
**OBJECTIVES
FOR THIS LESSON:**

1. To learn to evaluate the reliability, the bias, and the usefulness of primary source documents.
 2. To use your history background knowledge to understand and make inferences about primary source documents.
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Evaluating Evidence & Primary Source Documents

The primary source documents for this lesson are displayed on the next three pages. All of the exercises for this lesson are based on these primary sources and the background information provided here.

**THE PRIMARY SOURCES
AND THE EXERCISES**

The primary sources for this lesson have to do with society and religion in colonial America. These primary source documents are all displayed on pages 6-8. One of documents is about Benjamin Franklin and the Constitutional Convention of 1787. This, of course, was just *after* the colonial era ended. But this passage of Franklin's expresses the views of one of colonial America's most famous leaders.

These sources could be used to write a complete essay about social attitudes and religious ideas in colonial America. However, in this lesson, we do not give you a document-based question (DBQ) asking you to focus on all nine of the sources. You will deal with DBQs and other essay questions in later lessons. The aim of this lesson is to help you think more carefully about primary sources themselves. Learning to work with such sources is a skill. The exercises for this lesson will help you learn to work with primary sources and better understand what you can and cannot learn from them.

**KEY CONCEPTS
AND LEARNING STRATEGIES**

Basically, the exercises will focus your attention on the following broad concepts and strategies in analyzing primary sources:

1. You need to decide how **reliable** or trustworthy a primary source is. That is, how accurate it is or how dependable the information or evidence in it is.
2. You need to decide how **biased** or one-sided a source is — and whether or not it is still useful in spite of, or because of, its bias.
3. You need to use all your **background history knowledge** in interpreting, or making sense of, any primary source.
4. You need to make reasonable **inferences**, or logical conclusions, about sources.
5. You need to deal with and use **sources that often conflict** with one another.

The Documents

Society and Religion in Colonial America

Document 1

New England Puritan minister John Eliot is pictured here preaching to some Indians in the 1640s. This is an engraving by J.C. Buttre after a drawing by J.A. Oertel done in 1856.

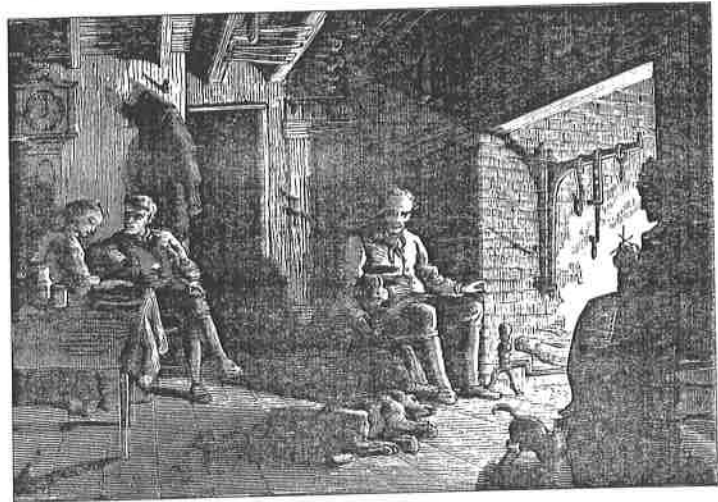
Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Document 2

An 18th century engraving of a farm family in colonial America after the day's work is done.

Stock Montage, Inc.



Document 3

Photograph of a New England tombstone from colonial times. Death is shown struggling with an angel who is preventing him from putting out a flame that stands for the life of the spirit.













Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Document 4

A page from *The New England Primer*, a book used in Puritan New England in the 1600s to teach children to read.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

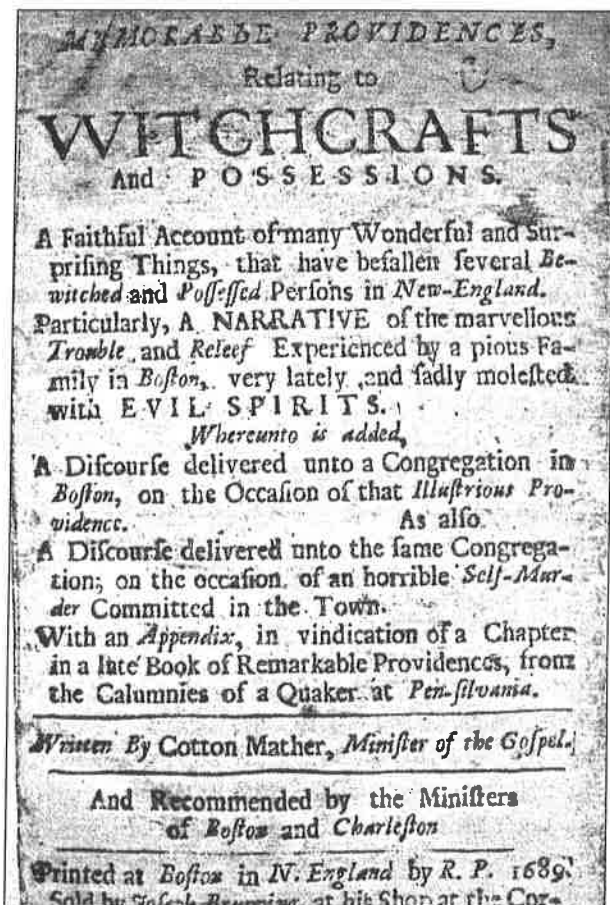
A		In <i>Adam's Fall</i> We finned all.		As runs the <i>Glass</i> , Man's Life doth pass.
B		Thy Life to mend, This <i>Book</i> attend.		My <i>Book</i> and <i>Heart</i> Shall never part.
C		The <i>Cat</i> doth play, And after slay.		<i>Job</i> feels the <i>Rod</i> , Yet blesses <i>God</i> .
D		A <i>Dog</i> will bite A <i>Thief</i> at <i>Night</i> .		Proud <i>Korah's Troop</i> , Was swallowed up.
E		An <i>Eagle's</i> Flight Is out of <i>Sight</i> .		The <i>Lion</i> hold The <i>Lamb</i> doth hold.
F		The idle <i>Fool</i> - Is whipt at <i>School</i> .		The <i>Moon</i> gives <i>Light</i> In <i>Time</i> of <i>Night</i> .

The Documents

Document 5

Cover for the book *Memorable Providences*, a 1689 account of a case of witchcraft in New England. The account was written by Cotton Mather, one of the most respected ministers in New England.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Document 6

Apology Years Later by Jurors in the 1692 Salem Witch Trials

"We whose names are under written, being in the year 1692, called to serve as jurors in court at Salem on trial of many who were by some suspected guilty of doing acts of witchcraft upon the bodies of sundry persons.

"We confess that we ourselves were not capable to understand, nor to withstand the mysterious delusions of the powers of darkness, and prince of the air; but were, for want of knowledge in ourselves, and better information from others, prevailed with to take up with such evidence against the accused, as ... we justly fear was insufficient for the touching the lives of any: Deut. xvii. 6., whereby we fear we have been instrumental with others, though ignorantly and unwittingly, to bring upon ourselves and this people of the Lord, the guilt of innocent blood; which sin the Lord saith in scripture he would not pardon: 2 Kings xxiv, 4: that is, we suppose in regard of his temporal judgment. We do therefore, hereby signify to all ... our deep sense of sorrow for our errors in acting on such evidence to the condemning of any person.

"And do hereby declare that we justly fear that we were sadly deluded and mistaken, for which we are much disquieted and distressed in our minds; and do therefore humbly beg forgiveness, first of God for Christ's sake for this our error; and pray that God would not impute the guilt of it to ourselves nor others; and we also pray that we may be considered ... as being then under the power of a strong and general delusion, utterly unacquainted with, and not experienced in matters of that nature. ..."

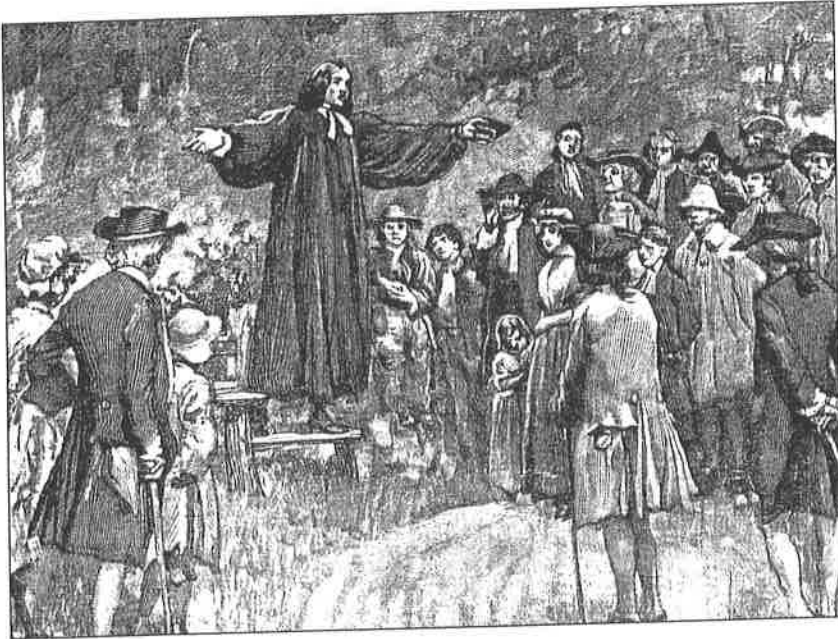


Document 7

An 18th century drawing of a Virginia planter and his wife and child, who are seen visiting the slave quarters on their plantation in the early 1700s.

Stock Montage, Inc.

The Documents



Document 8

An 18th century drawing of Rev. George Whitefield preaching in a field. Whitefield was one of the most famous traveling preachers during the great upsurge of religious feeling in the colonies in the 1730s and '40s. This time of religious revival is known as the Great Awakening.

Stock Montage, Inc.

Document 9

"I have vastly a greater sense of my universal, exceeding dependence on God's grace and strength and mere good pleasure, of late, than I used formerly to have, and have experienced more of an abhorrence of my own righteousness. The thought of any comfort or joy, arising in me, on any consideration reflection on my amiableness, or any of my performances or experiences, or any goodness of heart or life is nauseous and detestable to me. And yet I am greatly afflicted with a proud and self-righteous spirit, much more sensibly than I used to be formerly. ...

"Though it seems to me that in some respects I was a far better Christian for two or three years after my first conversion than I am now, and lived in a more constant delight and pleasure, yet of late years I have had a more full and constant sense of the absolute sovereignty of God and a delight in that sovereignty, and have had more of a sense of the glory of Christ as a mediator as revealed in the gospel."

Jonathan Edwards, a famous New England Puritan preacher who played a key role in the Great Awakening, in the 1730s. This passage is from his "Personal Narrative," written around 1740 when Edwards was 37 years old.

Document 10

"Mr. President, I confess that there are several parts of this Constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve of them. For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions, even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that, the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others. Most men, indeed, as well as most sects in religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them, it is so far error. ...

"On the whole, sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention, who may still have objections to it, would with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility, and, to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument."

Benjamin Franklin, at age 81, making a final statement to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 urging the other delegates to support the new U.S. Constitution.

Exercise 1

Primary Sources: How Trustworthy or Reliable?

Primary sources are records from the past. But this does NOT mean they can always tell you exactly how “it really was” in the past. You need to evaluate such sources carefully to be able to learn things from them. For example, one important question you need to ask of every primary source is this:

How trustworthy or reliable is this source? In other words, can you depend on it to give you information that you can use to answer the specific DBQ or essay question you have been given? Keep in mind that a reliable source need not be accurate or truthful. An inaccurate report, for example, may still be reliable as evidence of what people believed at the time.

This exercise will help you think about source reliability. Four of the lesson's documents are listed here. Next to each are three statements about the document's trustworthiness or reliability. For each document, choose the one statement you agree with most. Mark your choice in the space provided. Discuss your choices in class.

- Doc. 1**
- A. The document is reliable evidence of what John Eliot and his Indian students looked like.
 - B. The document is reliable evidence of what some people in the 1800s thought the Puritans and the Indians of the 1600s looked like.
 - C. The document is reliable evidence of the Puritan's peaceful, friendly attitude toward the Indians.

Your Choice _____

- Doc. 3**
- A. The document is reliable evidence of how pious and moral all Puritans were.
 - B. The document is reliable evidence of New England town government and social life.
 - C. The document is reliable evidence of the strong feelings many Puritans had about death and the afterlife.

Your Choice _____

- Doc. 4**
- A. The document is reliable evidence of the strong connection between learning and religion in Puritan New England.
 - B. The document is reliable evidence of the high level of education attained by most people in Puritan New England.
 - C. The document is reliable evidence of the existence of a firmly established public school system in Puritan New England.

Your Choice _____

- Doc. 6**
- A. The document is reliable evidence that views about witchcraft in colonial New England were changing in the late 1600s and early 1700s.
 - b. The document is reliable evidence that those accused of witchcraft in Salem in 1692 were totally innocent.
 - C. The document is reliable evidence about what caused the witchcraft scare in Salem in 1692.

Your Choice _____

Exercise 2

Primary Sources: How Biased?

Diary entries, letters, newspaper articles, paintings, cartoons, ads, photos and other primary sources are often created by people with specific goals and strong personal opinions. **This can make a source one-sided, or “biased.”** Sometimes this bias is easy to notice — as when an author states a point of view strongly. But more often, the bias is harder to detect. It can be found as much in what is left out as in what is included. Bias can be expressed simply by including some facts while leaving others out. Or it can be shown by exaggerated or emotional language and images. To detect bias, think about emphasis, specific selection of facts, emotional language, etc.

You can also get important clues as to bias by noting the **author or creator** of the source, his or her **purpose in creating that source** and the **audience** for the source. To help you think about this, choose two documents from those for this lesson. Choose one that is clearly and strongly biased and one that seems biased but in a much less noticeable way. Then answer the questions below.

1. Clearly Biased: Document _____

Why do you think this document is biased? _____

A. How might knowing about the author or creator of the document help explain its bias?

B. Who was the intended audience of the document, and how might that help to explain its bias?

C. For what purpose was the document created, and how might that help to explain its bias?

2. Bias Harder to Detect: Document _____

Why do you think this document is biased? _____

A. How might knowing about the author or creator of the document help explain its bias?

B. Who was the intended audience of the document, and how might that help to explain its bias?

C. For what purpose was the document created, and how might that help to explain its bias?

Exercise 3

Interpreting Primary Sources: Using Your Background Knowledge

Sometimes, you can understand a primary source even if you know nothing about its time period. But this is rare. Usually, **you must use your background knowledge of the historical period to help you interpret, or make sense of, the source.** Keep this in mind when answering a DBQ. The primary sources won't make much sense if you do not already know something about the time in which they were produced. That is, the documents do not "speak for themselves," and it is not enough just to mention them in laundry list fashion. You need to use your background knowledge to interpret the documents and explain how they help answer the DBQ.

You often won't even notice how much your own background knowledge affects your understanding of a source. This exercise may help you see this better. Study each document for this lesson and think about what a person needs to know to understand that document fully. In the space provided below, write down two facts or broad trends from the colonial era that help explain each document. As a class, share your lists to see how much background knowledge it takes to properly interpret these primary source documents.

Doc. 1 1. _____

2. _____

Doc. 2 1. _____

2. _____

Doc. 3 1. _____

2. _____

Doc. 4 1. _____

2. _____

Doc. 5 1. _____

2. _____

Doc. 6 1. _____

2. _____

Doc. 7 1. _____

2. _____

Doc. 8 1. _____

2. _____

Doc. 9 1. _____

2. _____

Exercise 4

Interpreting Primary Sources: Making Inferences — 1

You often need to make inferences about primary sources. An **“inference”** is a belief you come to **accept based on other facts**. For example, suppose you find milk spilled on the kitchen floor. You may “infer” that your brother spilled it — even though you didn’t actually see him do this. This inference is logical and reasonable, yet it still may not be true. For example, the cat may have knocked over a glass of milk, not your brother. You can usually make many reasonable inferences from a primary source. But as this “spilled milk” example shows, you need to be careful about this. Be sure of all your facts and of what the primary source shows. **Use your background knowledge, and keep in mind what knowing about the source’s “author, audience and purpose” tells you.** If the inference still seems logical, you may be able to use it in your essay or answer.

Below are six statements about **Document 6** (“Apology of the Salem Witch Trial Jurors”). Some of the statements are reasonable inferences; others are not — that is, they are not supported by **Document 6**. In the spaces provided, write “yes” or “no” for each statement that is or is not a reasonable inference about **Document 6**.

1. The Salem jurors apologized because they had come to doubt the truth of the Christian Bible.
A reasonable Inference? _____
2. By the time of this apology, these Salem jurors probably believed that many accused witches in the past, in Salem and elsewhere in New England, were innocent of the charges against them.
A reasonable Inference? _____
3. The Salem jurors making this apology, along with most people in their colony, no longer believed in witches at all.
A reasonable Inference? _____
4. The Salem jurors still felt that the colony’s laws and values should be based on a literal understanding of Christian teachings.
A reasonable Inference? _____
5. The Salem jurors making this apology felt that decisions in trials had to be based on a close attention to the evidence against the accused.
A reasonable Inference? _____
6. At the time of this apology, many people in Massachusetts colony probably still believed they could be deceived by Satan.
A reasonable Inference? _____