

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?

Name _____

Period: _____

Date: _____

Validity Worksheet

Source Title: _____

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?

Texas Language in 1869

Oral Histories

A journalist toured Texas in 1869 and wrote a magazine article about how Texans spoke.

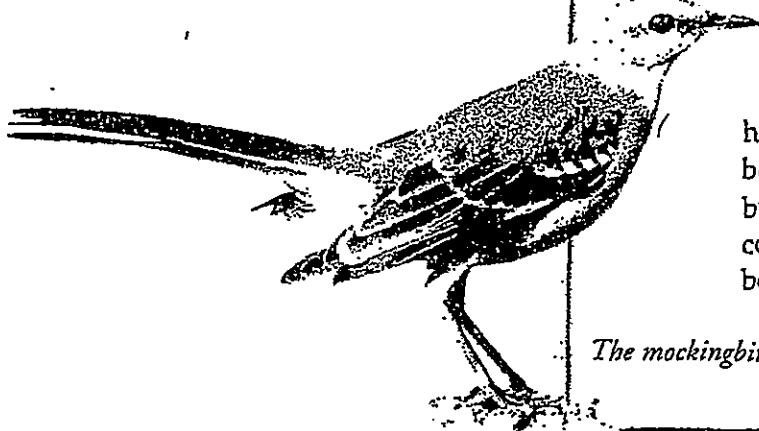
It may be doubted if there is any other state in the Union which pretends to rival Texas in the startling originality of its slang.

A Texan never has a great quantity of anything, but he has "scads" of it, or "oodles," or "dead oodles," or "scadoodles," or "swads."

But it is in geography that this gift gives forth its most amazing manifestations . . . Read these [place names] from Texas: Lick Skillet, Buck Snort, Nip and Tuck, Jimtown, Rake Pocket, Hog Eye, Fair Play, Seven League, Steal Easy, Possum Trot, Flat Heel, Frog Level, Short Pone, Gourd Neck, Shake Rag, Poverty Slant, Black Ankle, Jim Ned.

One [man named] Maverick formerly owned such immense herds that many of his animals unavoidably escaped his rouanne in the spring were taken up by his neighbors, branded, and called "mavericks."

During the [Civil] War we all heard enough of "we-uns" and "you-uns," but "you-alls," was to me something fresh.



The mockingbird is the state bird of Texas.

A Traveler Describes Houston

Personal Records

A German traveler visited Texas in 1848. When he returned to Europe, he wrote about his adventures in the Lone Star state.

Houston was about the same size as Galveston but had more brick buildings than the latter and a great many more stores. In my opinion, the most interesting of these stores was the furrier establishment belonging to the Torrey brothers who owned a trading post located on the northern reaches of the Brazos River where they bought from the Indians . . . The streets of this town were terribly dirty and completely impassable during or after a rain. In the market square the stumps of trees, which had been cut down only recently, could be seen.

In general, Houston was not as hospitable in appearance as Galveston because the lovely gardens that lined the streets of that port were lacking in Houston. Also an attitude of small-mindedness seemed to prevail more in Houston.

I did not doubt, however, that Houston would far outstrip Galveston in terms of business activity if it had not already done so. This was because the location of Houston was more suited for such growth. Farmers from all over the state brought their cotton here loaded in large wagons pulled by teams of ten to twelve oxen. Their crops were either sold here or traded for wares, and from here their cotton, hides, or other commodities would then be shipped elsewhere. I saw a local businessman trade a variety of brightly colored cloths for a whole bundle of bear hides brought in by two Indians.

TWO VIEWPOINTS

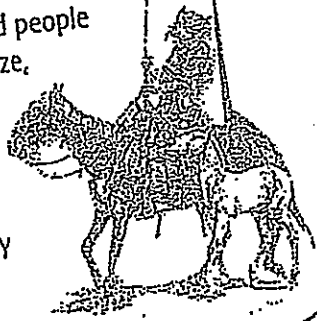
Colonizing Texas

Early Spaniards were not in agreement about the benefits of Spain's efforts to colonize Texas. Read the two views below and then answer the question.

Explorer Has a Favorable Response

The Tejas are a very well governed people and plant large quantities of maize, beans, calabashes, cantaloupes and watermelons. They are very familiar with the fact that there is only one true God, that He is in Heaven . . . And certainly it is a pity that people so rational, who plant crops and know there is a God, have no one to teach them the Gospel, especially when the province of Texas is so large and so fertile and has so fine a climate.

—Report of explorer Alonso de León, May 1689



A Spanish Official Visiting Texas Is Not Impressed by the Province

A villa without order, two presidios, seven missions, and an errant population of scarcely 4,000 persons of both sexes and all ages that occupies an immense desert country stretching from the abandoned presidio of Los Adaes to San Antonio does not deserve the name of the Province of Texas . . . nor the concern entailed in its preservation.

—Commandant-General Teodoro de Croix to José de Gálvez, October 30, 1781



Learning From History

Why do you think an explorer and a military officer would have such different points of view?



A Shared Past...

In 1739, Spanish and French streams of settlement and exploration met in Santa Fe. French Canadian brothers Paul and Pierre Mallet arrived from the Missouri country. Their route later became the Santa Fe Trail, which opened trade between Missouri and New Mexico. When they left Santa Fe, they crossed the Panhandle of Texas and journeyed to New Orleans.

