll just look at and acknowledge completion) that this one can be a chance for laughter at the more, shall we say, unusual choices. As a teacher, I always have to remind myself that the teachable moment often is the unexpectedly humorous moment, so I try to seize the chance to laugh together as a class. And I well remember the day I forgot my own personal primary source that I had intended to use as a model and grabbed a mini candy bar from the teacher's lounge instead.

Once each student has a personal primary source on his or her desk, I place students in pairs or groups and ask them to pass their own source to the person on the left. "You are historians one hundred years into the future," I say seriously. "Imagine that you know little or nothing about the culture of middle-schoolers in the early twenty-first century and are attempting to understand our society from this object alone."

For each object, students have three to five minutes to complete the following:

- a) Write one or two guesses of what this source tells you about the life of the person who owned it.
- b) Write one or two observations that this source tells you about the life, society, and/or culture of students in your town in the early twenty-first century.

To model this activity, I've held a jade lion figurine from China and asked students to imagine what this says about me and the time in which I live. Some actual responses from students, creativity encouraged:

Thoughts About the Person

- *This person was a zookeeper or a lion trainer.*
- *He or she used this figurine to scare away mice.*
- *This person had an entire collection of animals, like Noah's ark, with two of each kind for good luck.*

Ideas About the Society

- *The society had the capability of carving gemstones.*
- *The society worshipped lions.*
- *People placed these figures on their car hoods.*

Sometimes a student suggests a more common answer: that the lion is a souvenir from a trip, which it was, and shows that this person (me) liked to travel. I emphasize that the zany hypotheses are just as valid, though, and that historians need to be creative, especially when serving as archaeologists investigating an unfamiliar culture. The Snickers bar, though an impulse choice, also produced some intriguing guesses:

- *The candy bar is small, which meant that people couldn't carry much.*
- *The society's members liked encasing everything in chocolate because their stomachs were sensitive.*
- *The people in the society were futuristic and ate only items wrapped in plastic.*

This activity can take as little or as much time as you like. With three or four students per group, they generally will spend fifteen to twenty minutes analyzing their "data" and five minutes sharing their individual ideas with the group. Students love to discuss their responses with each other.

"I didn't know you liked to sketch pictures of your sisters," Erin says when she learns the real reason Emily chose the pink pencil case.

"Hey, I'm doing soccer right now too," David responds when he hears why Eric brought in his favorite sport's equipment. If we have time, I ask students to share the stories behind their objects in front of the class as well as mention their classmates' unusual guesses. To wrap up the discussion, I bring the entire class together and ask students to talk about the benefits and problems of using artifacts as primary sources.

“You can really touch and feel what it was like for someone living back then,” says Alex.

“Yeah, but who knows what these things were actually used for?” Kristi argues. “Like with Eric’s soccer ball—if we didn’t know what it was, we might have thought it was a spherical game board, like a checkerboard, or an early map of the world.”

The students’ off-the-wall guesses have shown them that primary sources can just as easily be used to misinterpret as to correctly identify habits of the past—and that the interpretations depend on who is doing the viewing.

Much as each of the National Geographic Society’s “Five Themes of Geography” relates local to global geographic features (Joint Committee on Geographic Education 1984), I like to get my students thinking about personal primary sources at the beginning of the year because it enables them to become historians and consider the importance of their own lives. If they all will make history, as I tell them on day one with the “Worker Reads History” poem, then these artifacts are the building blocks of their impressive future biographies.

From “You Are There” to “You Decide What Is Important”

In Chapter 1, we watched students jump into the heads of history makers by empathizing with their plights, disagreeing with their tactics, and wrestling with their challenges. Chapter 2, on the other hand, looks at history from the perspective of the people who chronicled it, rather than the people who made it. In the activities that follow, I encourage students to become historians themselves and to assess how and why we write history. The National Center for History in the Schools asks students to “examine the interpretative nature of history” in this way by “comparing, for example, alternative historical narratives written by historians who have given different weight to the political, economic, social, and/or technological causes of events and who have developed competing interpretations of the significance of those events” (NCHS 1996).

By entering into such historiographical discussions—conversations about the history of history—students can understand that interpreting the past is a somewhat subjective enterprise. One person’s narrative often includes details that another’s leaves out. With the meta-cognitive thinking required, such conversations about the history of history can raise some of the most interesting questions of the entire year about knowledge and power: “How do we know what we know?” and “Who decides what is history?”

Where Does History Come From? Material Culture During the Shang Dynasty

When students read a textbook, it can seem as if the words on the page are as immutable as stone, penned by an omniscient mind. Within the first month or two of school, I like to extend the “personal primary source” activity to an examination of artifacts from a real society. In this way,

students can understand how historians composed the accounts of the times in which they lived. This activity can be done anytime, with any civilization rich in material sources. (See Appendix B for suggestions of where to find such artifacts online.)

“Let’s mix things up today,” I begin. “We’ve been reading a lot in our textbook about the Shang and Zhou dynasties in China: now let’s look at some pictures of art from these ancient cultures.” In pairs, students examine a handout featuring photographs and brief descriptions of a Shang jade buffalo, a Zhou bronze wine container, and a Zhou bronze bell from the Metropolitan Museum of Art website (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/03/eac/ht03eac.htm> and <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/04/eac/ht04eac.htm>). Then they look at each artifact and underline key facts from its description. To catapult students into the history, I ask them to discuss these questions as a group and write brief responses:

- *How would you have felt holding this artifact?*
“Royal and rich,” Naomi says of a ritual wine vessel.
- *Do you like this object? Do you think it is beautiful or ordinary? What do you like/not like about it?*
“The buffalo is awesome,” Peter says. “Really ‘Home on the Range.’”
“But it’s in China, Peter,” Doug ribs him good-naturedly.
“Yeah, but you see how it shows that nature was important to the society? Just like in America with the midwestern prairies.”
- *List two adjectives to describe the society’s values.*
Kelly suggests “down-to-earth” and “civilized” for the Zhou, while Ryan offers “religious” and “natural” for the Shang.

Once we have discussed the feel and importance of the artifacts, we look at two passages in the textbook’s China chapter that describe the art of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. “What kinds of primary sources do you think the historians used in this section to compile the text?” I ask. By this point, students can hazard some guesses: bronze bells, jade figurines, and royal tombs. The textbook’s stone wall, so seemingly monolithic, has started to crumble. (One important note: When I first did this activity, I distributed the photographs in black and white and showed the original color photos after students had completed the activity. Only when Doug said, “Wow, I really didn’t like or understand the objects as well until I saw them in color” did I kick myself for not giving the more visual learners a rich entry point into the material. The next time, I put the photographs into a PowerPoint presentation and showed them onscreen at the outset.)

You can broaden this artifacts assignment to include our own time, or to fit into a journalism or language arts class, by asking students to find an article from a newspaper or reliable website. First, they can identify all the primary sources and eyewitness accounts the reporter might have used when researching the article. Then they do the same for secondary sources. Going further, you might ask students to pretend that they are historians one hundred or two hundred years into the future: How useful would this article be as a primary source if you were researching a book about American sports or American society in the early 2000s? Why or why not? Write an explanation or tape a video interview in which you pretend to be the historian. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 suggest additional activities and resources that you may wish to consider.

A funny coda to this activity: I initially used this newspaper lesson during the first week of a journalism class, bringing in an article about a blue whale off the California coast. When I asked students who would be good sources to interview for this piece, they offered up “a lifeguard,” “a park ranger,” “a zoologist,” and “an environmental activist.” And then I called on Danny, a witty eighth grader whom I barely knew at the time. His answer? “The whale.” He kept me laughing—and pulling out my hair—all semester.

Figure 2.1

Going Beyond Personal Primary Sources

Some other ways students can think about the ambiguity of primary sources are:

1. **Primary Source Walk.** Lead your students on a walk around campus for five minutes and ask them to take notes silently the whole time about what they see happening. When they return to class, ask them to spend five minutes writing down what they thought were the two to four most important sights on their walk and why. The class can vote for the most important events or observations and then discuss what these facts would reveal—or not reveal—to a reader about the school’s history on this day. As a follow-up, students can write a reflection or talk to their parents about the similarities and differences among the various reports, suggesting how this process relates to the usefulness of primary sources for historians.
2. **Brainstorm Questions.** Ask pairs of students to make a list of several questions that would be helpful when analyzing primary source documents. Then collect the questions on the board and make a class list for future use. Examples might include: “What do you think this was used for?” and “Do you think this is a decorative or a functional object?” DoHistory.com has an excellent list of questions to ask about primary sources at http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/primarySources.html. The site was inspired by Laurel Thacher Ulrich’s impressive *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (1991; see Appendix C for the complete list).
3. **Still Life or Collage.** Ask students to create an artistic representation of primary sources from their own lives and photograph them or glue together a collage of photos showing important events. Then tell students: “Write two accounts of the still life or collage—one real account describing why the objects and scenes are important to you, and one imagined narrative that is as skewed as you can make it while still relying on the same sources. You can also ask a relative, classmate, or friend to write the second account.” Spread the real or false narratives around the classroom and have students pair the accounts with the still life or collage they describe.
4. **Rate Your Stuff.** Ask students to list or photograph half a dozen primary sources from their own lives and categorize them on a scale of importance, ranging from “important only to me” (such as a seashell from a solitary beach walk) to “important to the city or nation” (a crayon rubbing of part of the Gettysburg Address from the wall of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.).

Figure 2.2

Summer Workshops for Using Primary Sources in History Classrooms

Many wonderful summer institutes ask teachers to dig into archives, museums, and libraries to find primary sources for their classrooms. Keep in mind that seminars are often competitive and deadlines can fall early in the year. Here are just a few:

- The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History Summer Seminars, held at universities and other sites across the country and taught by college professors and other luminaries (<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/teachers/seminars1.html>)
- Monticello-Stratford Hall Summer Seminars for Teachers, a three-week seminar for social studies teachers focusing on Virginia during the American Revolution (<http://www.monticello.org/education/stratford.html>)
- National Archives, Primarily Teaching Summer Workshops, at National Archives facilities across the country. In these, teachers find sources in the archives that would help their teaching and put together lesson plans based on their findings (<http://www.archives.gov/education/primarily-teaching>)
- National Gallery of Art, Summer Teacher Institute, a weeklong workshop on a particular topic (<http://www.nga.gov/education/teacinst.shtm>)
- National Endowment for the Humanities, Summer Seminars and Institutes for School Teachers, with workshops ranging from two to six weeks (<http://www.neh.gov/projects/si-school.html>)
- UCLA History-Geography Project, Summer Institutes, on local, U.S., and world history (<http://centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/HGP/events1.php>)

Telling History: Compelling Historical Narratives

Once we have discussed how historians transform primary sources into narratives, I introduce students to secondary sources—those written by someone who did not witness the events he or she is describing. One four-page excerpt that captivates me every time I read it is a gut-wrenching passage by Edmund Morris in *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (1979, 363–366). In it, Morris describes Teddy Roosevelt’s herd of cattle dying on the plains of the Dakota Territory’s Badlands during the bitter winter of 1886–1887. Morris writes sentences such as, “last summer’s drought, aggravated by overstocking, had reduced the grass to stubble. The starving cattle were forced to tear it out and eat the frozen, sandy roots” (364).

The passage ends with, “Patiently they began to sort and stack the skeletons of what had been one of the greatest range herds in the world” (366). When I read these descriptions to my students, their jaws literally drop as they consider the enormity of the loss. By thoroughly investigating this selection, whether or not your curriculum includes an in-depth look at Theodore Roosevelt, your students will gain a new understanding of these historical skills and themes:

- The impact of climate upon history
- The power of story to take us back to a place and time
- The force of strong imagery in telling history
- “The role of chance, oversight, and error in history”
- “The credibility of primary and secondary sources” (California State Board of Education 1998, 21, 22)

Badlands National Monument, South Dakota (Photo by W. H. Raymond III. Figure 26, U.S. Geological Survey *Bulletin 1493*.)



One caution: The first time you show your students a secondary source from a “real” history book written by a “real” historian, make sure it is compelling to young adolescents. I’ve made the mistake of picking a text that I liked, then finding that it bombed in class because it featured more analysis than storytelling. I do include excerpts from analytical books in my curriculum, but not at the very beginning. (See the following sections for suggestions on presenting analytical sources.)

After years of trial and error, I’ve developed some strategies to attack narrative passages in class. I usually use a variety of these techniques to ensure that every student understands the story. Then we can have a discussion about the importance of the historian’s work.

1. Provide Enough Context

Because I've usually read other parts of the book besides the excerpt I'm sharing, I know what is happening in the passage, but my students don't. In past years, I've too often relied on a rushed, several-sentence description, verbal or written, of the backstory or context. What about a student who is daydreaming while I give the background, or someone who doesn't find the description compelling enough to really understand it? These days, I spend five or ten minutes doing any or all of the following to provide context:

- a) Going back to a textbook passage that students have read and asking them to reread it
- b) Finding a short encyclopedia entry about the topic
- c) Showing some photos from the time or of the events I'm describing

2. Give Students a Personal Stake in the History

As with all history and all stories, if students cannot imagine themselves in a situation like the one that the protagonist faces—and there is, I would argue, a protagonist or antagonist in every good piece of historical narrative—they will tune out. It's what I call the “who cares?” factor: why should we care about this person? One strategy I've used is asking a thought-provoking question about the topic. For the Theodore Roosevelt passage, such questions could be as follows:

- Have you ever experienced a loss of a personal possession? How did the loss make you feel?
- Has your family ever been affected by a natural disaster? Describe your story. (Of course, be sensitive to the emotional impact of recent natural disasters in your area if you ask this question.)

These questions can also develop historical themes in addition to analysis, such as the effect of climate on communities and the year-to-year nature of farming, whether in Myanmar's delta or America's Midwest.

3. Cut Up the Text

Before you read the narrative, take a half-dozen sentences from the passage, cut them up into strips, and ask students to put them in the most dramatic order. The Theodore Roosevelt passage is not completely linear, so students often have different answers and different reasons for their ideas.

4. Read the Text Aloud, Twice

Sometimes I tell students that, if they are aural learners, they can put their heads on their desks while I read aloud a passage for the first time. To keep them involved, I ask students to make

mental images of the descriptions in the text as I go. Also, I might interrupt the reading, asking students to turn to a partner and briefly describe what is in their heads. The second time through, students underline especially powerful passages or phrases. “Just mark the ones you like,” I say. “You don’t even have to know what they mean, as long as they sound good to you.” Then we discuss the phrases, which helps bring out students’ questions about the narrative.

5. Use Visuals Whenever Possible

In addition to showing photos relating to the text, sometimes I ask students to illustrate a scene that they think is most important. “I’m a terrible artist—can I do stick figures?” Jeremy asks. Absolutely, I say, as long as you get the point across. I usually ask students to label their drawings with at least three phrases or sentences from the text so that their artwork will be factually based. For instance, if they were drawing the bodies of cattle rushing down the river, they could label that part of the picture with this phrase: “and still the carcasses jostled and spun” (365–366).

6. Talk Up the Mystery

The Theodore Roosevelt passage holds fantastic mystery and foreboding; it unfurls slowly, almost painfully. As you read aloud, students can mark especially dramatic points. Ask them: When did you know what was going to happen? Why is the passage still compelling after that? You can also explore the language in more depth, which is an effective way to keep students underlining and marking up the text as they read. One way is to ask students to circle strong verbs or action words, such as “escape” (364), “invaded,” and “hurtling” (365). Students could even make a poem or write a story with these words to show their power.

7. Consider Creative Extensions

To ensure that students have understood the text, they could respond to the following prompts:

- Write a letter from Theodore Roosevelt or his herder telling what they found and how they felt after the snows melted.
- If this were a movie, how would you film it? Opening and closing shots? Voice-overs?
- Write a short textbook account, several sentences, of this event. How is it different? What do you like about this source that the textbook does not have room to include?
- You are there: consider Roosevelt’s perspective on hearing about this bitter winter loss. Why do we not see his perspective in this interlude when we do throughout the whole rest of the book?

8. Imagine the Sources

Ask students to get into pairs or groups and make a list of a half-dozen sources that Morris might have used in his research. Then compare their ideas with the actual list of endnotes from the book to discover that Morris consulted newspapers (such as the *Dickinson Press* in North Dakota) and magazines from the time, Roosevelt’s personal diaries, and secondary sources. You can ask students: What does this passage say about the importance of writing down descriptions of events as they happen? How do you think this narrative is different from the newspaper stories? How do you think historians will write about our Internet society, with newspapers laying off reporters and shutting down bureaus all the time? Generally I’ve found that students do not have to understand or look up every endnote; in fact, their doing so would probably doom your quest to sweep them up in narrative. One well-chosen note can work wonders in showing them that history comes from someplace real.

9. Appeal to Students’ Sense of a Challenge

Whenever we do something “hard,” such as examining a secondary source written for adults, I like to tell students, “People might think you couldn’t do this, but I know you can.” Then, with the appropriate scaffolding, they generally do. Middle-schoolers can understand just about anything adults do, I believe, if the passage is short enough and we spend enough time on it.

10. Supplement This Reading with Another Source

As much as one marvelous source can spark a student’s interest, sometimes creating an interplay between two complementary pieces can create unexpected synthesis—much as two children playing together can generate more energy than two playing alone. For instance, you could use an excerpt from Theodore Roosevelt’s *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* to give students a sense of how difficult the “primitive” ranching life was, and then compare its tone to the Morris passage. (For the “Winter Weather” chapter from the Roosevelt autobiography, go to <http://www.bartleby.com/54/5.html>.) You also could find an article about farming subsidies today and debate whether it is beneficial for the government to support farmers during difficult seasons.



The discussion on Edmund Morris’s Roosevelt excerpt produces a very labor-intensive class or classes, but I’ve found it to be well worth the time. My goal during this initial investigation of historical narratives is to keep my students talking and writing, to each other and to the entire

class, so that they are engaging with the historian's work. If, as Brittany once said after class, "I had no idea that snow could be so interesting," then I've achieved one goal: eliciting enthusiasm. If students translate that enthusiasm into an understanding of historians' motives and challenges, so much the better, as Tom discovered when he said, "Theodore Roosevelt was a powerful man, but even he couldn't fight back against midwestern winters." But we have to keep in mind that such understanding is a layered process, begun with one source and continuing with others throughout the year. Appendix A includes other resources that you can use to supplement the textbook's account of historical periods.

Shock Students with Fascinating Facts from History

When do I use secondary analytical texts? When the textbook is so disjointed, with so many bits and pieces that I am bored or confused while reading it and I know my students will lose interest as well. When I want to show students that history doesn't just appear; it is explained by historians who help us impose order upon and make sense of the past. When I want to return to a key standard, such as the idea that "interpretations of history are subject to change as new information is uncovered" (California State Board of Education 1998, 22). With many historians' work, I certainly don't read an entire book at once because I don't have time within a unit to do so. Often, I simply scan for relevant passages or base my choice on a librarian's or colleague's recommendation. If I enjoy a book, I'll return to it in more depth during vacation.

One of the most compelling analytical sources I've found moves from mystery to understanding in a way that young adolescents can appreciate. It is Jared Diamond's description of packrat middens in his excellent *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005). *Collapse* describes vexing problems that historical and modern-day societies, from the Vikings and the Maya to Rwanda and China, have struggled to solve. An excerpt on the Anasazi appears in a chapter about the settlement at Chaco Canyon (Chapter 5, "The Maya Collapses," 143–147). The preceding section lists different methods of sustaining agriculture in an area plagued by irregular rainfall.

Scientists did not know for sure that this currently dry area was originally well forested until they discovered an ingenious repository of history: packrat middens. No, you're not supposed to know what this term means! At the time of the California Gold Rush in the mid-nineteenth century, some prospectors on their way West discovered what looked like sticky balls of candy on a cliff in the Anasazi region. Unfortunately, the sweet-tasting gobs made the miners feel sick to their stomachs. The substances were not candy, after all, but "hardened deposits made by small rodents, called packrats, that protect themselves by building nests of sticks, plant fragments, and mammal dung gathered in the vicinity, plus food remains, discarded bones, and their own feces" (Diamond 2005, 145). Yes, feces—the gross-out factor looms large. Through radiocarbon dating, scientists realized they could tell when the plant and animal remains in the middens were digested; thus, they could find out when Chaco Canyon was lush with vegetation (145–146).

Anasazi pueblos



though, I'll form heterogeneous groups and ask students to assume roles: a person with a fine speaking voice can read aloud, someone who loves the sounds of words can underline neat-sounding phrases, a student with a more mathematical or logical bent can circle unknown words, a global thinker can list the major ideas of the paragraph, and a visual learner can draw a symbol or picture that describes the passage. Figure 2.3 includes additional ways that students can show what they know.

After the group has read through the paragraph twice and each person has completed his or her assigned task, I ask the group members to write a summary and check it with me. This is probably the most important step to make sure that their interpretation is accurate and, even more crucial, that they feel confident enough to present it well to the class. It is fine if their first explanation is completely off the mark, as long as they are thinking hard and know that they will rethink and revise. If groups finish early, I ask them to guess what the “punch line” is of the historical argument that Diamond is making—what might be his surprise at the end? Once I've approved the group's one-sentence summary (and picture, if they like), I ask them to put the sentence on the board. Sometimes I call this sentence the “thesis” of the paragraph, especially if language arts classes are concentrating on this idea.

“No way,” said Evan. “I can't believe he was using rat poop to figure out where those people went.”

Rat poop to study history? No way! Let's start at the beginning. (And thanks to history teacher John Ruch for suggesting that I use Jared Diamond's books in class.) Diamond's work is appealing to middle school students because he pulls in unusual artifacts and obscure facts to pique readers' sense of intrigue and weave a compelling narrative.

With middle-schoolers, and even with high-schoolers, I often start to get tired of my own voice after too many teacher-led discussions. So, by this point, I'm happy to put students into groups to examine the excerpt. For analytical sources, I like groups rather than partners because there are more eyes and brains looking at the passage.

At times, if the paragraphs vary greatly in difficulty, I will assign them to homogeneous groups based on reading comprehension skills. More often,

Figure 2.3

Jumping In: Entry Points to Analytical Documents

- Read aloud and define key words from the passage while students annotate in the margins. Then students can illustrate a major point from each paragraph.
- Ask students to construct an outline of the author's argument, perhaps in a jigsaw with one sentence, paragraph, or page per group.
- Make a time line of the events described in the piece.
- In groups, ask one person to draw the scene described. Ask another to think of a caption and a third and fourth to write dialogue.
- Perform skits of archaeologists arriving on the scene and describing what they're finding.
- Create a diorama of the historian's article (this only for a topic on which you really want to spend time).
- Assign each group a key term to teach to the class using a visual aid, such as *packrat middens* or *water management*.
- Draw a diagram or flowchart showing the historian's argument.
- Find pictures on the Internet and tell the historian's narrative through a graphic novel (drawn or cut-and-pasted).

experience reading other, similarly sophisticated history texts, however, the majority of my ninth graders were lost when I foolishly assigned this difficult reading as homework. These students were used to doing well, too, so it took five minutes of prodding—some “confusion analysis,” if you will—to figure out just how perplexed they were. As often happens with skilled students, they will give a smile and nod if they don't understand something, not always acknowledging that they don't get it.

Now comes the fun part, in the last five to ten minutes of class. “What is so amazing about this argument and/or the way Diamond tells it?” I ask. Usually the students are excited enough about “history through rat dung” that some do think his writing is incredible.

“He's telling a story about doing research, and it's really interesting,” says Robbie.

“He's using pee to make history!” says Ryan.

“He really keeps you interested by making it a mystery,” says Maria.

“Yes, all of that,” I say. History can be fascinating if you find the mesmerizing parts and weave them into a story.

I have to come clean and admit that I've had considerably less success with other snippets of analytical documents, especially those that were not as straightforward as *Collapse*. One year, I started our study of historical narratives in a world history class with another excellent book by Jared Diamond, the bestseller *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1999). We were studying Africa, and Diamond has a fascinating passage about the role of “glottochronology,” or “calculations of how rapidly words tend to change over historical time”: in other words, the development of African languages provides clues to when different African societies incorporated various plants and animals into their agriculture (391, 390–397). Without

With the *Guns* excerpt and other tricky pieces that I've asked students to read on their own, I've found that they will do any or all of the following because I haven't given them enough structure:

- They're baffled, so they ask their friends what they wrote and copy their answers.
- They write short phrases that don't make sense.
- They feel as if they're doing something wrong because I haven't provided enough guidance. As a result, they get frustrated and turn off.
- They do not understand that the historian is making an argument.
- They do not understand the vocabulary well enough to comprehend the excerpt.

For homework the night before we looked at *Guns, Germs, and Steel* in class, my world history students were supposed to read the excerpt, underline a key idea from each paragraph, and write a several-sentence summary. Most did this, but they still didn't have a clear idea of what the author was saying. I realized the depth of their frustration only when I asked them what they thought of the article and they said the author was hard to understand and they didn't know why I'd assigned it.

At this point I regrouped, deciding to spend the entire class period on the article rather than just the first ten minutes. I used the technique I later employed with the *Collapse* excerpt: divided it into sections, asked each group to decide on and write the "thesis" of the section on the board, and then discussed it. Only then, after twenty-five minutes of sustained work on the meaning of the passage, did we start to talk about the argument Diamond was making. Only then did Tara say, "It's hard to tell what's fact and what's opinion because he's such a good writer." And Alex said, "He's making an argument, but you can't really tell because he weaves the facts together so well with his opinion." Finally, I felt that the class recognized what he was trying to do, even if not everyone appreciated it. And when I brought in the Anasazi passage from *Collapse* later in the year, I referred to "our friend Mr. Jared Diamond" with a wink and a smile to acknowledge my earlier missteps.

The moral of these stories? We need to pick passages carefully. Nothing too complicated at first and nothing too hard to get through with some help. Otherwise, quiet students will smile and nod, and more vocal students will express their confusion, but neither group will understand.

To finish with the big picture—I was striving to do the following with both Diamond excerpts:

1. Teach content standards about the Anasazi and the Bantu to supplement the textbook's descriptions.
2. Teach an analytical standard about understanding historians' views: students can "detect the different historical points of view on historical events and determine the context in which the historical statements were made (the questions asked, sources used, author's perspective)" (California State Board of Education 1998, 21).
3. Help students see what real historians do: gather evidence to make an argument that often doesn't sound like an argument. They're almost fooling you. I sometimes continue the conversation by asking, "What else fools you in your life?" Answers could be commercials or the media, leading to a discussion about what we can trust and what we can't.

Africa Analysis: Pulling Together Many Sources for Deeper Understanding

Usually I don't use analytical sources more than once or twice a unit. Students see the point with small doses, and the labor required is enough that I can't justify spending class time on these pieces every week. However, one year, when we were starting a unit on African history, I felt that the textbook was simply not conveying the fascination behind the topic. "Why do we study African history?" and "How do we know what we know about it?" were the big questions on my mind. Yet the textbook focused mainly on the geography, crops, and governmental structures of a dozen different societies—important, yes, but where was the synthesis? I wanted to convey the messages that African history has not always been studied and that there are interesting new ways to learn history when we don't have conventional sources. After we thought about the reasons behind the history—the historiography—we could put in context the multitude of facts about Mali and Ghana, Kush and Zimbabwe by considering standards such as "Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the sub-Saharan civilizations of Ghana and Mali in Medieval Africa" (California State Board of Education 1998, 28).

Remembering my unsuccessful lesson plan with *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, I picked a more accessible excerpt to begin with: Basil Davidson's defense of African history in his *Lost Cities of Africa* (1959). It describes how little we know about the culture of Meroë, an iron-making site in the Kush region that boasts one of the earliest known African civilizations. Davidson makes the case that Meroë thrived at the same time as ancient Greece—that the African society also "traded widely with many nations, developed its own traditions of art and literacy, [and] implanted its seminal influence far beyond its frontiers" (50). This brief excerpt was published in 1959, long before many scholarly works on African history appeared, such as the breathtaking *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience*, edited by Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates (1999). Davidson asks intriguing questions that inspire global connections, such as "What did these citizens know of China, whose bronzes they copied and whose silks they bought; of India, whose cottons they wore; of Arabia, whose cargoes they purchased?" (49). In addition to the previously mentioned techniques for using narrative and analytical sources, we can pose these challenges to students:

- Imagine that you are a detective: What are the "clues" to unlock the mystery of Meroë? Which sources would you use if you were a historian (sculptures and iron smelting ruins, for example)?
- Why must Meroë's "western and southern frontiers . . . be guessed at" (49)? Why didn't we know more in 1959, when Davidson was writing?
- Which of the historian's questions do you find most interesting? What answers might you give?
- What is Davidson's point of view? Can you imagine an alternate point of view?
- Which strong words and phrases does he use to make his point? What do you like about them?
- If Davidson were standing in front of you, what would you want to ask him?

Great Zimbabwe: Modern photo of medieval ruins



The *Lost Cities of Africa* excerpt is a short, fairly accessible one that repeats the same point many times: the magnificence of African culture was severely underappreciated. Other sections in Davidson's book are similarly fruitful for discussion, such as his account of some European travelers' not believing that the Great Zimbabwe was built by Africans but rather by the Queen of Sheba, because the construction was so fine. My students really laugh at that one.

To accompany this introductory work, which students read on the first day of the Africa unit, I included several pieces that enhanced but did not repeat the textbook. I found them by visiting our library's section on Africa, talking to a colleague who teaches an African history elective for seniors, and searching ProQuest Platinum Periodicals for articles on fossils and Ghana's independence. Keep in mind that I am no expert on Africa—I just looked around to find passages that would engage different kinds of learners. Each day, I went over one of the following works in class for ten to fifteen minutes to supplement what students had read the night before in their textbook.

- “Kinship corporations” in Bill Berkeley's *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe, and Power in the Heart of Africa* (2001). This excerpt is difficult—I read the entire three pages aloud with my students—but it gives a fine overview of how foreign powers capitalized on the idea of “tribes” when coming into Africa.
- Rex Dalton's “Awash with Fossils” (2006). This piece follows a variety of foreign paleoanthropologists to Ethiopia.

- A primary source about Ethiopian king Zar'a Ya'kob that describes the opulence of the Solomonid court (Brummett et al. 2000, 237).
- Two articles from modern newspapers on Ghana's fiftieth anniversary of independence in 2007, found on ProQuest Platinum Periodicals: Tiffany Harness's "An Inspiration for Independence" (2007) and Simon Robinson's "The Saga of Ghana" (2007). The first piece gives a brief overview of Ghana's history, and the second portrays Ghana's history through the eyes of one family.
- Leon P. Spencer, "Free Trade Will Not Help Africa," and Thompson Ayodele, "Free Trade Will Help Africa," in *Africa: Opposing Viewpoints* (1992).

The first time I stitched together this patchwork of analysis, I wasn't sure how much my students comprehended. They were taking notes, thinking about the arguments behind the pieces, and participating in discussion, but I didn't know if they understood the big ideas. As a result, I asked them to spend half an hour in class at the end of the week writing about the sources. I told them they could use their class notes and that the grade would be worth only a little more than a normal homework assignment. I didn't want to penalize them for any lack of understanding that I might have caused. The assignment read: "Pick three or more sources from those we've read this week that share a similar theme, idea, tone, etc. Include a topic sentence in your paragraph that tells what the similarity is, and include at least one fact or quotation from each of the sources relating to your theme."

I gave the students a variety of themes to start with, including the economy, American colonialism, the rise of civilizations, how we know Africa's history, and why Africa is important to study. It didn't matter which theme they picked, as long as they now had a framework on which to hang all the disparate facts in their textbook. And I was glad to note that, yes, they had been paying attention to at least some of what we had been discussing. I took away from this experiment the idea that students don't need to understand every word of every article—though some will, and such depth is appropriate for their level of reading comprehension—in order to understand the big themes that shape our study of history. Figure 2.4 shows some of their responses.

Biography 360°: Approaching Individuals from All Sides

*Listen my children, the tale is at hand
Of a traitor betraying our British command
The eighteenth of April, as darkness did fall
A messenger traveled—his name 'twas Paul.
Revere sent a warning—"The British doth land!"*

Figure 2.4

Two Africa Synthesis Reflections

Kelly's Africa Synthesis

Here is Kelly's synthesis, which touches on different ways to understand African history. Kelly wrote this one-shot draft in twenty-five minutes with the articles and notes in front of her; she did not have time to add a concluding sentence. If I were doing this assignment again, I would give students an entire class period to write (forty-five minutes) and might also have them revise their drafts based on peer response. I thought this was a fine stab at the assignment given the limited time; with more minutes, Kelly would have likely included more analysis. The assignment is reproduced just as she wrote it. My annotations are in italics.

Guns, Germs, and Steel by Jared Diamond, the ProQuest articles on Ghana's independence, and Emperor Zar'a Ya'kob's coronation Primary show how we know about African history. In the *Guns, Germs, and Steel* article, we learned about how to date the plants and to find out where they originated by using the technique glottochronology. This was interesting because it isn't a very "advanced" [yes—explain] way to look and learn, which is very uncommon these days. In the ProQuest article, we learned about Ghana's history through people who describe what they have heard from their ancestors. This might not be the most accurate way, but by using the method of oral traditions, you get to understand the people's way of thinking. And finally, the Zar'a Ya'kob Primary source tells us of civilization back then and how the social classes and religion were handled. Since this was a Primary source, it is probably the most accurate and tells us about Zar'a Ya'kob's strengths and weaknesses from one point of view. [relate back to other ideas]

Figure 2.4 (continued)

Maria's Africa Synthesis

Here is Maria's synthesis, which looks at the economy of Africa then and now. Maria's analysis was interesting for the brief time she had. I would like to have seen a few more specific facts to back up her ideas, but the creative connections were excellent. The assignment is reproduced just as she wrote it.

From the excerpt on Zar'a Ya'kob to Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* and the ProQuest articles on Ghana, the struggle and maintenance of the economy has been a key factor since the origins of Africa. In the 2nd ProQuest article, the plummeting economy is not only a national burden, but a personal one as well. Because of its deep poverty, Ghana is stuck in a hole of violence and hardships, and must work twice as hard as many to build themselves back up. The bad economy has led to limited education which then affects the future of Ghana's economy. In Zar'a Ya'kob's coronation, the economy at the time was flourishing with extensive shrines. Gold was abundant and the nation was grateful during this rich time. However just like any other area, the economy is an unsteady balance that can be thrown off at any moment. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, the Bantu were able to expand that territory because of their economical advantages. The iron tools and wet farming techniques were modern aspects that lead to a comfortable economy, stable with food production and trade. Yet . . . [She ran out of time]

So begins a "revised edition" of Longfellow's famous poem, written by eighth grader Simone after we finished "Paul Revere Week" in our U.S. history class. When I have time, I try to read books by current historians to find memorable stories, intriguing images, or new approaches—such

as statistical studies or social histories—that can enliven the history in our textbook. That year, I had just finished reading David Hackett Fischer’s astounding *Paul Revere’s Ride* (1994). The book looks at the famous night of April 18, 1775, in intricate detail and makes Revere’s journey pulsate with every gallop. *Paul Revere’s Ride* epitomizes the importance of examining well-known history through multiple lenses.

As I made my way through the book, I referenced illustrations and quotations that might be useful for my eighth-grade history class. After I finished, I culled the many resources to just a few—as much as I wanted to expand the unit to “Paul Revere Month,” I knew the standards and curriculum requirements were too crowded with other important people and events to give Revere additional space on the school calendar. The handouts I chose included the famous portrait of Revere by John Singleton Copley; a map of the Boston area that showed the locations of ports and commerce; a list of words that Bostonians pronounce differently than people in other regions of the country, such as “Bast’n” for “Boston” and “chattaer” for “charter” (Fischer 1994, 4–5); and the poem by Longfellow that schoolchildren have memorized for more than a century.

By choosing such a variety of sources, I aimed to follow a standard of historical thinking described by UCLA’s National Center for History in the Schools: that students should be able “to consult documents, journals, diaries, artifacts, historical sites, works of art, quantitative data, and other evidence from the past, and to do so imaginatively—taking into account the historical context in which these records were created and comparing the multiple points of view of those on the scene at the time” (NCHS 1996). I would save such an in-depth unit for at least a month into the school year, when students have established the skills and concentration they might need to pull together so many disparate sources. The unit would build on techniques students had learned in other activities featuring the role of the individual—primary source interpretation, visualizing personalities, and highlighting the importance of vocabulary—to understand Boston’s milieu in the late 1700s.

On the first day of this weeklong unit, we focused on geography to give context. I showed pictures of the Freedom Trail on a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation so students could imagine what the buildings looked like, asking if anyone had been to Boston.

“It was so hot!” Jonathan said of a recent summer visit, and we discussed what the weather might have been like in April 1775.

When I handed out copies of the map “Boston in 1775” from Fischer’s *Paul Revere’s Ride* (1994, 11), I asked students to jot down “three things you can tell about this world or society from the map itself.” They listed elements as apparent as the many churches and as subtle as the crowded streets. We decided that this was a city in which people couldn’t easily get away from each other and thus had to know each other well, a community that valued religion and tradition. At the end of class, I had extra time and so asked students to color in the water on their copies of the map. Suddenly they saw even more how isolated Boston was and how simple it would have been for the British military to cut off the city’s access to the rest of Massachusetts and beyond. The students imagined themselves there and saw the threats they might have faced from the British.

On the second day of the unit, we focused on personality by looking at the Copley painting of Revere, represented in both black and white on their handouts and in color on a PowerPoint slide.

“What do you think Mr. Revere was like to know?” I asked. “Would you like to have dinner with him?”

“He seems smart,” Maggie said, “from his hand on his chin.”

“Why is he holding a teapot?” Matt asked. We read a short biography of Revere and learned about his work as a silversmith.

“Do we still have silversmiths today?” Doug wondered.

“Yes, but we do much more by machine,” I said.

We went on to talk about why Revere was portrayed half in shadow (The mystery of his midnight ride? His courage in facing the British at night? Many answers seemed plausible) and what the smooth texture of everything in the painting might tell us about his world (neatly ordered, clean, at least in this picture).

“Then that world blew apart,” said Matthew.

“Exactly—this painting shows Revere in a world that was in the throes of revolt. How would you feel?”

We also looked at the language of the time, and students enjoyed putting on a Boston accent. They noted that it helped give a sense of the atmosphere of the time to imagine Revere speaking in this unusual vernacular.

Days three and four brought us to documents: to Longfellow’s admiring poem, which we read aloud chorally, and to an account of the Battle of Lexington by the Provincial Congress at Watertown, Massachusetts, on April 26, 1775. (For this source, see the excellent *Cooperative Learning Basics: Strategies and Lessons for U.S. History Teachers, Grades 7–12*, published by Jackdaw Publishing, www.jackdaw.com.) Students compared the tone of phrases from the poem and words from the deposition. Longfellow portrays Revere as saintly, while the government documents are much more understated. “Would you have testified before the committee, or would you have been terrified of the British reaction?” I ask, leading to a discussion about when courage is smart and when it is foolhardy.

On day five, I hoped to synthesize the lessons from the week: inferring the particulars of Boston society from a map of the time, imagining Paul Revere’s personality from the Copley painting, and comparing the tone of the Longfellow poem and the citizens’ depositions immediately after the midnight ride. I knew our coverage of Revere had been inadequate, even with spending so much time on him. We could have looked at his early life, at other accounts of his ride, at more photos of Lexington and Concord, at other historians’ views. But this week, I wanted them to construct their biography of Revere from a variety of sources, to feel the Revolutionary War fervor and the pace of colonial life. They focused on a key figure using real documents of history: court testimony, a painting, a map, and a poem.

On this last day of the unit, I gave them a choice: write a paragraph arguing whether Revere was a hero, or try to reimagine Longfellow’s poem from the British perspective. Such an assignment could easily tie in to a language arts persuasive essay requirement. Throughout the unit, you could also work or team with other teachers to make interdisciplinary connections, perhaps comparing the size of Boston then to your city today for a math class, or contrasting Boston in the 1700s with Boston today, after much of the water has been filled in by land, for

an earth science class. For a computer science, science, or math class, students could also use Google Earth to zoom in and out; investigate the role of the Atlantic Ocean in the East Coast's tidal patterns; or figure out the fastest way to get from Boston to Lexington today, both as the crow flies and on human roads.

Simone concluded her poem with a lament from the British about their defeat, a reflection on who loses when one side triumphs:

*The message succeeded, for the colonists tried
To help Revere, and several cried—
“The Redcoats are coming, the Redcoats are coming!”
All through the villages, hooves pounded, drumming
Though our marvelous soldiers defied its flight
The shouts continued all through the night.
As the sun rose in the morning bright
America was ready, ready to fight
And Britain was defeated that terrible night.
God Save the Queen!*

At the end of class we looked at a quotation from the conclusion of Fischer's book: “The next generation, the children who heard the Lexington alarm but were too young to fight, grew up to be the statesmen of America's silver age. Their experience on the day of Lexington and Concord made a difference in their lives” (1994, 289). For example, John Quincy Adams was eight years old on the night the American fighters passed his house. “What big events have made a difference in your lives? What people?” I wondered aloud. The week had focused on Paul Revere, but I hoped we could continue the lessons into the next month and beyond. (See Figure 2.5 for more approaches to draw students into secondary sources.)

Why Study Secondary Sources?

So why spend all this time with historians' sources? In addition to showing students that history is far more individual and interesting than the pabulum that can appear in their textbooks, the applications are far ranging and interdisciplinary. By understanding historians' arguments, students can develop a critical eye toward the media and toward people who are trying to sell them a bill of goods. The ability to discern fact from opinion, to see that seemingly unbiased accounts can still have an agenda behind them, serves students well in any humanities discipline. Finally, these sources show that history can be compelling, just as with their own lives and their own primary sources. By imagining how historians chronicle the past, our middle-schoolers can picture themselves becoming part of the world's story.

Figure 2.5

Additional Ways to Make Historians' Work Come Alive

Once students have read small excerpts by “real” historians about the period they are studying, you can ask them to bring these views to life with some of these activities that tap into multiple learning styles:

- Watch a five-minute video clip of a historian on C-SPAN's *Booknotes*, a TV show that ran from 1989 to 2004 and interviewed hundreds of authors. Then read an excerpt of his or her work and talk about how the historian's personality might have affected his or her scholarly interests. (Go to www.booknotes.org for more than five hundred shows available to teachers and other interested parties.)
- Create a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting different accounts of a topic, such as the Bantu migration from northern to southern Africa. Your textbook's account and a historian's excerpt would be good sources to consider. Which facts or interpretations do both sources include, and which facts or interpretations are only represented in one account or the other? Illustrate the diagram.
- Using two different-colored highlighters, mark the facts in a historian's excerpt in one color and the opinions in another. Then do the same with a paragraph on the same topic from your textbook. Compare your highlighting with a partner or another group (it will likely not be exactly the same). Which source has more opinion in it? Which source is more interesting? More reliable?
- Draw a map of the world, a continent, or a country. Write a caption for a relevant place on the map for each historian you have read, with a fact and opinion relating to his or her work.