

Social Studies Strategies

Bias, Frame of Reference, Point of View and Validity/Reliability of Sources

Thinking Like a Historian

The job of a historian is to analyze how bias, point of view, and frame of reference influence the creation of primary sources about historical events and individuals. Historians view multiple sources before reaching conclusions about an event or individual and the historical importance of that action/individual. As new sources become available, interpretations of events and individuals change over time. Textbooks and other secondary sources are the work of historians and others who have searched hundreds of sources in order to draw inferences and conclusions about events and individuals in history. The historian assesses the validity of sources based on analyzing the source for the presence of bias and taking into account the frame of reference and point of view of the person creating the primary source. The historian also looks for corroboration from other primary and secondary sources.

Validity/Reliability

The evaluation of the Validity [worth] and Reliability of a source or artifact measures how reliable a source of information is and how affected by bias the reporting of information [text or visual] may be. Historians determine the reliability and validity of a source based analyzing three major conditions:

Time and Place: When a source is created, the closer in time and place it is to the actual event the more accurate the information might be. For instance, an eye-witness to a particular event might create a more reliable historical artifact/writing if they kept a diary at the time of the event rather than wait until they were 82 years old and write their memory of the event. Both would be primary sources because the person participated in the event but one may be more reliable than the other.

Presence of bias: Every source is biased by the creator. The historian uses his/her skill to determine what the author's bias is and to cross-check the source with others to filter as much bias as possible.

Corroboration from multiple sources: The historian seeks out many sources [both primary and secondary] to confirm facts about events.

Point of view

Ideas held by an individual or a group that express feelings or cause them to take a specific *side* regarding an issue, event or person(s). Personal feelings influence the way individuals and groups choose sides and view the facts. *Point of view* often affects how a person "sees" or interprets the facts in a particular event or situation. One's point of view affects how one writes about, speaks about or interprets a particular moment in history. This *bias* can affect how the event is recorded for later generations to view and interpret.

Frame of Reference

The context, viewpoint, or set of criteria that influences people or a group's perception and thinking is called *frame of reference*. Evaluating *Point of View* and *Frame of Reference* are often interrelated skills. *Frame of Reference* often answers the question *WHY?* What elements of thinking, experience, historical or cultural context influenced or caused the person to write/create this particular artifact at this particular time? *Point of view* and *Frame of Reference* also govern individual and group actions and decision-making. The historical context is perhaps one of the most critical aspects/conditions governing interpretation of historical records and events. It is sometimes easy to look back at events and the individuals participating in those events and be critical of their actions. A good historian examines how the context of the times influenced decisions made at that time.

Bias

Bias is a measure of the degree to which a person or group expresses their own ideas and points of view in a primary source artifact. Types of bias might include:

- Bias by **omission** – Is something left out or "not said"?
- Bias by **selection of sources** – Are only sources that agree with the author cited?
- Bias by **placement within a source** – Are negative aspects left until last?
- Bias by **labeling groups or individuals** – Are highly positive or negative/derogatory labels used to refer to people or groups?
- Bias by **spin** – Is information presented that will deliberately draw readers/listeners to draw false conclusions?

Social Studies Strategies

Bias, Frame of Reference, Point of View and Validity/Reliability of Sources

Primary and Secondary Source Analysis Strategies

Historical Inquiry Process:

1. Identify a historical question, issue or problem.
2. Gather multiple sources of information [primary and secondary].
3. Draw and present [orally or in writing] at least one conclusion.

Document Analysis strategy **APPARTS:**

Author - Who created the source? What is their point of view?

Place and Time - Where and when was the source produced? What effect might this have on the source?

Prior Knowledge - What do you already know that would help you understanding this source better?

Audience - For whom was the source created? Does this affect the reliability of the source?

Reason - Why was this source produced?

The Main Idea - What is the most important point/message that the source tries to give?

Significance - Why is this source important? How does this source help answer the 'so what' question?

Visual Analysis Strategy **OPTICS: What...**

Objects are in the picture/painting/cartoon...?

People are in the picture/painting/visual?

Title is there; What **Time** period does it represent?

Inferences can you draw based on this source?

Conclusions can you draw based on this source?

Symbols are present? **Summarize** the main idea?

The **Four C Strategy** helps a historian analyze *frame of reference*. Those Cs are:

Context – What was the context of the times, the situation, or the event?

Choices – What choices did the participants have at that time?

Course – What decision did the participants make? [What course did they take?]

Consequences – What were the consequences [results] of the decision?

The following questions help a historian evaluate the validity of a primary source:

1. Who created the source and why? Was it created through a spur-of-the-moment act, a routine transaction, or a thoughtful, deliberate process?
2. Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event? Or, did the recorder report what others saw and heard?
3. Was the recorder a neutral party, or did the creator have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?
4. Did the recorder produce the source for personal use, for one or more individuals, or for a large audience? Was the source meant to be public or private?
5. Did the recorder wish to inform or persuade others? (Check the words in the source. The words may tell you whether the recorder was trying to be objective or persuasive.) Did the recorder have reasons to be honest or dishonest?
6. Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How large a lapse of time?