



WORKING WITH SECONDARY SOURCES

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One of the challenges of teaching history is in encouraging students to be active learners, rather than passive recipients of information. This problem is often most pronounced when students interact with secondary sources. Textbooks, in particular, speak with an authorial voice that students feel ill-equipped or unwilling to challenge.

These exercises take secondary source materials and ask students to interrogate them in new ways – ways that require them to think about them as human constructions, to rework the information they've read, and to actively weigh the relative importance of various events, ideas, and cultural beliefs.

(For an additional approach to reworking information from secondary sources, see [Using Timelines](#) on the Bringing History Home site.)

1. How Textbooks Are Made

At the beginning of the course, spend some time discussing your assigned course text(s). What do students know about the authors of the book(s) they'll be using, or the publisher of the same? How much money does the textbook industry generate for publishers each year? How many textbooks focus on the period of history with which your course deals?

Few students will be able to answer these questions – but that is, in and of itself, a teachable moment. Ask students to go away and research these questions and bring their findings back to the next class period. Discuss the pros and cons of what they discovered, and ask them to consider how their findings will change the way they interact with the text.

2. Sorting Information by Theme

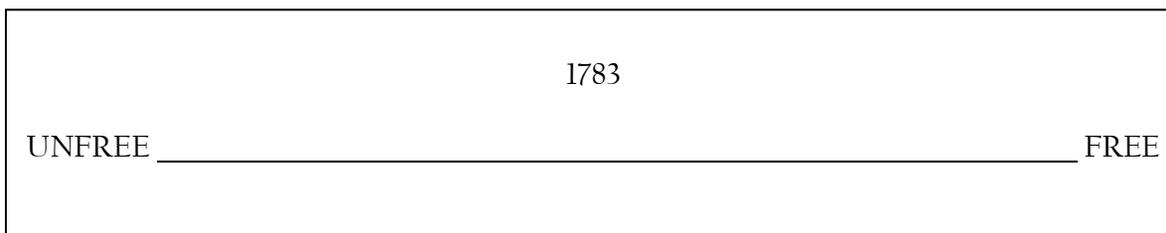
When studying American history, it's hard to avoid the concept of 'liberty,' and it's tempting for students to imagine liberty is a static value. To historicize liberty (or another large organizing thematic), consider some variation on the following exercise:

a) Assign reading about the era of the American Revolution. This can come from a class textbook, a monograph, or an article – but it should be a secondary source that takes a wide view of the subject.

b) Split students into small groups. Two to four participants in each group is ideal.



c) On the board, draw this visual organizer:



d) Supply the students with a list of hypothetical individuals who could have lived in North America at the end of the Revolution. For example:

- A white, property-owning, married man in Boston.
- A young Cherokee mother.
- A enslaved woman who is pregnant by her owner.
- A Catholic shoemaker in New York City.
- An enslaved man who works on the docks in Baltimore.
- The youngest child, and only daughter, of a Pennsylvania pacifist who died during the Revolution.
- An illiterate farmer in Virginia, who owns two slaves.
- A wealthy married woman in Charlestown.
- A former slave who ran away to the British lines during the Revolution.

Ask each group to decide where they will place each person on the spectrum of FREE to UNFREE. They should draw on their secondary source reading in order to support their case.

Allow at least twenty minutes for small group work.

e) As a class, report back on the small group findings. Place each individual on a large version of the spectrum drawn on the board, at the direction of the students. There will be some disagreement about who goes where – which is exactly what you want. Discuss the merits of each placement, as this allows students to articulate the ways in which they see race, wealth, gender, marital status, education, religious affiliation, and occupation intersecting to produce different experiences of liberty.



This exercise can be undertaken at any point in an American survey class. It would work well as a means of analyzing the ramifications of industrialization, the limits of reform in the Age of Jackson, the question of civil rights after Reconstruction, and the status of women after the 19th amendment.

Other themes would work equally well. Citizenship is a powerful organizing thematic for the post-1865 American History survey, and a spectrum that stretches from non-citizen to citizen, while leaving plenty of room in the middle, can expand the way students think about the protections, rights, and responsibilities awarded to individuals by their government. Adapt the spectrum to whatever works with your students, your textbook, and your course goals.

3. Expanding Beyond the Textbook

It's tempting for students to believe their textbooks represent the final word on what's important in history, rather than one perspective on the subject. If you spent time at the beginning of the course discussing how textbooks are made, your students should already be more critical consumers of textbook information. To re-emphasize this, however, take a subject from class discussion and ask students to go away and find other perspectives on the same. Take an event like the Gold Rush, for example, and ask students to research what other historians have said about it. Do their findings match those in the textbook? Why or why not? How do they explain the similarities and differences?

4. Interrogating Bibliographies

In upper-level history classes, students are as likely to be working with a series of history monographs as with a textbook. The following exercise helps students analyze information in a monograph *other* than the main text itself, and think about what it means to read for background knowledge and context.

a) This exercise can be done on an individual basis or in small groups. (I tend toward using small groups, as it prompts good discussion.)

b) Give your students a bibliography with all identifying information (book title, author, publisher, etc.) removed. Choose the bibliography of a book with which you're familiar, and which has a good range of sources, both primary and secondary. (You can even use a bibliography from your own work, which has the added benefit of being available in manuscript, rather than published, form.)



- c) Ask the students to analyze the bibliography and try to work out the subject of the book to which it's usually attached. Counsel them to keep track of entries that seem baffling – books that seem out of place, or subjects that seem unrelated to most of the information listed.
- d) In large group, discuss everyone's findings. Compare the book descriptions each person or group formulated – how similar are they? Why? Where and why are there differences?
- e) Spend time on the 'baffling' entries. Why would a historian studying X want to reference a book on subject Y or place Z?
- f) Reveal the book's author and title toward the end of class, and summarize its contents. Where you can, explain the baffling entries. Ask the students what this demonstrates about building context for a historical argument. How widely should they cast their net when approaching their own research papers? How does this change their view of the work they're undertaking as junior historians?