

Historical Thinking: Examining a Photo of Newsboys in Summer, 1908

Hilary Mac Austin and Kathleen Thompson

American historian James Harvey Robinson said, “In its amplest meaning History includes every trace and vestige of everything that man has done or thought since first he appeared on the earth.”¹ A fourth-grader in Chicago’s Funston Elementary School put it more simply: “It’s when *before* happened.”

They’re both right, of course. History is everything that has ever happened before the moment you ask the question. It is Caesar crossing the Rubicon and Washington crossing the Delaware, but it is also you picking up this journal, opening it, and reading what you’ve read to this point. And now to this point ... and now to this point...

That isn’t how most people think of history, of course. Most young students have a vague sense that history is, as one second-grader said, “Stuff from back in other days.” Older students, and most adults, may think of history as a timeline, a series of dates and names to be memorized. Or perhaps we think that history is a story, with a beginning and a long, long middle but not, so far, an end.

But the great historical thinker, R. G. Collingwood, said, “Nothing capable of being memorized is history.” And to think of history as a story leads to expecting it to unfold like a novel or a play, with a plot that makes sense and characters who can be described and known. Stories are much tidier than history, and making history as tidy as a story is a good way to lose its truth.

In fact, history is a process. Just as science is the quest to discover and understand the truth about the world we live in, so history is the quest to discover and understand the truth about our world in the millennia that led up to this moment.

Developing Questions

The English word “history” comes from the ancient Greek word “*historia*,” which means “inquiry, examination, or investigation.” Historians are people who investigate, who dig for clues to our shared past in attics and archives and official records, even in thrift shops. They also interpret and seek to understand what they dig up. That whole process, that ongoing search, is history. It produces articles and books and additions to what has been called the master narrative of the human past, but those things

are the products of the historical investigation. History is also the investigation itself.

We asked children who ranged in age from 6 to 12, first grade to sixth, how we know what happened in history. “We read it in our social studies book.” “Some people in the family were there and they told us.” “We read it in a book.” “There are books about it.”

There was no indication in the answers that the students had any idea that historians today might look for and interpret evidence of the past. They were pretty convinced that somebody wrote history down when it happened, and we read it now. That would mean, if it were true, that history was unchangeable, that we could never learn anything new about what happened in our past, and that’s not the case at all, of course. We are learning new things about the old days all the time, especially since we have become more aware of the participation and contributions of women, African Americans, Native Americans, and other ethnic groups. History is alive.

Thanks to Cosmos and other wonderful television programs about science, most of us are aware that science has a set of principles and guidelines called the “scientific method.” Similarly, the investigation of history is carried out in accordance with rules and using skills that, together, we call “historical thinking.” We can teach our students this kind of thinking from an early age. And the Common Core State Standards say that we should do just that.

The basis of all historical thinking is simple. As historian Sam Wineburg put it in his foreword to our book, *Examining the Evidence*, “We begin by paying attention. Next, we ask questions.”² This deeper understanding of what the discipline of history is all about is reflected in the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards, or the “C3 Framework” for short.³ Dimension 1 of the “Inquiry Arc” features the development of questions and the planning of inquiries. “Compelling questions focus on enduring issues and concerns.” (p. 23) “With the entire scope of human existence as its backdrop,” social studies can “tie all of this content together,” giving it meaning and relevance, through inquiry. (p. 17)

Dimensions of the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

This is the C3 Framework in action. As students work with primary sources, they are participating in the act of inquiry. They are learning critical thinking skills that they will use all their lives, in college, career, and civil life.

Robin J. Fogarty has distilled from the Common Core a list of “21 Explicit Thinking Skills that thread across all content areas for student proficiency.”⁴ Many of those thinking skills are at the heart of good social studies instruction, and students develop the skills as they read primary source documents. The seven strategies that we outline below will help advance some of those thinking skills, including: analyzing, evaluating, generating, associating, hypothesizing, clarifying, interpreting, determining, understanding, inferring, explaining, developing, deciding, reasoning, connecting, and generalizing.

As early as kindergarten, students can begin to examine and gain information from primary sources, applying the “disciplinary concepts and tools” of the historian, as suggested by Dimension 2 of the Inquiry Arc.⁵ With younger students, we suggest working with images and artifacts because we believe that using our strategies with this material will help students develop essential visual literacy skills and hone key thinking skills that they can later apply when reading texts. They will also learn what the historical process is by practicing it as they examine a photograph of a tenement, a hand-written equipment list, or an old manual eggbeater.

Seven Strategies for Teaching with Primary Sources

First, let's look at the seven strategies that we suggest for approaching primary sources. Then we'll go on to an example of how teacher Grace Gibbs used some of these strategies in her classroom at Courtenay Language Arts School in Chicago.

Strategy 1: Decide What You're Looking At

To begin with, you should consider whether you are you looking at a primary source at all. Children's and young adult books, as well as textbooks, are filled with illustrations. Some of those illustrations may be very carefully created to provide as authentic a picture as possible of a particular time period, situation, or person. That does not make them primary sources, and children should gradually learn to recognize this. This doesn't need to happen immediately, especially since secondary sources can be useful and appealing ways to introduce students to history and the world around them. But, over time, students should develop an awareness of the nature of a primary source.

At the upper elementary level, this same issue becomes more complex. When you first look at a primary source, you will need to determine, if possible, exactly what it is—what kind of image or text it is, where it came from, and when. Sometimes

identifying the material will be as simple as reading a description, or a caption, in a textbook. Sometimes you may need to do research just to know what you're looking at.

Strategy 2: Determine the Purpose and Audience

The purpose of a source is usually integrally connected with its intended audience, so determining the purpose often means beginning with the audience. A studio portrait, for example, is usually intended for friends and relatives. The people in the portrait you're looking at probably wore their best clothes. They posed, or were posed, to look happy or proud or beautiful.

In a documentary photo, on the other hand, the photographer is often trying to get the public to pay attention to something unpleasant, wrong, or painful. The purpose of the photograph does not involve showing its subject in the best possible light. Clearly, we can get different information from a portrait than we can from a documentary photo. The same applies to text; for example, a diary entry gives us different information than a public interview.

Strategy 3: Look for Bias

Looking for bias and understanding how it affects what the text or image communicates is a crucial strategy in viewing a primary source. And bias comes into play on many levels. The personal biases of the author, photographer, or artist are usually reflected in their work. The broader biases of an era or a culture are apparent in almost everything created in and for that era or culture, making it necessary to know some history in order to investigate history.

This strategy helps students develop critical thinking skills that will translate to other areas of their academic and personal lives, and in their civic lives, as consumers of news and information.

Strategy 4: Examine Closely the Source Itself

This is, in many ways, the most interesting part of examining primary and secondary sources. It means really looking at all the details of the material carefully and creatively. If dealing with a primary source is detective work, this is examining the crime scene.

For students in the early grades, this strategy is helpful in developing students' visual literacy, whether it is used with a primary or secondary source. When you show students a photograph, for example, and ask them questions that will help them see what's in it, you are helping them think of visuals as sources of information. They learn to find and interpret clues about the reality being portrayed. For older students, close examination is the aspect of primary source investigation that gives them the strongest feeling of real participation in the discovery and creation of history.

Strategy 5: Find More Information

If you're looking at a primary source in a textbook, there may be information in the text that will help you interpret the material. But you and your students may want to know more. A primary

source is an extraordinary launching pad for a research project.

After additional research, your second, more informed look at the primary source may reveal details that you and your students didn't notice the first time. It will certainly lead you to different conclusions about some of the things you saw the first time.

Strategy 6: Consider Your Own Role in the Interaction.

You and your students bring a whole life's worth of experience, cultural conditioning, opinions, and biases to the act of viewing a primary source. If you really want to understand what you're looking at, you need to examine how you're coloring it. Our expectations are very different from those of people living a century ago, for example. Through discussion, students can compare their own viewpoints with those of people of an earlier time and gain great insight into their own assumptions and prejudices.

Strategy 7: Compare a Variety of Sources

By looking at a variety of primary sources, students learn to apply the same basic principles of critical thinking in different ways with different kinds of sources. They learn valuable lessons about point of view and bias. And they get experience in synthesizing and integrating information, a skill that will be of great value when the time comes for them to do research papers or to analyze the platforms of different political parties.

These strategies are not intended as a series of sequential steps that follow one after another. Instead, they provide a framework to a process that is usually a flow rather than a ladder. Analyzing primary sources requires a back and forth between the strategies. "Determining audience and purpose" might be possible only after finding more information. "Examining closely" might occur each time you look at a source document, image, or artifact.

The Strategies in Practice

Earlier this year, with the help of the Chicago New Teachers Center, we formed a focus group of teachers who wanted to work with primary sources in their classrooms. One of these was Grace Gibbs, who teaches first-grade students at Mary E. Courtenay Language Arts Center in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago. She has a multi-racial, multi-cultural group of students, mostly Latino and African American.

We asked the focus group to use a photograph of newsboys, taken by Lewis Hine in 1908 (Handout A, following p. 32). We provided the teachers with some very basic information about newsboys and about Lewis Hine, the photographer who took this picture.

Thousands of these children—mostly boys but some girls—sold newspapers on big city street. They weren't employees of the newspapers. They bought the papers and were not allowed to return the ones that they didn't sell, so they usually stood on the street as long as it took to sell out, which could be more than 12 hours. Many of the "newsies" were homeless and slept on the streets. Others were from families that they helped to support.⁶

Our focus group teachers shaped their lessons differently, depending on the grade level that they were teaching. High school teacher Lindsay Hayden, for example, gave her students no information, not even a caption. She began with Strategy 4. By asking questions and encouraging discussion, Lindsay helped her students determine what was going on in the picture entirely from the evidence in the photograph, zooming in to look closely at details like the headline of the newspaper, which places the newsboys in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Lindsay then went on to Strategy 5, providing historical context, and her students re-examined the photograph in light of that context. (The scaffolding she followed is available at a page "Solving the Mystery of a Photograph" (onehistory.org/howtolooka.htm) on our website, OneHistory.org.⁷

Grace Gibbs, on the other hand, began with Strategy 5, providing her first-graders with background information. She told them what newsboys were and the job they did. She went then to Strategy 2, explaining what kind of photograph they were looking at. Then she used Strategy 4, asking the students to examine the photograph closely and tell her about the picture. The results are distilled below.

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| Grace Gibbs: | Who do you see in the picture? |
| Students: | Boys. They are big boys and little boys. |
| Grace Gibbs: | Where are they? |
| Students: | In a city. |
| Grace Gibbs: | Why do you think that? |
| Students: | Because there are tall buildings. |
| Grace Gibbs: | Is it day or night? |
| Students: | It's day. |
| Grace Gibbs: | Why do you think that? |
| Students: | The sun is shining. |
| Grace Gibbs: | What time of year is it? |
| One student: | Winter. |
| Grace Gibbs: | That's really interesting.
Does anyone else have a different idea? |
| Others: | Summer. |
| Grace Gibbs: | Why do you think that? |
| Students: | They aren't wearing jackets. |
| Grace Gibbs: | Was this picture taken now or in the past? |
| Students: | The past. |
| Grace Gibbs: | Why do you think that? |
| Students: | There isn't any color. The boys are wearing
short pants like we don't wear anymore.
Everybody is wearing a hat. We don't wear
hats like that. |

Even such young students were able to examine a fairly com-



Newsboys in Cincinnati, Ohio, August 1908

Teacher's Key: The Library of Congress caption for this image reads, "Waiting For The Signal. Newsboys, starting out with base-ball extra. 5 P.M., Times Star Office. Location: Cincinnati, Ohio." The photographer was Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1940). Image and notes can be found at www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004000075/PP.

plex primary source and use critical thinking skills to glean information from it. They were able to get a lot of information from the picture and provide evidence for their conclusions, noticing some things that their teacher hadn't noticed and, in fact, at least one thing that we had never noticed, even though we've looked at the photograph hundreds of times. The students pointed out that the people in the picture were not all looking at the camera.

What they did not notice was also interesting. They didn't make any mention of the fact that some of the boys were wearing shoes and some were barefoot. And they didn't mention that some of the boys were white and some African American. The older students noticed both of these facts and speculated about them. This speculation led to discussions of class, race, geography, and history. The questions that teachers pose can promote closer analysis on the part of even elementary age students; with repeated practice, close analysis will become second nature to students.

Relating the Lesson to Standards

So, how does this exercise with the image of the newsboys relate to the Common Core State Standards? Both sets of students—those in first grade and those in high school—used CCSS Anchor standards.⁸ They read [viewed the image] closely and made logical inferences from it and they cited specific evidence to support their conclusions (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1). They evaluated content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9).

The first grade students also used Reading: Informational Text standards. These same standards—growing in complexity—would apply to any of the elementary grades. Students asked and answered questions about key details in a text [image] (CCSS.ELA-RI.1.1). With the help of their teacher, they identified the main topic of the text [image] and retold key details about it (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.2). They used a caption that the teacher read to them (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.5). Finally, they began the process of distinguishing between information provided by pictures and information provided by the words in a text (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.6).

A number of other standards could also be applied to the examination of this image for students at higher grades, including interpreting information presented visually (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.7); explaining how an author [photographer] uses

evidence to support particular points (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.8); determining an author's [photographer's] point of view or purpose (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.6); and comparing and contrasting two texts [or a text and an image] on the same topic (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.9). Clearly, the primary source exercise also addressed dimension 2 of the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework, whereby students applied disciplinary concepts and tools, as they sought to make evidence-based claims.¹⁰

Examining this image, this primary source evidence of the past, demanded key critical thinking skills of the Common Core and C3, but, just as important, it gave both the older and the younger students a sense of how historians work with the clues of history. Working with primary sources is the best kind of training in critical thinking. Once students have learned to interpret and evaluate primary sources, they can use the same skills when listening to a news show, reading a book or magazine, or, perhaps most important, looking at the Internet. While they're learning about history and the world around them, they will also learn to be thinking, questioning citizens. 🌐

Notes

1. This oft-quoted passage by James Harvey is from his 1912 book *The New History*. The quote by R.G. Collingwood, which appears later on this page, is from his 1939 autobiography.
2. Hilary Mac Austin and Kathleen Thompson, *Examining the Evidence: Seven Strategies for Teaching with Primary Sources* (North Mankato, MN: Capstone Classroom, 2015), with a forward by Sam Wineburg.
3. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013). Free PDF of the C3 Framework at www.socialstudies.org/c3, or Purchase the paperback book (with introductory essays) at www.socialstudies.org/store.
4. C3 Framework, 17.
5. Robin J. Fogarty, "7 Critical Thinking Skills of Common Core" (Chicago: Robin Fogarty, 2012).
6. "Newsies," The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/resources/newsies.
7. OneHistory.org is a resource we created "for students, teachers, and the general public. Our aim is to have high-quality, accessible content for all levels of learners and for a variety of interests."
8. "English Language Arts Standards," Common Core State Standards Initiative, www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy.
9. This standard refers to text features generally. Captions aren't specifically called out until the Grade 2 iteration of this standard.
10. C3 Framework, 17–18.

HILARY MAC AUSTIN and KATHLEEN THOMPSON are authors of *Examining the Evidence: Seven Strategies for Teaching with Primary Sources*. Reach them at Mac@onehistory.org and Kathleen@onehistory.org.

Analyzing a Primary Source Document: A Photo



Lewis Hine/Library of Congress

Suggestions for Sources to Study and Skill Development, K-6

Grade	Type of Source	Skill Development
K-1	<p><i>Artifacts:</i> old toys, household utensils, clothes, as well as natural objects such as birds' nests</p> <p><i>Photographs:</i> images of children, including those in other societies, and of nature.</p>	Observation, inference, and visual literacy. It is not important that the primary sources be historical, although that can be fun and interesting.
2-3	<p><i>Artifacts:</i> old tools and sports equipment and more sophisticated natural objects, such as fossils</p> <p><i>Photographs:</i> older images, still of children, adding more historical images</p> <p><i>Texts:</i> simple "personal voice" texts, such as diary entries.</p>	Observation and reading skills. Text material should not depend on advanced reading skills. In order to introduce some interesting texts, you may need to read aloud , or help students read.
4-6	<p><i>Artifacts:</i> less familiar objects, such as navigating instruments and other specialized tools</p> <p><i>Photographs:</i> historical images connected to specific events or eras being studied</p> <p><i>Texts:</i> Oral histories and interviews, some official and scientific records, such as census reports and weather data.</p>	Reading, Examining, and Comparing. Multiple historical sources, such as a photograph, an oral history on the same topic, and possibly an artifact or replica can be compared and used to verify each other. All of the Teaching Strategies, 1-7, can be used with this age group.