

# Chapter One

## History from the Eyewitness Viewpoint

When I first started teaching, I thought it would be easy to impart my enthusiasm for history to my students. I imagined that if I shared the facts and stories that fascinated me, my audience would naturally be fascinated, too. But just because I love New York City where I grew up does not mean that I can convince you that you should love it. Soon enough I realized that conveying information, no matter how interesting to me, was not sufficient to engage my students. I had to think about the *processes* through which students acquired information so that history became meaningful to them.

First I had to figure out why most students find history boring rather than exciting. Since we are living through times that will become history, perhaps our own experiences hold the key. During recent events like the war in Iraq or the last presidential election, we all lived in a state of tension and suspense. We listened eagerly and anxiously to friends, family members, colleagues, and television commentators. We read books, editorials, and blogs written by people who may have agreed or disagreed with us, changed our way of thinking, or infuriated us. Changes in immigration policy or health insurance were not abstract matters, but directly affected many of us and those we care about. As teachers we need to ask ourselves, Why will these same events as recounted in textbooks bore students a decade from

now? The answer in part is that the outcome of the events will be known, the controversies they generated will be omitted from textbooks, and their effects on ordinary people will be overlooked.

In *Eyewitness to the Past* I share a variety of classroom strategies based on my years of teaching eighth-grade American history as well as teaching English. My goal is to show teachers how they can make the study of history exciting by placing students in the shoes of ordinary people who, like we do now, lived in a state of suspense through tense times. Ordinary people in times past cared passionately about what the future would hold because they had a personal stake in what happened next. In order for students to make an imaginative leap into the lives of generations long gone, students need to hear the voices of people as witnessed in their letters, diaries, daily newspapers, speeches, and autobiographies. This approach emphasizes the fact that common citizens affected the course of events, just as average people today make an impact on history. And it is crucial to a true understanding of history that students not just listen to the winning side. Students need to hear from the Tories as well as from the Rebels, the slave owners as well as the abolitionists, the men and even women who opposed female suffrage and not just the suffragists. In the activities described in this book, the documents left to us, representing multiple views, become models for student writing and oral argument. With the help of these models, students imaginatively live through past events without “knowing” what will happen next or how it will affect their imagined lives.

I call the activities described in this book *eyewitness strategies* because students relive historic events as if they were there. In this approach, students rely on the their textbooks, supplemented by primary source documents, to see events through the prism of an imagined persona (or sometimes a group of people) with a particular viewpoint. Once invested in a point of view, students hold a personal stake in what will happen next. The classroom comes alive because debates naturally arise from a situation in which people hold different or opposing viewpoints.

To understand what mattered to people living in a different era, students need to be familiar with the details of their daily lives—what they wore, what their homes looked like, what expectations governed their social interactions. To experience the excitement of history, students must also

be able to envision it. It is important for students to see the past as it was depicted in advertisements, portraits, photographs, and film when available. Thus each eyewitness strategy incorporates the use of both written and visual primary source documents. Visits to museums and historic homes take on new meaning when they hold a place in students' imaginations as well. Student-produced artwork (whether generated by hand or computer) is an important aspect of each strategy because it helps students visualize the past.

## **The Six Eyewitness Strategies**

This book is organized into six eyewitness strategies. Each chapter covers one strategy and describes a sequence of activities that can be adapted to accommodate different content. Each strategy focuses on one type of written primary source document: diaries, travelogues, letters, newspapers, election speeches, and scrapbooks. Students study the properties of that genre and its use to historians in understanding the past before they write in that genre themselves. With each strategy, the class ends up generating work from a variety of viewpoints, thus creating a more complex appreciation for the texture of American life. I illustrate how I developed each strategy in the classroom by discussing a particular application of the strategy to one time period in U.S. history, and show how it can be easily adapted to teach other events and eras as well. Because each strategy generates controversy and debate, I also suggest ways to conclude each unit with role-plays and simulations. Engaging their minds, imaginations, and multiple intelligences ensures that all students will find at least one route through which history becomes meaningful. Samples of student work and rubrics for assessment accompany each chapter.

My goal is to provide clear instructions so that teachers can easily implement and adapt each eyewitness strategy. But in addition, each chapter is packed full with inventive teaching ideas for analyzing documents and understanding point of view that can stand on their own as wonderful activities in the classroom.

## **Overview of the Six Eyewitness Strategies**

### ***Diaries: Writing from Opposing Viewpoints***

In this chapter, students read examples of historical diaries and then create a persona and write a diary of their own. They keep their diaries while they “live through” a set of events as they “unfold” in their textbooks. The class is divided into different viewpoints on the same events (Rebels and Tories, for example). Students maintain these viewpoints as they write their diaries and discuss events in class. They create covers for their diaries that depict their homes or crafts.

### ***Travelogues: Eyewitness Perspectives on a Growing Nation***

Historians have an incredible array of travelogues written by those who journeyed across America at various times in our history. After reading samples from travelogues and related chapters in textbooks, students imagine themselves in the role of a traveler with a particular purpose: explorer, land speculator, immigrant, or conservationist, for example. Thus they describe what they see from a particular perspective while gaining an appreciation for America during a particular time period. In addition to writing, students create sketches and artwork of what they see along the way.

### ***Letters: Arguing the Past in Written Correspondence***

After reading examples of historical letters, students are put into pairs of correspondents. The students in each role-playing pair write a series of letters to one another while holding different perspectives on the issues they are learning about from their textbooks. Correspondents might be stationed on the home front and battlefield during a war or be supporters of opposing presidential candidates. Enclosures in their letters include family photographs or sketches and a variety of keepsakes such as news clippings about important events of the time.

### ***Newspapers: Conflicting Accounts of the Same Events***

With an ever-increasing number of documents now available online, students can easily access examples of news articles written at various times in our history and expressing different viewpoints. After studying how

language can slant our take on events, teams of students are assigned to write their own newspapers that represent partisan perspectives of key events of the day such as a Civil War battle or controversial trial. Students also generate advertisements and cartoons that put events in sociological as well as historical perspective.

### ***Election Speeches: Advocating for Your Candidate***

Campaigning and speechifying have been integral parts of the democratic process since our nation's founding. This eyewitness strategy is set during a presidential election year and focuses on the rhetoric of speeches. Students are divided into teams, each in support of one presidential candidate. Each student writes a speech in favor of one aspect of his or her candidate's platform and presents the speech in a formal debate. Students also generate cartoons, slogans, posters, and, for modern campaigns, radio and television advertisements.

### ***Scrapbooks: Documenting the Past Across Time***

Scrapbooks are a means to preserve and reflect on how historic events play a role in personal or family histories. They demonstrate how politics, social trends, and technology affect our private and professional lives. In this activity students work alone or in family groups to create a collection of memorabilia that demonstrates the impact history makes on individuals and their families.

### **Adapting and Sequencing the Eyewitness Strategies**

When I adapt one of these strategies, I go to the textbook first. Despite their touted differences (this one highlights geography, another primary sources or graphic organizers, and so forth), American history textbooks all tell much the same story in much the same sequence. Titles of chapters may vary, but content remains fairly constant over the long haul. If I am teaching about the social and technological changes of the 1920s with an emphasis on the women's rights movement, I might assign a scrapbook. Grandma's generation would be preflapper and pre-automobile. Mother's generation (after women get the vote) would feel the full effects of the Jazz Age. If I am teaching the 1930s, I might choose to cover it in a travelogue

since I want students to see how different regions of the country are being affected by the Great Depression. A set of historical events, such as those leading up to the Revolution or Civil War, lends itself to a diary or letter exchange sequence.

Here is a possible sequence to cover the first half of a typical U.S. history textbook:

- Personal diaries during events leading to the Revolution
- Election debate of 1800: Adams versus Jefferson
- Travelogue describing life in America in the early 1830s
- Letter exchange set in the 1850s with a focus on events leading to the Civil War
- Conflicting news accounts of a Civil War battle
- Scrapbook of life during Reconstruction

In such a sequence students would be learning about America's first one hundred years as a nation, encompassing the life spans of two to three generations. Thus it is not too hard for a student to imagine that the character he or she develops in the Revolutionary War diary then traveled around America in the 1820s, perhaps settling out West and voting for Andrew Jackson in 1832 at age seventy. Perhaps that individual's offspring lived through events leading to the Civil War and into Reconstruction. We truly are a young country, after all! While students are not expected to develop a family saga throughout the sequence of eyewitness strategies, they should be encouraged to imagine the characters they create living through time. There was not, after all, a generation that was born in 1776 and dropped dead all at once in 1787 when the Constitution was ratified. Americans living in the Roaring Twenties were not all born in 1920 only to die with the stock market crash in 1929. Indeed, some people living in the 1920s fought in the Civil War, while others would live into the 1980s, and so forth.

Another sequence for using the eyewitness strategies for the second half of U.S. history might look like this:

- Scrapbooks of immigrants arriving during the Great Migration of 1880 to 1925

- Travelogues of Americans during the Great Depression
- Letter exchanges between individuals on the battlefield and home front during World War II
- Diaries during the Cold War era
- Conflicting news accounts of the Vietnam War and the Tet Offensive
- Election debate between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan in 1980

Here again we can easily imagine an overall story of two or three generations. A young child arrives in America with his or her immigrant parents, lives through the Great Depression and World War II, and raises children who fight in and/or protest the war in Vietnam.

Because this second sequence takes place during and after the advent of radio, film, and television, students can access primary sources created with these new technologies. It is not difficult to find famous speeches online and hear their original audio recordings, for example. Students can also interview people in their own communities who lived through these events. Finally, students can make use of twenty-first century technologies to create their own documents. Rather than produce printed newspapers, they can create conflicting radio accounts of the same events or videotape their election debates and broadcast them on video or DVD. At the same time, students can study the effects of new media on the political process.

## **The Role of the Textbook**

The textbook is a fact of life in schools across the country. It thus becomes tempting to make the study of history synonymous with learning only what is in the text, boring or not. Rather than give in to this predicament, I view the textbook as both a tool and a challenge. It is a useful one-stop source of information, but how can I motivate students to feel they are living participants in history, despite the monotonous voice of the text?

The strategies that are developed in this book ensure that students learn and review events covered in the text. Because students have to personalize information from their textbook as they imaginatively incorporate it into assignments, they retain information and learn it in depth. Because the class explores events from multiple viewpoints, students are able to replace a

voiceless and presumably objective viewpoint with multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations. This leads students to a better understanding of how historians construct a story of the past.

### ***Critical Thinking Skills***

Although I distribute textbooks to my students every year, I want them to apply their critical thinking skills to the information presented in the text right away. Thus, before I assign any reading in the text, I read to the class Howard Zinn's account of Columbus from *A People's History of the United States* (1980). Zinn draws on primary source documents to present the horrifying history of what happened to the Arawak Indians in the wake of Columbus's landing on the island of Hispaniola. He then claims, "When we read the history books given to children in the United States, it all starts with heroic adventure—there is no bloodshed—and Columbus Day is a celebration" (7). I ask students whether they think Zinn's accusation, written more than twenty-five years ago, still stands. When they open their textbooks they discover, quite sadly, that Zinn is still essentially correct. We compare Zinn's account of Columbus's exploration to the one presented in their textbook point for point. I ask students, Is any piece of information in one account directly contradicted in the other? What gets left out of each version? How do omissions slant our perspective? What else would you want to know to determine the truth? Where would you find out? At what age should students be presented with "the whole truth," especially if it is upsetting? Is it ever possible to accomplish telling the whole story in a textbook? What is the purpose of a textbook? Should it attempt to instill national pride? Why and why not? These are some of the questions that make students think and that generate good debate because they are open-ended.

### ***Deconstructing the Text***

Another effective way to help students deconstruct the text is to ask them to investigate how textbooks get written and approved for state adoption, especially in the case of states like California and Texas, which have enormous influence on the textbook industry because of their purchasing power and review process. My students were upset to discover that the



Texas board of education was able to get a publishing company to revise its statement on global warming, for example, so that it would be adoptable by the lucrative Texas market. The controversy about teaching evolution surely did not end with the Scopes Trial in 1925. As our year progresses, I ask my students if they think their textbook accurately conveys the importance that religion played throughout American history.

Who should decide what students read? This is the issue I let students grapple with and debate among themselves. But even when students answer, “Historians,” I do not let them assume the matter is so simple. I assign students to read a *New York Times* article written by Alexander Stille (2002). In it John Mack Faragher, a history professor at Yale University, is quoted as saying,

*There was no women's history until there was a women's movement, there was no African-American history before there was a civil rights movement. Historical practice is very much determined by the things that people are concerned about. History is ultimately a moral art, and it is about values. It is not merely about the collection of facts. It is about the way we put those facts together and the meaning we give them. (A1)*

When I assign readings in our textbook they remember this statement. The facts are there in the text, presented in such a way that appears neutral, but multiple interpretations of them are possible. As students cull their text for facts to use in the eyewitness documents they create, they need to think about what those facts *signify* within a given context. Information in the textbook becomes meaningful and therefore easier to remember.

## ***Historiography***

I encourage my students to scrutinize their textbooks as historiography, not just history. By comparing what James M. McPherson writes about Reconstruction in the textbook *The American Journey* (Appleby, Brinkley, and McPherson 2003) to a version I read in school in the early 1960s, students can begin to understand how and why interpretations change. The pre-civil rights text that I grew up with was strictly out of *Gone With the*

*Wind*—it described carpetbaggers descending like vultures on the South to enrich themselves and oppress the vanquished white population by ensuring that unqualified African Americans (mere lackeys of the carpetbaggers) would be elected to office. This depiction of the Reconstruction era was used to justify the maintenance of segregation until historians like Kenneth Stampp wrote revisionist works about the period in the 1960s, such as *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (1965).

Another tack is to ask students to evaluate the way their textbook presents the end of World War II. Growing up in the fifties and early sixties, I took many years to fully comprehend the true role the Soviet Union played in defeating Hitler and the debt we owed to the Russians. During the Cold War years this was not something the powers-that-be emphasized in U.S. textbooks.

It is also fun to ask students to reverse national perspectives by writing a textbook chapter on the Mexican War of 1846 to 1848 from a Mexican perspective or by writing a Canadian version of the French and Indian War. One year my students came to class with their textbook notes on the Mexican War in hand. I surprised them when I insisted that we discuss events of the war as if we were Mexicans living in Mexico, reversing the use of the pronouns *we* and *they*. Following this I invited a fellow teacher at my school to come to talk to us about her Chicano family's long history in South Texas.

Students can apply their new understanding of the complexities of textbook perspectives to current issues as well. How would students objectively summarize the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 were they writing a textbook today? What happens to their use of language when they try to present a neutral tone? These activities use the text while demanding that students question its authority through critical thinking skills.

### ***What If?***

Another means of getting students to use the text while enabling them to think outside the box is to make use of the “What If?” approach to history. When we look back on a sequence of historical events, they seem to have unfolded inevitably. But they need not have happened that way. To be engaged in those events imaginatively from an eyewitness perspective,

students must feel they could have made a difference in how events turned out. If we want students to be active citizens today, if we want them to feel empowered to make wise decisions that will affect future generations, we need to teach them to analyze the consequences of decisions past. This is where the “What If?” approach to history can be fun and useful. According to Robert Cowley (2003),

*Counterfactual history may be the history of what didn't happen, a shadow universe, but it casts a reflective light on what did. Why did certain events (and the trends and trajectories that grew out of them) dominate, and not others? At what point did possibilities become impossibilities? Why did America develop in the way that it did when it could easily have followed other directions? Critics attack such speculations as being mere entertainment, mind games lacking in intellectual rigor or seriousness. I would maintain that they can be entertaining and educational at the same time. (xiii)*

What if America had lost the Revolutionary War? What if the South had won the Civil War? What if the Watergate scandal had never been uncovered? By discussing what did not happen, students can begin to understand the grave consequences of what *did*. Students also feel more at liberty to enter history not only through their intellects, but also through their imaginations—a liberty we regularly extend to filmmakers and writers but rarely to students.

## **The Role of Primary Source Documents**

Reading primary sources exposes students to the multiple voices and viewpoints we want them to use to make the past come alive. Here lies the challenge of taking the raw stuff of history and making sense of it for ourselves. Learning to teach with primary sources did not come easily to me for the simple reason that I was never taught this way as a student myself. Using primary sources is a process I learned while teaching at the City & Country School in New York City. The school's commitment to teaching with primary sources dates back to its founding in 1914, so by the time I joined the faculty in the 1970s, its library had an incomparable collection of

books for teaching American history. The catalog included autobiographies, collected letters, and travel journals. In 1991 I participated in Primarily Teaching, the teacher-training workshop still offered by the National Archives. There, under the expert guidance of archivists and their education staff, I researched a topic of interest to me—antislavery petitions to Congress in the 1830s—through access to the actual documents. While teaching eighth grade American history and English at the Village Community School for the past twenty-five years I have benefited immeasurably from the ongoing support of the school to keep learning and exploring ways to make history come alive through documents.

It is a positive development that some states, including New York, now mandate teaching with primary sources. For students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, documents take center stage. Yet, it is quite disappointing to see the workbooks that are now put out to help students practice using primary sources. They are filled with short, out-of-context exercises in which students read a portion of text (a primary source) and answer questions about it—just like they do with their textbook! As Keith C. Barton and Linda Levstik (2004) report in *Teaching History for the Common Good*,

*This is surely the form of inquiry without its substance, a tool without all its parts, faith without works. Where is the felt difficulty, the perplexity, confusion, or doubt in this kind of activity? When the questions arise from 'reproducible student pages' rather than from students' own concerns about the past, then the activity does not involve inquiry in any meaningful sense—it simply involves the analysis of documents. (199)*

There certainly are many collections of primary source documents for teachers to use, many issued by the textbook companies themselves. But to my mind, too many of them end up presenting a view of America's past that is as simplistic as the textbook's. This is because they often only present the voices of the winning side—the politically correct view. Left out are those who argued that slavery was a blessing for the African, that workers had no rights relative to their employers, and that the Chinese should not

be eligible for U.S. citizenship. We lose sight of the epic proportions of the struggle for justice when the proponents of oppression are missing from the story.

Take for example the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. This shameful part of our history is no longer hidden under the rug. Documents relating to it are included in anthologies, but editors typically choose a narrative from someone who was interned. It is much more difficult to find the voices of those supporting this policy—and most Americans either claimed not to know about it or agreed that internment was a necessary safety precaution after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. How then can students learn to compare the past to the present in a meaningful way if they are not exposed to both sides of a controversy as people lived through it? It seems obvious to us *now* that the way we treated Japanese American citizens was reprehensible, but during a war whose outcome is unknown, fear can trump reason. Students need to question whether the same thing is happening today after terrorists bombed the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Unless students hear from both sides, they lack the tools with which they can evaluate the best course of action.

In order to help students experience the past as it was lived—from multiple overlapping and conflicting viewpoints—it is worth looking for anthologies that present contemporaneous views from various perspectives. Documents in these anthologies will supplement all six eyewitness strategies. Students need to hear the full chorus of American voices, even if the sound is often not harmonious. The series I like the best is *Opposing Viewpoints in American History* from Greenhaven Press. Here we have arguments from all sides—why the Sedition Acts violate the Bill of Rights, and why they do not, why the Louisiana Purchase should be approved and why it should not. We hear from Frederick Douglass in “Blacks Should Have the Right to Vote” but also hear from the opposition in “Blacks Should Not Have the Right to Vote” by Henry Davis McHenry, a Democrat from Kentucky. In addition to this two-volume anthology, Greenhaven puts out many single-volume editions that focus on opposing viewpoints throughout specific eras in American history, such as the American Revolution and the Vietnam War. Teachers also can find digitized primary sources on the Web such as those at the National Archives and Library of Congress, among others.

In the six eyewitness strategies I present, the uses of primary sources are many. First and foremost in each chapter I focus on one *type* of document, such as letters, diaries, speeches, news articles, and so on. I model ways in which students can learn to analyze each type of document much as a historian would. Because students also generate their own documents in each of the primary source categories, they have increased motivation to study the originals. Today students can use computer programs to create a variety of visual special effects to make their written documents look real, but staining them with tea is still quite a lot of fun. In addition to written documents, the eyewitness strategies incorporate the analysis and creation of visual artifacts such as illustrations, advertisements, cartoons, and so forth. Finally I suggest some documents that are valuable because of their content (e.g., the viewpoint they present). These resources are listed in the appendix and organized by chapter and category.

Documents written before the twentieth century can be daunting for students to read, with their unfamiliar words and long, convoluted sentences. My job is to make reading them as easy as possible. What I want students to understand first is the overall context of the document—who wrote it, for what purpose, and for what audience. Students will experience success if they get the general meaning first, and some of this can be gleaned by pulling out key words. If I download a document from the Web, I handwrite word definitions in the margins before photocopying it for students. I also like to read primary sources out loud. Because I know where to pause and what to emphasize as I read, their meaning is immediately more apparent to students. Asking students to circle the subject of each sentence can help. The most important thing to remember is that it is only by reading *more* and not less that students will begin to gain the confidence they need.

## **The Eyewitness Strategies and Adolescent Learners**

I developed the methods described in this book while teaching eighth graders. The strategies can be easily adapted for middle school through high school by considering the level of the students and altering the degree to which the teacher simplifies or builds upon the suggested activities. The strategies are not appropriate for early elementary grades because they ask students to see events from multiple perspectives, a confusing concept for

younger children.

The eyewitness strategies appeal to adolescents because in most of them students develop their own personas, an alter-ego “self.” I give them lots of prompts to help them develop their personas, such as filling in questionnaires about their imaginary selves, while helping students to be as historically accurate as possible. By being asked to create a different self living in a different time period, students surpass their circumscribed focus on the here-and-now and extend their understanding of the world. The eyewitness strategies then become more complex as students share viewpoints and analyze multiple perspectives, their causes, and their consequences on subsequent events.

## Teaching to Meet the Standards

Each eyewitness strategy is designed to accommodate a variety of historical periods described in a typical U. S. history textbook. Think of each strategy as a vessel into which you can pour the content. This makes it easy to implement a creative approach while guaranteeing to supervisors that you are covering the material mandated by your district or state.

Although there are statewide variations on what teachers are required to cover, there are also useful national guidelines. When I design a lesson, especially one for a nationally used website like PBS Online, there are several sources I go to. One is McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning), which is an online compendium of K–12 content standards and related tools for teachers designing units. Another is *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies* (1994) published by the National Council for the Social Studies. It posits ten thematic strands that social studies programs should cover, including “Time, Continuity, and Change,” “Science, Technology, and Society,” and “Power, Authority, and Governance.” Specific performance objectives are offered for each strand at the early grades, middle grades, and high school levels. Let us suppose that you want students to write opposing eyewitness newspapers (Chapter 4) of the Scopes Trial of 1925. In this activity students would be studying how scientific discoveries affect and change society, what governmental bodies mediated the dispute, and the consequences of the trial, thus covering the three thematic strands listed above.

The *National Standards for History* (1996) developed by the National Center for History in the Schools divides U.S. history into ten eras and offers standards for grades K–4 and 5–12. In addition to content guidelines, they offer five Standards in Historical Thinking. We can imagine how these historical thinking standards would be implemented if you followed the suggestions in Chapter 2, *Diaries: Writing from Opposing Viewpoints*. In the sequence described in Chapter 2, students live through the events of the Revolution as either Tories or Rebels. The activity enhances their ability to understand sequence (Chronological Thinking standard) because they are “living” through events in chronological order. By reading and analyzing primary sources to incorporate into their diaries students gain a better understanding of how history is constructed and written (Historical Comprehension standard). Because students are studying the Revolution from opposing viewpoints, they “consider multiple perspectives” and “challenge arguments of historical inevitability” (Historical Analysis and Interpretation standard). In order to incorporate facts into their diaries they need to do research (Historical Research Capabilities standard). At the end of an eyewitness strategy, students are ready to do higher-level thinking about events (Historical Issues–Analysis and Decision-Making standard) such as analyzing “the interests and values of the various people involved” or evaluating “the consequences of a decision.” The means to achieve these last two goals are suggested at the end of each chapter and often involve a decision-making role-play.

## **Minimizing the Workload**

Most of the eyewitness strategies discussed in this book ask students to do a significant amount of writing. As an English and social studies teacher I am well aware of the pressure this puts on educators who simply do not have the time to read and respond to everything students write. My answer to this dilemma may surprise some teachers: Assign the work anyway, then find creative ways around this inevitable problem. Our students will never learn to write if they do not write all the time.

Over the years I have adapted many strategies to keep my students writing while keeping myself sane. I always thoroughly respond to work that is being revised for the public to see, whether it will be shared in print, online, or on a bulletin board. Unless they are required to fix their mistakes,



most students do not pay attention to all those red marks. So I do not waste my efforts; I want them to pay off. I usually am not the first reader who has looked for mistakes or made suggestions for improvement of the content. I often pair students or put them into writer's workshop groups to do this for one another before a draft gets to me.

This year I experimented with using the track changes feature in Microsoft Word. It is widely adopted in the business world and therefore a valuable tool for students to learn. Essentially, students email their work to me or post it electronically on our class bulletin board. I download it to my computer where I turn on the track change feature and make my comments and corrections directly on the electronic version of their papers. I email their work back to them and students then have the option to accept my changes or not and can make further revisions.

Obviously, not all student work is meant for public eyes. This means that most of the time I look for other strategies to maintain student motivation while keeping my workload manageable. English teachers are well aware of these time-saving methods. If you are lucky you may find an English teacher who is willing to teach some of the eyewitness strategies as a joint social studies and English venture. Because each of the six strategies presented in this book demands the production of a different genre of work, with varying content matter, specific rubrics can be found at the end of each chapter. These convey standards for both English skills and social studies content and concepts.

It always helps students when they are given the rubrics ahead of time so they know in advance how they will be evaluated. In each category students can earn from one to five points. A student who does not follow instructions and whose work reflects little to no mastery of English skills and social studies content receives a one. This student's work is given no credit and thus the student must redo it. A student who has followed the assignment but completed it perfunctorily or with a lack of real understanding receives a two. This work is passable but because it needs greater attention I encourage the student to hand in another draft. This student may need help using a historical document as a model for his or her own writing as well as an appreciation for how documents reflect point of view. The category for three points reflects a solid effort that squarely meets my expectations for mastery of facts and concepts. This student writes with clarity and consistency. He

or she includes many factual details, synthesizes, them, and demonstrates an understanding of ideas and viewpoint. Very good work earns a four. This student has not only learned the material, but also brought it to life through the expressive use of language like that used in the time period we are studying. A student working at this level demonstrates nuanced thinking about complex issues. A student receives a five for outstanding work and original thinking. This student is often a gifted writer and avid reader who brings to the task extensive learning acquired not only in the classroom but well beyond it.

In strategizing how to maximize the effect of my feedback to students, I pay special attention to the first assignment in a series. For example, if students are writing a sequence of four letters, I want to make certain that they are on the right track as early as possible. I focus my time responding to their first letter, because if they do not understand what they are expected to do they will run into problems in subsequent letters. However, I may well not have the time to respond to each student's first letter individually. In that case, I might read out loud to the class some student work that best exemplifies what I am looking for in the assignment. Anonymously, of course, I might also read out loud an example of student work that is lacking on some score as well. For their subsequent letters I might ask some students to read aloud their work in class on a rotating basis or I might skim their letters, evaluating them based on just a few criteria each time. For example, I might say to the class, "On the next assignment I will be looking to see that you incorporate at least five facts into your letters, and that you write in complete sentences." Or I might announce, "This time I will be looking for a well-reasoned explanation of why you do or not support the tactics used in the Boston Tea Party. I will also pay special attention to your spelling." Then I read that set of letters with only those things in mind, which makes the process much quicker for me. Or I might not read several of the letters at all. Instead, I might ask students to keep their letters in a portfolio of their work and then ask them to choose the one letter they think reflects their best work for me to grade.

## **Conclusion**

Even if you only implement one or two of the eyewitness strategies discussed in this book, you will discover that students find history as

exciting as many of the most dramatic current events. Each strategy is sequenced in such a way that the past becomes both understandable and meaningful. The strategies draw on students' critical thinking skills as well as their imaginations and artistic abilities. The strategies demand that students formulate ideas and opinions and learn to express them in writing. Furthermore, the six eyewitness strategies are designed to lead to interactive debate and activities in class on an ongoing basis—they form part of a whole learning experience in which students engage with one another and not just the teacher.

If you implement several eyewitness strategies over the course of a year you will discover that students become more fluent writers and more adept at role-playing. They look forward to coming to class because they know that everyone has something different to say. Students begin to take on the excited voices of impassioned citizens who had tough choices to make, rather than the monotone voices of students answering rote questions. In developing these materials with my students over many years, my appreciation of the American past has deepened because of what they have added to our discussions. It is because of their diverse talents as thinkers, writers, and artists that these eyewitness strategies exist.

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