

What Happened at Ellis Island?

by Jonathan Burack

Each unit in *The Historian's Apprentice* series deals with an important historical topic. It introduces students to a five-step set of practices designed to simulate the experience of being a historian and make explicit all key phases of the historian's craft.

The Historian's Apprentice: A Five-Step Process

1. Reflect on Your Prior Knowledge of the Topic

Students discuss what they already know and how their prior knowledge may shape or distort the way they view the topic.

2. Apply Habits of Historical Thinking to the Topic

Students build background knowledge on the basis of five habits of thinking that historians use in constructing accounts of the past.

3. Interpret the Relevant Primary Sources

Students apply a set of rules for interpreting sources and assessing their relevance and usefulness.

4. Assess the Interpretations of Other Historians

Students learn to read secondary sources actively, with the goal of deciding among competing interpretations based on evidence in the sources.

5. Interpret, Debate, and Write About the Topic Yourself

Students apply what they have learned by constructing evidence-based interpretations of their own in a variety of ways.



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Teacher Introduction

★ *Teaching the Historian’s Craft*

The goal of *The Historian’s Apprentice* units is to expose students in a manageable way to the complex processes by which historians practice their craft. By modeling what historians do, students will practice the full range of skills that make history the unique and uniquely valuable challenge that it is.

Modeling the historian’s craft is not the same as being a historian—something few students will become. Therefore, a scaffolding is provided here to help students master historical content in a way that will be manageable and useful to them.

Historical thinking is not a simple matter of reciting one fact after another, or even of mastering a single, authoritative account. It is disciplined by evidence, and it is a quest for truth; yet, historians usually try to

clarify complex realities and make tentative judgments, not to draw final conclusions. In doing so, they wrestle with imperfect sets of evidence (the primary sources), detect multiple meanings embedded in those sources, and take into account varying interpretations by other historians. They also recognize how wide a divide separates the present from earlier times. Hence, they work hard to avoid present-mindedness and to achieve empathy with people who were vastly different from us.

In their actual practice, historians are masters of the cautious, qualified conclusion. Yet they engage, use their imaginations, and debate with vigor. It is this spirit and these habits of craft that *The Historian’s Apprentice* seeks to instill in students.

★ *The Historian’s Apprentice: Five-Steps in Four Parts*

The Historian’s Apprentice is a five-step process. However, the materials presented here are organized into four parts. Part I deals with the first two of the five steps of the process. Each of the other three parts then deals with one step in the process. Here is a summary of the four parts into which the materials are organized:

Teacher Introduction. Includes suggested day-by-day sequences for using these materials, including options for using the PowerPoint presentations. One sequence is designed for younger students and supplies a page of vocabulary definitions.

Part 1. A student warm-up activity, an introductory essay, a handout detailing a set of habits of historical thinking, and two PowerPoint presentations (*Five Habits of Historical Thinking* and *What Happened at Ellis Island?*). Part 1 (including the PowerPoints) deals with *The Historian’s Apprentice* Steps 1 and 2.

Part 2. A checklist for analyzing primary sources, several primary sources, and worksheets for analyzing them. Part 2 deals with *The Historian’s Apprentice* Step 3.

Part 3. Two secondary source passages and two student activities analyzing those passages. Part 3 deals with *The Historian’s Apprentice* Step 4.

Part 4. Two optional follow-up activities enabling students to write about and/or debate their own interpretations of the topic. Part 4 deals with *The Historian’s Apprentice* Step 5.

★ Suggested Five-Day Sequence

Below is one possible way to use this *Historian's Apprentice* unit. Tasks are listed day by day in a sequence taking five class periods, with some homework and some optional follow-up activities.

PowerPoint Presentation: *Five Habits of Historical Thinking*. This presentation comes with each *Historian's Apprentice* unit. If you have used it before with other units, you need not do so again. If you decide to use it, incorporate it into the **Day 1** activities. In either case, give students the “Five Habits of Historical Thinking” handout for future reference. Those “five habits” are as follows:

- History Is Not the Past Itself
- The Detective Model: Problem, Evidence, Interpretation
- Time, Change, and Continuity
- Cause and Effect
- As They Saw It: Grasping Past Points of View

Warm-Up Activity. Homework assignment: Students do the *Warm-Up Activity*. This activity explores students’ memories and personal experiences shaping their understanding of the topic.

Day 1: Discuss the *Warm-Up Activity*, then either have students read or review the “Five Habits of Historical Thinking” handout, or use the *Five Habits* PowerPoint presentation.

Homework assignment: Students read the background essay “Encountering Ellis Island.”

Day 2: Use the second PowerPoint presentation, *What Happened at Ellis Island?*, to provide an overview of the topic for this lesson. The presentation applies the Five Habits of Historical Thinking to this topic. Do the two activities embedded in the presentation.

Homework assignment: Students read the “Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist.” The checklist teaches a systematic way to handle sources:

- Sourcing
- Contextualizing
- Interpreting meanings
- Point of view
- Corroborating sources

Day 3: In class, students study some of the ten primary source documents and complete “Source Analysis” worksheets on them. They use their notes to discuss these sources. (Worksheet questions are all based on the concepts on the “Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist.”)

Day 4: In class, students complete the remaining “Source Analysis” worksheets and use their notes to discuss these sources. Take some time to briefly discuss the two secondary source passages students will analyze next.

Homework assignment: Student read these two secondary source passages.

Day 5: In class, students do the two “Secondary Sources” activities and discuss them. These activities ask them to analyze the two secondary source passages using four criteria:

- Clear focus on a problem or question
- Position or point of view
- Use of evidence or sources
- Awareness of alternative explanations

Follow-Up Activities (optional, at teacher’s discretion).

Do as preferred: the DBQ Essay Assignment and/or the Structured Debate.

★ Suggested Three-Day Sequence

If you have less time to devote to this lesson, here is a suggested shorter sequence. The sequence does not include the PowerPoint presentation *Five Habits of Historical Thinking*. This presentation is included with each *Historian's Apprentice* unit. If you have never used it with your class, you may want to do so before following this three-day sequence.

The three-day sequence leaves out a few activities from the five-day sequence. It also suggests that you use only seven key primary sources. However, it still walks students through the steps of the *Historian's Apprentice* approach: clarifying background knowledge, analyzing primary sources, comparing secondary sources, and debating or writing about the topic.

Warm-Up Activity. Homework assignment: Ask students to read or review the “Five Habits of Historical Thinking” handout and read the background essay “Encountering Ellis Island.”

Day 1: Use the PowerPoint presentation *What Happened at Ellis Island?*. It provides an overview of the topic for this lesson by applying the Five Habits of Historical Thinking to it. Do the two activities embedded in the presentation.

Homework assignment: Students read or review the “Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist.” The checklist teaches a systematic way to handle sources.

Day 2: In class, students study some of the ten primary source documents and complete “Source Analysis” worksheets on them. They then use their notes to discuss these sources. Documents 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 are suggested.

You may wish to make your own choices of primary sources. Use your judgment in deciding how many of them your students can effectively analyze in a single class period.

Homework assignment: Student read the two secondary source passages.

Day 3: In class, students do the two “Secondary Sources” activities and discuss them. These activities ask them to analyze the two secondary source passages using four criteria.

Follow-Up Activities (optional, at teacher’s discretion):

Do as preferred: the DBQ Essay Assignment and/or the Structured Debate.

★ *Suggestions for Use with Younger Students*

For younger students, parts of this lesson may prove challenging. If you feel your students need a somewhat more manageable path through the material, see the suggested sequence below.

If you want to use the *Five Habits of Historical Thinking* PowerPoint presentation, this sequence takes four class periods. If you do not use this PowerPoint, you can combine **Day 1** and **Day 2** and keep the sequence to just three days. We suggest using five primary sources only. The ones listed for **Day 3** are less demanding in terms of vocabulary and conceptual complexity. For **Day 4**, we provide some simpler DBQs for the follow-up activities.

Vocabulary: A list of vocabulary terms in the sources and the introductory essay is provided on page 7 of this booklet. You may wish to hand this sheet out as a reading reference, you could make flashcards out of some of the terms, or you might ask each of several small groups to use the vocabulary sheet to explain terms found in one source to the rest of the class.

SUGGESTED FOUR-DAY SEQUENCE

Warm-Up Activity. Homework assignment: Students do the Warm-Up Activity. This activity explores students' memories and personal experiences shaping their understanding of the topic.

Day 1: Discuss the Warm-Up Activity. Show the *Five Habits of Historical Thinking* PowerPoint presentation (unless you have used it before and/or you do not think it is needed now). If you do not use this PowerPoint presentation, give students the "Five Habits of Historical Thinking" handout and discuss it with them.

Homework assignment: Ask students to read the background essay, "Encountering Ellis Island."

Day 2: Use the PowerPoint presentation *What Happened at Ellis Island?*. This introduces the topic for the lesson by applying the Five Habits of Historical Thinking to it. Do the two activities embedded in the presentation.

Homework assignment: Students read or review the "Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist." The checklist offers a systematic way to handle sources.

Day 3: Discuss the "Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist" and talk through one primary source document in order to illustrate the meaning of the concepts on the checklist. Next, have students complete "Source Analysis" worksheets after studying primary source documents 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8.

Homework assignment: Students read the two secondary source passages.

Day 4: Students do *only* "Secondary Sources: Activity 2" and discuss it. This activity asks them to choose the two primary sources that best back up each secondary source passage.

Follow-Up Activities (optional, at teacher's discretion):

Do as preferred: the DBQ Essay Assignment and/or the Structured Debate.

Here are some alternative DBQs tailored to the six primary sources recommended here:

Using these sources, explain why you do or do not think the Ellis Island system was a reasonable way to deal with immigrants arriving in America.

"Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island must have been deeply disappointed by it and by the America they found, compared with the one they had hoped for." Explain why you do or do not agree with this statement.

Vocabulary: The Introductory Essay

- **bureaucracy:** Administration by officials organized along clear lines of authority and by fixed rules of operation
- contagious: Able to be spread through bodily contact, the air, etc.
- steerage: The part of a ship assigned to passengers who pay the cheapest rates
- impoverished: Extremely poor
- oppression: Imposing burdens through unjust, tyrannical actions
- overpopulation: The state of having more people than what an area's given resources can sustain

Vocabulary: The Primary Sources

- **Emerald Isle:** Ireland
- fleeced: In this case, a term for being deprived of money or goods by fraud
- incur: To acquire or take on something or some burden
- inexhaustible: Endless, unable to be depleted
- incessantly: Constantly
- noxious: Very unpleasant, disagreeable, or harmful
- pauper: A very poor person
- philanthropic: Charitable
- regime: In this case, a ruling or prevailing power or authority
- statistics: Science of analyzing numerical data
- stolid: Unemotional, not easily moved to show feeling
- Yiddish: A German language mixing Hebrew and Slavic languages, used mainly by Jews

Vocabulary: The Secondary Sources

- **dossiers:** Collections of documents on a subject
- exorbitant: Too great or excessive
- incomprehensible: Impossible to understand
- perfunctory: Done in a hasty, automatic, routine way
- notorious: Widely and unfavorably known
- unscrupulous: Not restrained by principles, or scruples

Part 1: Ellis Island—Providing the Context

Note to the teacher: The next pages provide materials meant to help students better understand and evaluate immigration and Ellis Island. The materials also seek to teach students the Five Habits of Historical Thinking.

This section includes the following:

- **PowerPoint presentation: *The Five Habits of Historical Thinking***
This presentation illustrates five habits of thought or modes of analysis that guide historians as they construct their secondary accounts of a topic. These five habits are not about skills used in analyzing primary sources. (Those are dealt with more explicitly in another handout in the next section.) These five habits of historical thinking are meant to help students see history as a way of thinking, not as the memorizing of disparate facts and predigested conclusions. The PowerPoint uses several historical episodes as examples to illustrate the five habits. In two places, it pauses to ask students to do a simply activity applying one of the habits to some of their own life experiences.
If you have used this PowerPoint with other *Historian’s Apprentice* units, you may not need to use it again here.
- **Handout: “The Five Habits of Historical Thinking”**
This handout supplements the PowerPoint presentation. It is meant as a reference for students to use as needed. If you have used other *Historian’s Apprentice* units, your students may only need to review this handout quickly.
- **Warm-Up Activity**
A simple exercise designed to help you see what students know about Ellis Island, what confuses them, or what ideas they may have absorbed about it from popular culture, friends and family, etc. The goal is to alert them to their need to gain a clearer idea of the past and be critical of what they think they already know.
- **Introductory essay: “Encountering Ellis Island”**
The essay provides enough basic background information on the topic to enable students to assess primary sources and conflicting secondary source interpretations. At the end of the essay, students get some points to keep in mind about the nature of the sources they will examine and the conflicting secondary source interpretations they will debate.
- **PowerPoint presentation: What Happened at Ellis Island?**
This PowerPoint presentation reviews the topic for the lesson and shows how the Five Habits of Historical Thinking can be applied to a clearer understanding of it. At two points, the presentation calls for a pause and students are prompted to discuss some aspects of their prior knowledge of the topic. It is suggested that you use this PowerPoint presentation *after* assigning the introductory essay, but you may prefer to reverse this order.

Warm-Up Activity

What Do You Know About Ellis Island?

This lesson deals with the immigration station called Ellis Island. Whenever you start to learn something about a time in history, it helps to think first of what you already know about it, or think you know. You probably have impressions, or you may have read or heard things about it already. Some of what you know may be accurate. You need to be ready to alter your fixed ideas about this time as you learn more about it. This is what any historian would do. To do this, study this photograph and take a few notes in response to the questions below it.



This photo shows a Polish immigrant boarding a ship bound for America in November 1907. Do you have relatives who emigrated to America in the early 1900s? Do you know others whose family members came to America in those years? If so, what do you know about their reasons for leaving their own lands to start new lives here?

What thoughts about America do you think this immigrant was having at this point in his life? What stories have you heard about the lives and ideas of immigrants like him in the past? List any movies or books on this topic you know about. What ideas about immigration in general have you picked up from such sources?

What do you know about Ellis Island, where so many immigrants from Europe and elsewhere arrived in the early 1900s? What is your sense of the kind of welcome this man would have gotten when his ship docked at Ellis Island in 1907?

Encountering Ellis Island

The story of immigration is vast. In a way, it is the story of America itself. Since the nation's beginnings, wave after wave of immigrants have arrived here hoping to start a new life in a new land. Today, nearly everyone here is linked back only a few generations to family members who came to America as strangers and remade their lives as they remade America itself many times over.

The immigration experience began in a million different ways in dozens of other nations, as each immigrant, immigrant family, or community made the heart-wrenching decision to leave everything behind and depart for an unknowable future in America. In some cases, that departure was forced on the unwilling. Obviously, that was true for millions of Africans torn from their homes and sold into slavery in the Americas. However, for most immigrants, the decision to leave was a matter of choice. In many cases, the choice was made with enthusiasm by immigrants expecting to improve their lives. In other cases, the choice was made reluctantly, in fear, in order to escape intolerable economic or political conditions at home.

For European immigrants, the trip across the Atlantic usually only added to their anxieties. Well into the 20th century, it remained a tense, uncomfortable, often unhealthy, and dangerous experience—especially for the vast number of poor passengers who were confined to steerage.

The first dramatic encounter with the United States could be thrilling. It could also be confusing, discouraging, or even terrifying. Immigrants landed at many ports, under conditions that changed from place to place and over time. In each case, however, this first encounter was a dramatic experience that no immigrant ever forgot. It is the point at which America ceased to be a dream or vague idea and began to take shape as a reality. How did immigrants experience this first encounter? What did they find out about the kind of society they were joining? What view of them did this society convey in the way it greeted them? Was it welcoming or forbidding, compassionate or harsh? Was it full of sympathy and understanding, or was it suspicious and lacking in comprehension?

One way to decide these questions is to look specifically at the most famous immigrant receiving station of all, the one on Ellis Island near the New Jersey shoreline in New York Harbor. Ellis Island opened in 1892 and closed in 1954. For its first three decades, it was the main receiving station for an enormous wave of immigration unlike any other in the nation's history to that date. Earlier immigrants had mainly come from northern and western Europe (Germany, Ireland, Britain, and Scandinavia). In the 1880s, overpopulation in impoverished rural areas, political oppression in Russia, and other forces drove Italians, Poles, Hungarians, Greeks, Serbs, and many others from southern and eastern Europe to the Americas. This new wave (it came to be called the "new immigration") arrived as a rapidly industrializing America was hungry for workers for its mines, railroads, factories, farms, and shops. For millions in the decades ahead, Ellis Island would be their first stop.

Over the years, Ellis Island grew in size. Added to its main hall were kitchen facilities, a hospital, kindergarten, dormitories, new docks, and other buildings. However, for a long time, Ellis Island officials simply could not keep up with the thousands of passengers arriving every day. In the first decade of the 20th century, the island often received 5000 immigrants or more daily. They spoke dozens of different languages, yet there were never enough inspectors at Ellis Island who could speak even a few of these languages.

What immigrants at Ellis Island encountered above all was an impersonal, highly organized bureaucracy. It was designed to process masses of people by questioning, examining, and classifying them as they passed along through what must have seemed a totally bewildering maze. In the Registry Hall, officials examined immigrants in groups of 240 at a time. Health inspectors attached tags to their lapels with letters indicating possible problems—"L" for lung problem, "T" for trachoma, "H" for heart disease, "X" for a possible lunatic or person with mental illness, and "LCD" for "loathsome contagious disease." Newcomers were asked how they had paid for passage to America, what their occupation was, where they were going and why, whether they

were going to stay with relatives or friends, and what their job prospects were. One classification that especially worried officials was “LPC”—“likely to become a public charge.”

Several fears could result in some immigrants being held on the island for weeks or longer—fears about an immigrant’s past criminal activity, or about immigrants thought to be infected with contagious diseases. Long detentions put immigrants in danger of being cheated by greedy owners of food concessions, money changers, or officials extorting money from them by threatening deportation.

In fact, very few ever were deported. All but about two percent of arrivals passed through Ellis Island in a matter of a few hours. Basically, Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s wanted immigrants to do vast amounts of unskilled labor for the growing

industrial order. The maze of complicated rules and questions facing immigrants reflected a few basic fears that the society did have about immigrants. In time, reforms were made. This checked abuses in the Ellis Island system that were more prevalent in its early years. Was the encounter with this system merely unpleasant, boring and routine, deeply insulting and perplexing, or absolutely terrifying? On the other hand, it might have been mild and even welcoming in comparison to officialdom in the lands these newcomers had left behind? Obviously, for the few turned back the experience was a catastrophe; for many, it was probably a welcome relief from weeks in steerage and lives of misery left behind. It was for these immigrants a somewhat confusing but happy introduction to America, a “golden door” to a brighter future.

Points to Keep in Mind

Historians’ Questions

Historians have viewed Ellis Island in many ways, just as they have the entire process by which newcomers encountered America, adjusting to it as those already here reacted to and adjusted to them.

In many accounts, Ellis Island is depicted in an almost romantic way as a welcoming doorway to a new and better life for immigrants. In fact, this is how many immigrants themselves saw it, especially those who passed through it quickly and without incident. In this view, America welcomed the immigrants, showed respect for them, and made real efforts to protect them from mistreatment.

Others have seen Ellis Island in a less positive way. They focus on the impersonal rules; the sometimes ignorant, unfriendly, and even corrupt officials; and the many stages at which immigrants might be found wanting and sent home. They see in these aspects of the system a suspicious, even hostile attitude that was meant to tell the immigrants how superior America was and how lacking they and their own cultures were by comparison.

These differences—about Ellis Island and about the reception of immigrants in general—still give historians today much to debate.

The Primary Source Evidence

For this lesson, you will study ten primary source documents on immigration and Ellis Island. These will focus on the experience at Ellis Island as reported by immigrants themselves and observed by others. Some of the sources will focus on general attitudes toward immigrants common during the decades when the use of Ellis Island was at its height. Together, these sources will give you evidence to help you better understand and evaluate the Ellis Island experience. They will also enable you to make some informed judgments of your own about what two historians say about this decade.

Secondary Source Interpretations

After studying and discussing the primary sources, you will read two short passages by different historians about Ellis Island. The historians who wrote these passages agree about most of the facts, but they make quite different overall judgments about Ellis Island. You will use your own background knowledge and your ideas about the primary sources as you think about and answer some questions about the views of these historians.

Five Habits of Historical Thinking

History is not just a chronicle of one fact after another. It is a meaningful story, or an account of what happened and why. It is written to address questions or problems historians pose. This checklist describes key habits of thinking that historians adopt as they interpret primary sources and create their own accounts of the past.

History Is Not the Past Itself

When we learn history, we learn a story about the past, not the past itself. No matter how certain an account of the past seems, it is only one account, not the entire story. The “entire story” is gone. That is, the past itself no longer exists. Only some records of events remain, and they are never complete. Hence, it is important to see all judgments and conclusions about the past as tentative or uncertain. Avoid looking for hard-and-fast “lessons” from the past. The value of history is in a way the opposite of such a search for quick answers. That is, its value is in teaching us to live with uncertainty and see even our present as complex, unfinished, open-ended.

The Detective Model: Problem, Evidence, Interpretation

Historians can’t observe the past directly. They must use evidence, just as a detective tries to reconstruct a crime based on clues left behind. In the historian’s case, primary sources are the evidence—letters, official documents, maps, photos, newspaper articles, artifacts, and all other traces from past times. Like a detective, a historian defines a very specific problem to solve, one for which evidence does exist. Asking clear, meaningful questions is a key to writing good history. Evidence is always incomplete. It’s not always easy to separate fact from opinion in it, or to tell what is important from what is not. Historians try to do this, but they must stay cautious about their conclusions and open to other interpretations of the same evidence.

Time, Change, and Continuity

History is about the flow of events over time, yet it is not just one fact after another. It seeks to understand this flow of events as a pattern. In that pattern, some things change while others hold steady over time. You need to see history as a dynamic interplay of both change and continuity together. Only by doing this can you see how the past has evolved into the present—and why the present carries with it many traces or links to the past.

Cause and Effect

Along with seeing patterns of change and continuity over time, historians seek to explain that change. In doing this, they know that no single factor causes change. Many factors interact. Unique, remarkable and creative individual actions and plans are one factor, but individual plans have unintended outcomes, and these shape events in unexpected ways. Moreover, individuals do not always act rationally or with full knowledge of what they are doing. Finally, geography, technology, economics, cultural traditions, and ideas all affect what groups and individuals do.

As They Saw It: Grasping Past Points of View

Above all, thinking like a historian means trying hard to see how people in the past thought and felt. This is not easy. As one historian put it, the past is “another country” in which people felt and thought differently, often very differently from the way we do now. Avoiding “present-mindedness” is therefore a key task for historians. Also, since the past includes various groups in conflict, historians must learn to empathize with many diverse cultures and subgroups to see how they differ and what they share in common.

Part 2: Analyzing the Primary Sources

Note to the teacher: The following pages provide the primary sources for this lesson. We suggest you give these to students after they read the background essay, after they review the “Five Habits of Historical Thinking” handout, and after they watch and discuss the PowerPoint presentation for the lesson.

This section includes the following:

- **Handout: *Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist***

Give copies of this handout to students and ask them to refer to it when analyzing any primary source.

- **Ten Primary Source Documents**

The Documents are as follows:

- Document 1. A 1889 sketch of immigrants on a ship passing the Statue of Liberty
- Document 2. A *New York Times* article on Ellis Island, 1893
- Document 3. A 1913 photo of inspectors examining immigrants
- Document 4. An article titled “Ellis Island, 1892”
- Document 5. A *New York Times* article on food sales at Ellis Island, 1894
- Document 6. A notice posted at Ellis Island by its commissioner, 1902
- Document 7. Arnold Weiss, a Polish Jew, recalls an incident at Ellis Island
- Document 8. A French woman’s letter to the editor about Ellis Island, 1924
- Document 9. An anti-immigrant caricature from *Puck*, 1913
- Document 10. A 1906 *Harper’s Weekly* illustration of Jewish immigrant children

- **Ten “Source Analysis” Worksheets for Analyzing the Primary Sources**

Each worksheet asks student to take notes on one source. The prompts along the side match the five categories in the “Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist.” Not every category is used in each worksheet, only those that seem most relevant to a full analysis of that source.

You may want students to analyze all of the sources. However, if time does not allow this, use those that seem most useful for your own instructional purposes.

Students can use the notes on the “Source Analysis” worksheets in discussions, as a help in analyzing the two secondary sources in the next part of this lesson, and in follow-up debates, DBQs, and other activities.

Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist

Primary sources are the evidence historians use to reach conclusions and write their accounts of the past. Sources rarely have one obvious, easily grasped meaning. To interpret them fully, historians use several strategies. This checklist describes some of the most important of those strategies. Read the checklist through and use it to guide you whenever you need to analyze and interpret a primary source.

Sourcing

Think about a primary source's author or creator, how and why the primary source document was created, and where it appeared. Also, think about the audience it was intended for and what its purpose was. You may not always find much information about these things, but whatever you can learn will help you better understand the source. In particular, it may suggest the source's point of view or bias, since the author's background and intended audience often shape his or her ideas and way of expressing them.

Contextualizing

"Context" refers to the time and place of which the primary source is a part. In history, facts do not exist separately from one another. They get their meaning from the way they fit into a broader pattern. The more you know about that broader pattern, or context, the more you will be able to understand about the source and its significance.

Interpreting Meanings

It is rare for a source's full meaning to be completely obvious. You must read a written source closely, paying attention to its language and tone as well as to what it implies or merely hints at. With a visual source, all kinds of meaning may be suggested by the way it is designed, and by such things as shading, camera angle, use of emotional symbols or scenes, etc. The more you pay attention to all the details, the more you can learn from a source.

Point of View

Every source is written or created by someone with a purpose, an intended audience, and a point of view or bias. Even a dry table of numbers was created for some reason, to stress some things and not others, to make a point of some sort. At times, you can tell a point of view simply by sourcing the document. Knowing an author was a Democrat or a Republican, for example, will alert you to a likely point of view. In the end, however, only a close reading of the text will make you aware of point of view. Keep in mind that even a heavily biased source can still give you useful evidence of what some people in a past time thought. However, you need to take the bias into account in judging how reliable the source's own claims really are.

Corroborating Sources

No one source tells the whole story. Moreover, no one source is completely reliable. To make reasonable judgments about an event in the past, you must compare sources to find points of agreement and disagreement. Even when there are big differences, both sources may be useful. However, the differences will also tell you something, and they may be important in helping you understand each source.

The Primary Sources for the Lesson



Document 1

Information on the source:

A sketch of an ocean steamer passing the Statue of Liberty. It shows the scene on the steering deck, from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 2, 1887.

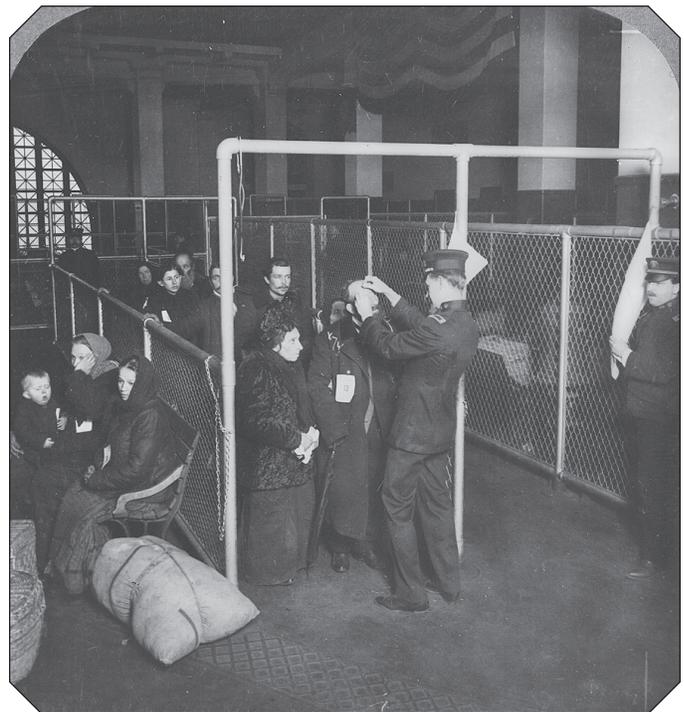
Document 2

Information on the source: Part of an article on immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, from *The New York Times*, December 11, 1893.

The immigrant is a patient, stolid animal as he appears at the handling station. With bags and bundles and cheap gripsacks, packed in Continental Europe, and half dazed with the new experience, this horde of human beings found themselves, the instant they set foot beneath the stars and stripes, prisoners, as effectively as if they had met at a prison station in Russia, bound for Siberia. They might walk in but one path from the gangplank—the one leading to the easterly end of the long, low building. In this they might enter but a single room. This room was bound by an iron fence, and once within, the immigrant on a search for the land of freedom became deprived of all personal liberty for the moment.

Document 3

Information on the source: U.S. inspectors examining the eyes of immigrants shortly after their arrival at Ellis Island, New York Harbor, in 1913.



Document 4

Information on the source: This passage is from “Ellis Island, 1892,” an article published in *The Illustrated American*, July 23, 1892.

On quarter of one per cent. of the Scandinavians—that is, Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes—over fifteen years of age, who reached New York 1891–92, could neither read nor write.

One per cent of the Germans over fifteen years of age could neither read nor write.

Great Britain is put down as sending over five per cent who are ignorant of two of the three R's. It would be interesting to know whether the Commissioners are aware of the fact that Great Britain does not include Ireland, and why the Emerald Island, which is given a separate place in all the other statistics, is merged into Great Britain on this occasion only. If the true facts of the case were given in the report, it would be found that the percentage of Scotch ignorance of reading and writing was nearly nil, and that the Irish were no more learned than the Russian immigrants, ten per cent. of whom do not know their A B C's. Of Austrians and Hungarians—again an unfair combination—twenty-five percent are reported to be ignoramuses, of Italians forty-five per cent, and of Poles sixty per cent.

People who visit Ellis Island will not be much impressed with the class of people who are to form our future fellow citizens. However, as Col. Weber, who has thoroughly studied the question of immigration on both sides of the Atlantic, tells us they are not deteriorating, we must conclude that a few months spent in this bright air of ours, and a week or two of feeling that you may go as you please, works wonders. The American who came over in the steerage a few years ago is a different person from the being you see landed at Ellis Island.

Each immigrant is thoroughly examined as to whence he came and whither he is going,

and particularly questioned as to whether he is under contract. If so, he is returned to his native heath at the cost of the steamship company. If it is found that he is penniless, or likely to prove a burden to the State, or has any noxious disease, or is an idiot or a lunatic, or is a convict, back he goes to the old world.

Along Bowling Green, facing the Battery, are numerous hotels and mission houses, supported by philanthropic Catholics and Protestants, where the newly arrived immigrants can find board and lodging, and every precaution is taken by the government officers that they shall not be fleeced. A body of men, who can between them talk almost every language under the sun, is provided, and the immigrant, so long as he is under Uncle Sam's care, is thoroughly taken care of.

Nor does Uncle Sam remain satisfied with having seen him start off to the mainland with his baggage, full of hope in his prospects in the land of liberty. If he comes back to Ellis Island a pauper within a year, the government authorities see that he is taken home again by the steamship company on whose vessel he arrived here. If he falls sick of any disease which may have been incurred in that vessel or before he left Europe, they see, too, that the steamship company pays his doctor's bills.

Under the new regime, the lot of the immigrant to the United States is made as happy a one as mortal man can make, and his expense to the country has been reduced to a minimum. The new law has worked well in this way, too. The steamship companies have ceased to seek in the highways and hedges for immigrants as they did under the old regime, for they know that the United States Government has set its foot down and refuses to receive undesirable immigrants.

Document 5

Information on the source: A passage from an article called “Opens the Door to Frauds: How Food Is Sold to Immigrants at Ellis Island,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1894. In this passage, the article raises questions about how easy it might be for food sellers and others to take advantage of immigrants at Ellis Island.

Some whom a reporter for the New York Times saw last week walked up to the lunch counter and made their purchases in precisely the same perfunctory and routine way that they walked past the inspectors and showed their documentary evidence to enter the country. No complaint is made that he [the lunch counter operator] does not manage it as well as anyone could or should. But, if it was in dishonest hands, there is a fine chance for defrauding ignorant immigrants. It is doubtful that there is another restaurant in the world where precisely the same conditions exist as at this one. It is on Government property, it is owned by private individuals. The Government assumes to maintain

jurisdiction over it. Many of its customers do not know how to count the money which they pay for what they buy. None of them ever saw it before; most of them will never see it again. Their purchases are made in a hurry. They do not ask for prices; there is no time. These are posted conspicuously, but many customers cannot read, and the formality is useless in their cases. They do not ask what is to be had in many instances. They take such quantities as are put into a paper bag and handed to them. They give a piece of money and are given some change. They add the paper bag containing the food to their other bundles and pass on, stolid, stupid, half-dazed, out into the United States.

Document 6

Information on the source: On April 28, 1902, Theodore Roosevelt appointed William Williams as commissioner of Ellis Island. Williams was determined to end abuses at Ellis Island, and soon after arriving, he posted the following notice.

Immigrants must be treated with kindness and consideration. Any government official violating the terms of this notice will be recommended for dismissal from the service. Any other person so doing will be requested to leave. It is earnestly requested that any violation hereof, or any instance of any kind of improper treatment of immigrants at Ellis Island, or before they leave the barge office, be promptly brought to the attention of the commissioner.

Document 7

Information on the source: A statement by Arnold Weiss, a Polish Jew from Russia who arrived at Ellis Island in 1921, at the age of 13.

They also questioned people on literacy. My uncle called me aside, when he came to take us off. He said, “Your mother doesn’t know how to read.” I said, “That’s all right.” For the reading you faced what they called the commissioners, like judges on a bench. I was surrounded by my aunt and uncle and another uncle who’s a pharmacist—my mother was in the center. They said she would have to take a test for reading. So one man said, “She can’t speak English.” Another man said, “We know that. We will give her a siddur.” You know what a siddur is? It’s a Jewish book. The night they said this, I knew that she couldn’t do that and we would be in trouble. Well, they opened the siddur. There was a certain passage they had you read. I looked at it and I saw right away what it was. I quickly studied it—I knew the whole paragraph. Then I got underneath the two of them there—I was very small—and I told her the words in Yiddish very softly. I had memorized the lines and I said them quietly and she said them louder so the commissioner could hear it. She looked at it and it sounded as if she was reading it, but I was doing the talking underneath. I was Charlie McCarthy!

Document 8

Information on the source: A French woman writing to *The New York Times* about Ellis Island, February 17, 1924.

The ladies and gentlemen in charge of the emigrants have inexhaustible patience and kindness. The large admission hall is (in the evening) used as concert room (once a week) and a cinema once also. Sundays a Catholic, a Protestant and Jewish services are held so any creed can be followed. All this is free. Above, all around the hall is a balcony. This has white tile walls and floors, porcelain lavabos and baths. There are two hospitals, a kindergarten, medical attendance, all free as well as board, lodging, entertainment, etc., etc. Interrogation rooms, etc., are on the ground floor. Besides breakfast (coffee, eggs, bread, butter, jam) (lunch—meat, vegetables, cheese, tea) (dinner—soup,

meat, etc.), there are (morning, afternoon, evening) three distributions of the best of sweet fresh milk and crackers . . . Six hundred and fifty employees are daily in attendance. Eighteen languages are interpreted. From morning till night colored men and women clean incessantly. Towels are changed daily. Sheets three times a week.

I leave to a competent man the estimate of the daily expense of such an establishment, and I should thank heartily an expert to compare Ellis Island to anything of the same sort, any other nation in the wide world has to offer.



Document 9

Information on the source: This anti-immigrant caricature shows anarchists, Jews, Russians, and Italians dressed in kimonos being kept out of the United States. The caption says: "Perhaps if they came in kimonos, the real undesirables might be kept out." From *Puck*, March 1913.

Document 10

Information on the source: Jewish immigrant children in New York waving tiny U.S. flags while repeating the oath of allegiance. A reproduction of a drawing as it appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, 1906.



Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 1

A sketch of immigrants on an ocean liner approaching the Statue of Liberty, from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 2, 1887.

Contextualizing

The immigrants on this ship in 1887 would have arrived in New York a few years before Ellis Island was opened as an immigration receiving station. They would have landed at Castle Garden on Manhattan itself. What sorts of challenges do you think they would have faced there in their first encounter with their new homeland?

Interpreting meanings

How can you tell from this scene that most of the people on board here are immigrants to America?

Why do you think the artist made the Statue of Liberty such a key feature in this image?

Point of view

What overall view of immigrants and of America does this visual scene express? What features help in convey its point of view?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 2

Part of an article on Ellis Island, from *The New York Times*, December 11, 1893.

Sourcing

Why might a major New York newspaper have been especially interested in immigrants and their treatment at Ellis Island in 1893?

Interpreting meanings

What view of immigrants does the article mean to convey when it describes the immigrant as “a patient, stolid animal” or as “half-crazed,” or as part of a “horde of human beings”?

At one point the article says the immigrants are like “prisoners” arriving “at a prison station in Russia.” How does the article then go on to back up this suggestion?

Point of view

What point of view or opinion does the article express both about immigrants and about Ellis Island? How fair do you think it is in its judgments about Ellis Island? Explain your answer.

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 3

U.S. inspectors examining immigrants after their arrival at Ellis Island in 1913.

Contextualizing

Inspectors like those shown here tried to check immigrants for certain diseases, such as trachoma (an eye disease), heart problems, lung diseases, and “LCD,” which stood for “loathsome contagious disease.” Think of what you know about medical science in the late 1800s, the kinds of conditions the immigrants were leaving behind, and the conditions of life for many of them in America’s largest cities. How might these things help explain the emphasis at Ellis Island on certain diseases such as these?

Interpreting meanings

Imagine being an immigrant from southern or eastern Europe waiting in this line to be inspected. What sense of America might this first encounter with it give you? Do you think it would be reassuring, intimidating, confusing, frightening, or inspiring? Might it be all of these or none of these? Can you be sure from this photo alone what these immigrants were experiencing? Explain your answers.

Corroborating sources

Compare Source Documents 1–3. How do these documents support or not support one another? Which document seems the most reliable evidence of the arrival experience for immigrants at Ellis Island? Why?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 4

This passage is from “Ellis Island, 1892,” an article published in *The Illustrated American*, July 23, 1892.

Contextualizing

In the 1890s, Americans began to talk about a new immigration pattern, and this pattern worried them a good deal. How do the first three paragraphs of this document illustrate the nature of this new immigration and the concerns it aroused?

Interpreting meanings

This article says people “may not be much impressed with the class of people” arriving at Ellis Island, but it also says this concern is greatly exaggerated. Can you explain the article’s reasons for its view about this?

The article suggests some real suspicions about steamship companies that carry immigrants to America. What do you think are the reasons for these suspicions?

Point of view

Would you characterize this article as pro-immigration or anti-immigration? Do you think it is prejudiced against the new immigration from eastern and southern Europe? Why or why not?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 5

A passage from an 1894 *New York Times* article on how food is sold at Ellis Island.

Interpreting meanings

What exactly was it about the operation of the lunch counter at Ellis Island that so bothered the writer of this article? Explain this in your own words in a sentence or two.

Does this article actually accuse the lunch counter operator at Ellis Island of doing anything wrong?

Point of view

When the *New York Times* refers to the immigrants as “stolid, stupid, half-dazed,” is it expressing anti-immigrant prejudice, or is it making a point critical mainly of the government operation at Ellis Island, or is it doing both?

Corroborating sources

Compare this article with the other *New York Times* article, Primary Source Document 2. Taken together, sum up what you think the *Times*'s main concerns were about Ellis Island and the immigrants arriving at it in its early years.

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 6

An official notice posted at Ellis Island by William Williams shortly after he became commissioner of Ellis Island in 1902.

Sourcing

In interpreting this particular primary source document, why is it important to know who William Williams was? How does knowing this affect your view of the importance or significance of the document?

Contextualizing

What do you know about President Theodore Roosevelt and his views about political corruption and the need for political reform? How does knowing about this help you better understand the significance of Williams's appointment as commissioner of Ellis Island and the notice he posted?

Interpreting meanings

From this notice, what can you infer or guess about past practices at Ellis Island prior to the appointment of William Williams?

What can you fairly assume about the workforce at Ellis Island, even at the time when Williams posted this notice?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 7

A statement by Arnold Weiss, a Polish Jew from Russia who arrived at Ellis Island in 1921, at the age of 13.

Sourcing

This is the account of an immigrant remembering an event from his past when he was 13 years old. How reliable do you think this account is as a primary source?

Interpreting meanings

Why do you think Ellis Island officials felt it important to test each immigrant's ability to read?

Do you think Arnold Weiss's family simply did not care about literacy all that much? Why or why not? How might their views about the importance of literacy have differed from the Ellis Island officials they deal with in this incident?

Point of view

Do you think Weiss recalled this incident out of anger at tyrannical officials or out of amusement at inefficient officials?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 8

A French woman writing to *The New York Times* about Ellis Island, February 17, 1924.

Contextualizing

New, very strict immigration laws were passed in 1921 and again in 1924. Summarize how these laws dramatically changed immigration patterns in the U.S. How might these changes have affected the conditions at Ellis Island as described by this immigrant?

Interpreting meanings

Sum up the things that most impressed this immigrant about Ellis Island. What features or aspects of the experience might she have left out of her account?

Sourcing

The author of this comment is identified as a French woman. Given the immigration patterns both before and after the 1921 and 1924 laws, why might knowing this about her be important in assessing her point of view about Ellis Island?

Corroborating sources

Compare and contrast this source with others for this lesson and use the comparisons to sum up what the Ellis Island experience was like and how it may have changed over time.

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 9

An anti-immigrant caricature on the cover of *Puck* magazine, March 1913.

Contextualizing

This cartoon reflects certain attitudes about immigration in general in the early 1900s. To understand the cartoon, it helps to know about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and President Theodore Roosevelt's Gentleman's Agreement of 1907. Sum up what these actions did and why they put Asian immigrants in a separate class from European immigrants prior to the 1920s.

Based on this context, explain the cartoon's caption: "Perhaps if they came in kimonos, the real undesirables might be kept out."

Interpreting meanings

Notice the facial features of the immigrants in this cartoon. These immigrants are clearly not meant to look Asian, in spite of the fact that they are all wearing kimonos, a Japanese style of dress. These faces are basically stereotypes of many of the groups making up the so-called "new immigration" of the late 1800s and early 1900s. What makes them stereotypes of these new immigrant groups?

Point of view

Do you think the creator of this cartoon and *Puck* magazine were opposed to the laws excluding Asian immigrants, or were they simply in favor of extending those laws to cover the immigrant groups shown here?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 10

A 1906 *Harper's Weekly* illustration of Jewish immigrant children in New York waving tiny U.S. flags while repeating the oath of allegiance.

Interpreting Meanings

Are there any features in this illustration that help to identify these children as European immigrants or, in particular, as Jewish immigrants from Europe?

One central and widely held ideal for immigrants in American history has always been assimilation, often summed up by speaking of America as “The Melting Pot.” Some might say the title for this drawing could be “The Melting Pot.” Do you agree or disagree? Explain by also defining your idea of what the melting pot concept is.

Corroborating sources

Compare this source with the *Puck* cartoon cover (Primary Source Document 9). Are these two totally opposed views of immigration, or do they share any ideas about immigration in common? Using the evidence of the other sources for this lesson, which of these two views is closest to the one that seems to have influenced Ellis Island officials the most in their dealings with immigrants in the decades of the late 1800s and early 1900s?

Part 3: Analyzing the Secondary Sources

Note to the teacher: This next section includes passages from two secondary source accounts of immigration and Ellis Island, along with two activities on these sources. We suggest you first discuss the brief comment “Analyzing Secondary Sources” just above the first of the two secondary sources. Discuss the four criteria the first activity asks students to use in analyzing each secondary source. These criteria focus students on the nature of historical accounts as 1) problem-centered, 2) based on evidence, 3) influenced by point of view and not purely neutral, and 4) tentative or aware of alternative explanations.

Specifically, this section includes the following:

- **Two secondary source passages**

Give copies of these passages to students to read, either in class or as homework. The two passages are from *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*, by Oscar Handlin, Edition: 2, revised (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), and from “Their Journey to America,” an article by Dave and Patricia Kustra posted on the Web site of the Allegheny–Kiski Valley Historical Society in Pennsylvania (http://www.akvhs.org/their_journey_to_america.htm)

- **Two student activities**

Activity 1

Students analyze the two passage taking notes on the following questions:

- How clearly does the account focus on a problem or question?
- Does it reveal a position or express a point of view?
- How well does it base its case on primary source evidence?
- How aware is it of alternative explanations or points of view?

Activity 2

In pairs, students select two of the primary sources for the lesson that best support each author’s claims in the secondary source passages. Students discuss their choices with the class.

The Secondary Sources for the Lesson

Analyzing Secondary Sources

Historians write secondary source accounts of the past after studying primary source documents like the ones you have studied on Ellis Island. However, they normally select documents from among a great many others, and they stress some aspects of the story but not others. In doing this, historians are guided by the questions they ask about the topic. Their selection of sources and their focus are also influenced by their own aims, bias or point of view. No account of the past is perfectly neutral. In reading a secondary source, you should pay to what it includes, what it leaves out, what conclusions it reaches, and how aware it is of alternative interpretations.

* * * *

Secondary Source 1

Information on the source: The passage in the box below is an excerpt from *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*, by Oscar Handlin.

Men, women, and children come off their floating homes. They are arranged in lines cut off from each other by wooden barriers, and they begin wearily to tread an incomprehensible maze. Officials in uniform survey them, look at the already large collection of papers, peer at eyes, down throats, thump chests, make notes on cards, affix tags of various colors to the hesitant bodies that pass uneasily along before them. Now and again, one of the fellow travelers is separated out from the rest—to go who knows where . . .

Anyway, most are lucky and do get through. The handful of inspectors are too few to permit more than a perfunctory examination. They look for surface disabilities (trachoma, an infection of the

eyelids, is one; favus, a skin disease, is another), for obvious deformities, and for signs of idiocy or insanity. On the hot summer days which see the peak load, the impatient officials, starched collars wilting under the heavy serge, now and then single out for more than casual study a case from the long rows that move stolidly before them. The rest get by. They escape to the free American aid and leave behind the luckless who must still face medical boards of review, hearings, and appeals, perhaps soon to be sent back from whence they came or to spend more months in the confinement rooms of the station while distant powers thumb through the dossiers that pile up on Washington desks.

The Secondary Sources for the Lesson

Secondary Source 2

Information on the source: The passage in the box below is an excerpt from “Their Journey to America,” an article by Dave and Patricia Kustra on their own family members who emigrated from Slovakia in the first decade of the 20th century. The article is posted on the Web site of the Allegheny–Kiski Valley Historical Society in Pennsylvania.

From its beginning, Ellis Island was notorious for its corrupt currency exchange officials who shortchanged immigrants. Concession operators were also a problem. The catering service was known to serve meals without utensils, but served up 20 million pounds of prune sandwiches a year. A barber was fired after threatening an immigrant with deportation if he did not pay to have his hair cut. A clerk was accused of failing to deliver money orders to immigrants, resulting in their deportation. Baggage handlers were found to charge immigrants twice the going rate. Railroad ticket agents often routed immigrants, not by the most direct route to their destination, but by one that required a layover. Some were forced to buy a fifty-cent or dollar bag of food from the restaurant concession for their train trip. There were always a large number of clergy and persons representing charities, boarding houses, and immigrant aid societies to meet passengers as they disembarked on Ellis. Some boarding houses charged excessive rates and abused

guests. St. Joseph’s Home for the Protection of Polish Immigrants was accused of beating tenants with rubber hoses, exacting exorbitant rents, and withholding money left with them for safekeeping. Women taken in by the Swedish Immigrant Home disappeared, perhaps sold into slavery or prostitution. These abuses were cleaned up to a great extent under William Williams who served as Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis from 1902–05 and 1909–14. Not everyone on the Island was corrupt. Social workers helped immigrants find jobs and avoid unscrupulous labor contractors who preyed on their own countrymen. Many of the forty immigrant aid societies appearing on Ellis gave cards to passengers to facilitate their travel. A typical card might read, “To the conductor: Please show bearer where to change train and where to get of, as this person does not speak English.” They also helped locate lost luggage, cut red tape, contact family members, and even gave money and clothing to immigrants.

The Secondary Sources: Activity 1

In this exercise, you read two short passages from much longer secondary sources dealing with Ellis Island. For each secondary source, take notes on the following four questions (you may want to underline phrases or sentences in the passages that you think back up your notes):

1. How clearly does this account focus on a problem or question? What do you think that problem or question is? Sum it up in your own words here.

The Uprooted, Handlin

“Their Journey to America,” Kustra and Kustra

2. Does the secondary source take a position or express a point of view about Ellis Island? If so, briefly state that point of view or quote an example of it.

The Uprooted, Handlin

“Their Journey to America,” Kustra and Kustra

3. How well does the secondary source seem to base its case on primary source evidence? Take notes about any specific examples, if you can identify them.

The Uprooted, Handlin

“Their Journey to America,” Kustra and Kustra

4. Does the secondary source seem aware of alternative explanations or points of view about this topic? Underline points in the passage where you see this.

The Uprooted, Handlin

“Their Journey to America,” Kustra and Kustra

In pairs, discuss your notes for this activity.

Part 4: Follow-Up Options

Note to the teacher: At this point, students have completed the key tasks of *The Historian's Apprentice* program. They have examined their own prior understandings and acquired background knowledge on the topic. They have analyzed and debated a set of primary sources. They have considered secondary source accounts of the topic. This section includes two suggested follow-up activities. Neither of these is a required part of the lesson. They do not have to be undertaken right away. However, we do strongly recommend that you find some way to do what these options provide for. They give students a way to write or debate in order to express their ideas and arrive at their own interpretations of the topic.

Two suggested follow-up activities are included here:

- **Document-Based Questions**

Four Document-Based Questions are provided. Choose one and follow the guidelines provided for writing a typical DBQ essay.

- **A Structured Debate**

The aim of this debate format is not so much to teach students to win a debate, but to learn to listen and learn, as well as speak up and defend a position. The goal is a more interactive and more civil debating process.

Document-Based Questions

Document-Based Questions (DBQs) are essay questions you must answer by using your own background knowledge and a set of primary sources on that topic. Below are four DBQs on Ellis Island. Use the sources for this lesson and everything you have learned from it to write a short essay answer to one of these questions.

Suggested DBQs

Compare and contrast the experience at Ellis Island in its first years in the 1890s to the experience later, in the first decades of the 20th century.

“The encounter at Ellis Island was very different for approved immigrants from western Europe than it was for the masses from southern and eastern Europe, who were uniformly looked down on.” Assess the validity of this statement (that is, explain why you do or do not agree with it).

Based on the encounter with America at Ellis Island, what might an immigrant conclude about the kind of society America was and what it would offer in the way of a new life in a new land?

“At Ellis Island, the immigrant encountered a complex, impersonal system, but also one based on law, rules, and equal treatment for all—in short, a realistic introduction to America itself at that time.” Assess the validity of this statement (that is, explain why you do or do not agree with it).

Suggested Guidelines for Writing a DBQ Essay

- **Planning and thinking through the essay**

Consider the question carefully. Think about how to answer it so as to address each part of it. Do not ignore any detail in the question. Pay attention to the question’s form (cause-and-effect, compare-and-contrast, assess the validity, etc.). This form will often give you clues as to how best to organize each part of your essay.

- **Thesis statement and introductory paragraph**

The thesis statement is a clear statement of what you hope to prove in your essay. It must address *all* parts of the DBQ, it must make a claim you can back up with the sources, and it should be specific enough to help you organize the rest of your essay.

- **Using evidence effectively**

Use the notes on your “Source Analysis” activity sheets to organize your thoughts about these primary sources. In citing a source, use it to support key points or illustrate major themes. Do not simply list a source in order to get it into the essay somehow. If any sources do *not* support your thesis, you should still try to use them. Your essay may be more convincing if you qualify your thesis so as to account for these other sources.

- **Linking ideas explicitly**

After your introduction, your internal paragraphs should make your argument in a logical or clear way. Each paragraph should be built around one key supporting idea and details that back up that idea. Use transition phrase such as “before,” “next,” “then,” or “on the one hand...but on the other hand,” to help readers follow the thread of your argument.

- **Wrapping it up**

Don’t add new details about sources in your final paragraph. State a conclusion that refers back to your thesis statement by showing how the evidence has backed it up. If possible, look for nice turns of phrase to end on a dramatic note.

A Structured Debate

Small-group activity: Using a version of the Structured Academic Controversy model, debate alternate interpretations of this lesson's topic. The goal of this method is not so much to win a debate as to learn to collaborate in clarifying your interpretations to one another. In doing this, your goal should be to see that it is possible for reasonable people to hold differing views, even when finding the "one right answer" is not possible.

Use all their notes from previous activities in this lesson. Here are the rules for this debate:

1. Organize a team of four or six students. Choose a debate topic based on the lesson *What Happened at Ellis Island?*

(You may wish to use one of the DBQs suggested for the Document-Based Questions activity for this lesson, or you may want to define the debate topic in a different way.)

2. Split your team into two sub-groups. Each sub-group should study the materials for this lesson and rehearse its case. One sub-group then present its case to the other. That other sub-group must repeat the case back to the first sub-group's satisfaction.
3. Next, the two sub-groups switch roles and repeat step 2
4. Your team either reaches a consensus which it explains to the entire class, or it explains where the key differences between the sub-groups lie

Answers to “Source Analysis” Activities

Source Analysis: Document 1

Contextualizing: Answers could vary considerably, from challenges about coping with the language, finding housing, searching for relatives, etc., to dealing with officials, honest and dishonest; other swindlers; etc.

Interpreting meanings: The various dress styles are meant to convey this clearly.

The statue is perhaps meant to emphasize the notion of a land of liberty opening its doors to others.

Point of view: The excited, hopeful expressions on the immigrants, the Statue of Liberty, etc., all help convey a very positive view of both immigrants and the society about to greet them.

Source Analysis: Document 2

Sourcing: Ellis Island was in New York’s harbor, and it had just opened.

Interpreting meanings: Some may see these as demeaning expressions. Others may take this to be more a criticism of the confusing situation the immigrants faced at Ellis Island.

Mainly by describing the confined physical spaces through which the immigrants were forced to move.

Point of view: Answers may vary and should be discussed.

Source Analysis: Document 3

Contextualizing: These were mainly poor people from very poor parts of Europe on their way to cities where contagious diseases still threatened thousands regularly.

Interpreting meanings: Answers will vary, but they should show awareness of how hard it is to draw firm conclusions from personal accounts and certainly from a single photo like this one.

Corroborating sources: Document 1 could be seen as more positive than the other two, but answers here could vary and should be discussed.

Source Analysis: Document 4

Contextualizing: It draws a sharp contrast between old and new immigrant groups in terms of their literacy and by implication the ease with which they would be able to adjust to American life.

Interpreting meanings: The writer felt that the American environment of freedom would change the immigrants and they would learn to adapt as a result. He also appears confident that new immigration laws adequately provide for returning undesirable immigrants to their homelands.

The steamship companies made money from immigrant passengers and, in this writer’s view, were too lax in letting people on board whom they should have screened out.

Point of view: Answers will vary and should be discussed.

Source Analysis: Document 5

Interpreting meanings: The main complaint is that it could easily be run dishonestly without anyone noticing and without the immigrants themselves realizing it.

No actual accusation of wrongdoing is made.

Point of view: Various interpretations could be made and should be discussed.

Corroborating sources: Both stories could be said to mix seemingly anti-immigrant stereotypes or judgments with expressions of concern for immigrants at the hands of unscrupulous officials and others at Ellis Island.

Source Analysis: Document 6

Sourcing: As the commissioner in charge of Ellis Island, Williams's views would be significant as to the way the entire facility was run.

Contextualizing: Roosevelt was a Progressive reformer who opposed all kinds of political corruption. He would have likely been determined to have Ellis Island run fairly and efficiently and without abuse.

Interpreting meanings: The need to post this notice would seem to suggest that abuses were a real problem that top officials felt a need to address openly.

That it may have included many who dealt unfairly with immigrants, but perhaps also that it would have responded to demands from authorities to improve.

Source Analysis: Document 7

Sourcing: Answers may vary. It could be that Weiss was embellishing in order to be able to tell an entertaining story; on the other hand, this is his personal account, etc.

Interpreting meanings: Answers may vary. Some may see literacy as a legitimate need officials were right to insist on, though others may see this as a handy means of excluding people for all sorts of other reasons.

Views certainly could vary here. One family member could not read, but others could. It may be that the cultural background of this family simply determined that males were taught to read more often than females, etc.

Point of view: The incident is recalled with some humor, but answers here still could vary.

Source Analysis: Document 8

Contextualizing: The new laws established quotas for each country, with very strict limits on the amounts allowed in from eastern and southern Europe where the bulk of the "new immigration" had been coming from. This drastically reduced the numbers passing through Ellis Island.

Interpreting meanings: She notes the good food, the cleanliness, health care, the respect for religious preferences, the entertainment provided, etc. She does not comment on those sent back, on the bureaucratic procedures of the inspections themselves, etc.

Sourcing: As a Frenchwoman, the quota system was friendlier to her than it would have been to immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, many of whom might have been excluded or regarded as unwelcome.

Corroborating sources: Choices of other documents could vary considerably and should be discussed.

Source Analysis: Document 9

Contextualizing: Both actions sought to exclude groups of Asian immigrants entirely.

In depicting the immigrants in kimonos, it is wishing that the stricter limits on Asians might also be applied to these immigrants, who it sees as even less desirable.

Interpreting meanings: Answers will vary but should focus on exaggerated or distorted features meant to depict these immigrants as inferior in various ways.

Point of view: Answers will vary and should be discussed.

Source Analysis: Document 10

Interpreting meanings: Answers may vary, but it appears an effort was made here to depict these figures as white Europeans but without visual features identifying them with any one immigrant group.

Answers to this question will vary and should be discussed.

Corroborating sources: Several other sources besides Documents 9 and 10 could be used in answering this question. Answers will vary and should be discussed.

Evaluating Secondary Sources: Activity 1

These are not definitive answers to the questions. They are suggested points to look for in student responses.

1. How clearly does this account focus on a problem or question? What do you think that problem or question is? Sum it up in your own words here?

Handlin basically seeks to construct imaginatively a word picture or impression of the many aspects of the typical immigrant encounter at Ellis Island. If there is a question he is addressing, it is implied and is only something along the lines of “what was it like and how did it feel?”

Kustra and Kustra more specifically address the problem of the possible abuse or exploitation of immigrants, which could and at times definitely did take place at Ellis Island.

2. Does the secondary source take a position or express a point of view about Ellis Island? If so, briefly state that point of view or quote an example of it.

Handlin seems to see the experience as a confusing one, but one that was essentially benign or even positive for the many who got through. His view of the officials at Ellis Island is that the vast numbers forced them to deal in a routine and rapid way in passing immigrants through.

Kustra and Kustra are much harsher in their judgments about Ellis Island, and they devote a great deal of detail to the various ways in which immigrants could be abused. However, they do also note the many supportive and helpful people involved in the process as well.

3. How well does the secondary source seem to base its case on primary source evidence? Take notes about any specific examples, if you can identify them.

Neither *Handlin* nor *Kustra and Kustra* make specific reference to primary source documents, except for one reference to a card in the *Kustras*’ passage. Both do provide very specific details about the Ellis Island process that did come from such sources, but these sources are not cited specifically in these passages.

4. Does the secondary source seem aware of alternative explanations or points of view about this topic? Underline points in the passage where you see this.

Neither *Handlin* nor *Kustra and Kustra* make any reference to other historians who might take issue with their interpretation of the Ellis Island experience.

