Using historical sources

Using historical sources as evidence is foundational to historical thinking and inquiry and to students’ understanding of the past. Using historical sources as evidence is one of five key Historical Concepts and Skills in the History F–10 curriculum. Primary sources are the building blocks of historical thinking and are fundamental to students’ understanding and interpretation of the past. They are created at the time of the event or shortly afterwards and may be visual, written, audio, audio-visual and artefacts. Primary sources provide perspectives of those who experienced and witnessed both the significant turning points and everyday events of the past and provide valuable insights into how events shaped their ethics, ideas and values. Secondary sources, such as textbooks or historical interpretations made by historians or commentators, often draw on primary sources to present arguments or interpretations of the past. When using historical sources as evidence, students draw on historical perspectives and interpretations when constructing arguments about the past. (See more at [Learning in History, Victorian Curriculum F–10](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/the-humanities/history/introduction/learning-in-history).)

Ideas and tips for teaching and learning activities using historical sources

* Teachers should select one or more historical sources for students to use. The number of historical sources used will depend on the level(s) and student proficiency in using historical sources. Students should be working towards using multiple sources and different types of sources. Using multiple sources will allow students to corroborate them.
* Teachers should select both primary sources (including historical perspectives) and secondary sources (including historical interpretations). Also, teachers should consider selecting a range of source types, including written, visual, audio, audiovisual and artefacts.
* Students may also find and select sources independently and, through modelling, develop the skills to select the most appropriate source that addresses their historical inquiry and provides evidence for their historical interpretations and arguments.
* Using historical sources as evidence requires source identification, contextualisation, attribution, analysis and corroboration with other sources.
* When using historical sources, students may use their prior historical knowledge to ask questions about the sources or they may use questions and prompts to begin their historical understanding. These questions and prompts can be provided by the teacher and may include some of the following.

Identification:

* When was the source created?
* When and where was it made?
* Was it made at the time of the event?
* Who made this source?
* Is it a primary or secondary source?
* What type of source is it (for example, letter, photo, cartoon, speech, newsreel, graph, artefact, diary)?

Contextualisation:

* Describe the content of the source.
* Identify literal features, such as people, places and events.
* Identify symbolic features that may represent an event, idea, person or group.
* What information does the source provide?
* What was happening at the time the source was created or produced?
* What was happening at the time that is not evident in the source?

Attribution:

* Who is the audience of the source?
* Why was the source created or produced?
* What is the perspective(s) of the source?
* What is the purpose of the source?

Analysis:

* What interpretations may be drawn from the source?
* What inferences can be made about the source?
* What inferences may be drawn from absences or omissions in the source?
* What conclusions can be drawn from the source?
* What questions do you have about the usefulness and/or reliability of this source?

Corroboration:

* Is the source reliable?
* Is the source useful?
* What similarities and differences between the sources exist? Why?
* Comparing the sources, what gaps in information can you identify?
* What evidence can you draw from corroborating multiple sources?
* What other sources are available to check, confirm and oppose the evidence gathered from the sources?
* Students’ interrogation of historical sources should be used as evidence to support their own historical interpretations and arguments about the past.
* Teachers may use the following templates to support students’ use of historical sources.

Foundation to Level 6

1. What or who do I see or read about in the historical sources?

Insert historical sources

2. Describe what is happening in the historical sources.

3. What do the historical sources tell us about the past (for example, about events, people, perspectives or changes)?

4. What do I know about the past?

5. What do I think about the historical sources?

Levels 7–10

1. Identify and describe the features of the source(s).

2. What is the context of the source(s)?

3. What is the purpose and perspective of the source(s)?

4. What inferences and conclusions can be drawn from the source(s)?

Insert historical source(s)

5. Is the source(s) useful and reliable?

6. What is my historical interpretation?

7. What evidence do I have?

8. What questions do I still have?