

SESSION 2.1: GUIDE: PRIMARY SOURCES

A primary source provides direct or firsthand evidence about an event, object, person, or work of art. Primary sources include historical and legal documents, eyewitness accounts, results of experiments, statistical data, audio and video recordings, speeches, and art objects. Primary sources also include first-hand accounts that were documented later, such as autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories. However, the most useful primary sources are usually considered to be those that were created closest to the time period you're researching. There are many types of primary sources.

Secondary sources are any source about an event or period in history that was produced after the event has passed; usually a textbook.

Close Reads

Students will read original documents in order to understand the "Spirit of the Pioneers" frieze. The documents are memoirs (or reminiscences). A close read may be above reading level which requires multiple close readings to gain the information. This can be done in large or small groups or individually as seen fit by the teacher.

A reminiscence is written later in life, long after the events being described. Reminiscences are the most suspect form of "eyewitness testimony" to history because of the many years that have passed. Historians generally check their accounts against diaries and journals, which were usually written only hours or days after the events they chronicle, as well as other forms of primary documentary evidence.

A diarist is a person that generally writes on nearly a daily basis. A journal may be written when special events or feelings occur."

Source: The Oregon-California Trails Association, 1-1-15

http://www.octa-trails.org/OLD/learn/people_places/articles_ot_diaries.php#diarysample

continued next page..

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James Shimer's Trip to California in '49 Shimer & Conwell (Session 2.2)

The first document you will read is "James Shimer's Trip to California in '49," 1915. Good readers need to understand what they are reading. Notice the background information at the top. A reminiscent account means it was written later so it might not be as accurate as a diary written on the day. Scan the page and notice that there is vocabulary help. Review all words and definitions.

- Highlight the following headings before reading.
- Vocabulary words in the document (These words usually point us to important information.)
- Historical Background (We have to know the historical background in order for us to understand the text we are reading.)
- Source
- Titles (Quite often this gives us an idea of the topic.)

Read aloud Shimmer and Conwell, "James Shimer's Trip to California in '49," 1915. Highlight what you think is important in understanding what it was like to travel on a wagon train going across the state of Nebraska.

Read the text a 2nd time and underline or circle one thing you found interesting to share. Next, move into groups of 4. (30 seconds). Each person will share one thing they found interesting in the first reading of Shimer's trip. Teacher shares first, i.e., "I would be so frightened to try to get a wagon out of quicksand."

Allender Adventure and Experiences of a '49er (Session 2.3)

Now find the two-page document (2.3), which is part of the reminiscence that Jacob Allender wrote.

Read and discuss:

- Where did this group begin their journey?
- Do you get a sense of the general feeling of the travelers?
- How do these reminiscences compare to Document 2.2? The two authors are reminiscing about Nebraska as they travel the trail to the gold fields in California. Remember that Mr. Allender and Mr. Shimer are friends traveling together. One remembers getting stuck in a horrid torrential rain and having to dig out a wagon from quicksand. Mr. Allender doesn't even mention the event. Do you think that if they were keeping a diary they would have both written about the rain and quicksand?
- Discuss with your team what the difference is between a memoir (reminiscent document) and a diary or journal? In which would the torrents of rain very likely have been mentioned?