



Teacher Tip: Using Primary Documents

While we all enjoy recalling events of our past, we sometimes forget a few of the details. We can ask friends or family members who were there to help us remember. They are called eyewitnesses. We can also look at evidence such as photos, notes or memorabilia from the event to help us fill in some facts.

Just as detectives use clues and evidence to reach conclusions, historians use primary sources to learn about people, events and everyday life in the past.

A primary source is a firsthand original account, record or evidence about a person, place, object or event. Oral histories, objects, photographs, documents such as newspapers, ledgers, census records, diaries and journals are primary sources.

Primary sources

- help students develop cognitive and investigative skills, deductive reasoning and problem solving techniques
- address both auditory and visual learning styles
- appeal to students because artifacts and documents are tangible and real
- engage students and makes learning alive
- allow students to draw their own conclusions and by working with other students offer many different perspectives

Throughout the Alden Family Gallery students will discover a variety of primary documents including photos, newspaper articles ledgers, paintings and many artifacts. Here are some suggestions for reading photographs and artifacts to get you started.

We often say that a picture is worth a thousand words. While photos, paintings and graphics can stimulate personal involvement and don't require fluency in a particular language, it is important to remember that they often lack identifying information and may reflect the bias or perspective of the photographer or artist.

***A sample photograph and picture reading worksheet have been included in this packet to practice reading a photograph with your class as either a pre or post visit activity.**

Artifacts are the products of human thought and effort. They tell us something about the people who designed, made and used them. They give us a visual record but may not always give us clues to the who, what, when, where or why of an event.

***Reasonably priced artifacts for use or practice in your classroom can be found at flea markets, antique stores and sometimes even in your own closet or kitchen.**