

REFLECTIVE WRITING

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Primary source materials—such as letters, diaries, memoirs, and scrapbooks—can be both personal and historical. The documentation we leave behind can express our feelings and experiences, along with the larger narrative of history. This lesson asks students to explore primary source documentation as an inspiration for their own reflective writing.

STANDARDS

- United States History National Standards: Era 5, Civil War and Reconstruction (1850 – 1877); Standards 1, 2, and 3
- Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts, grade 8: Reading Informational text; Writing 3; Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6

Note to teachers: If you are studying the Civil War, highlight the impact of the war on individuals and families. Pair this activity with a visit to one of the sites in the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area to reinforce this connection. If you are not studying the Civil War, take this opportunity to expose students to voices from the past. What comes through in these primary sources that might get lost in textbooks?

PROCEDURE

1. Define and discuss the difference between a primary and a secondary source. Primary source materials are original documents that have not been filtered by interpretation (i.e.

first hand accounts like diaries, letters, photographs, art, objects). Encourage students to consider why primary source materials are so important for understanding history and the human experience. What factors should we keep in mind when exploring this documentation (point of view, intended audience, historical context)?

2. Using the material highlighted in the **Content Resources**, share a primary source with the whole class. Lead a discussion of the source using some of the questions from the Reading a Primary Source worksheet. You can also provide a bit of information about the piece (who wrote it, at what time period, etc.) and any additional or supplemental information that might help provide context.
3. Ask students to choose a first hand account to examine from the **Content Resources**. If you have access to other primary sources, feel free to consider that as well. After reviewing these accounts, students complete the Reading a Primary Source worksheet.
4. Based on their answers, ask students to create a written response to the author of the primary source. For example, they might introduce themselves to the author, ask questions, or share information “from the future” with the author. Consider modifying for differentiation in order to meet needs of your students.
5. Once students are finished, group them together by the piece of writing they chose. Have students trade response letters and then read them aloud. Ask the students to reflect upon how the responses are similar or different, and in what ways. Share with the whole class. Consider additional projects inspired by the student-generated material (movies, recordings).

EXTENSIONS

If you have visited a Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area site, ask students to write a letter or send a message to someone who was featured at the site. Students should build on information they learned during their visit to ask questions or simply reflect their experience in a letter form. Encourage them to think “outside the box” and experiment with creating their response as a “travel log” or graphic visualization of the field trip experience.

CONTENT RESOURCES

Audio clips:

- [Frederick diarist Jacob Engelbrecht describes Confederate General Jubal Early’s troops descending into the city in July 1864 \(0:58\)](#)
- [William Shelton Groff of the Potomac Home Brigade describes fighting other Marylanders at the Battle of Gettysburg \(0:41\)](#)
- [James Ripley Smith, a local merchant, on the Confederate raid of Hancock, Maryland, in July 1864 \(0:49\)](#)
- [Sister Matilda Coskery of the Daughters of Mercy on nursing soldiers after the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863 \(2:21\)](#)

Written records:

- [A letter on soldiers’ rations written by Robert Cruikshank of the 123rd Regiment New York Infantry, Co. H during the Maryland Campaign in September 1862](#)

- Isabella Morrison Fogg, a Maine Camp and Hospital Association Volunteer who traveled to be closer to her son, wrote about hospital conditions in November 1862
- Launcelot Minor Blackford of the 1st Corps, Army of Northern Virginia, discusses civilian sympathies for the Confederacy in this 1863 letter
- Josiah Marshall Favil of the 57th NY Infantry wrote a 1909 memoir
- An 1860 diary entry by Benjamin Tucker Tanner, minister at Quinn's Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Frederick during the Civil War
- Wartime recollections of Henry Ossawa Tanner, son of Benjamin Tucker Tanner who went onto become an internationally acclaimed painter (page 12)

READING A PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

Think about your first person account and consider the following questions. If you are working in a group, be sure to let everyone have a turn adding to the discussion. One student should serve as note-taker and record everyone's contribution.

1. What are some of the main points the author is making (both literally and implied)?
2. Who might be the intended audience for this writing? Does it make a difference in terms of the kind of detail, description or content shared? How and why?
3. Consider the language used (descriptive words, spelling, phrases). Is this language similar or different from how we speak today? Could this language be reflective of the author's point of view and perspective (regional, personal)? How?

4. What are some of the most memorable or powerful phrases the author makes, in your opinion? Why?
5. What do you think the author was feeling that the moment s/he wrote this piece? What might be his or her motivation for writing? What do you see in the text that makes you say that?
6. What questions do you have for the author? What would you ask them if you could? What would you tell them?

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