

Meet the Presidents: An Introduction to Primary and Secondary Sources

“What’s in those boxes?” students ask as they gather in the classroom.

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

This recipe will introduce students to the lives of several presidents. Boxes of biographical source materials await. Each group must determine which resources are primary and which are secondary and report their findings.

COOKING TIME

Cooking time is 30 to 60 minutes and serves at least eight students and no more than thirty.

ACRL INFORMATION DIETARY STANDARDS ADDRESSED

Standard One: 1.2

Standard Three: 3.1, 3.2, 3.6

Standard Four: 4.1, 4.3

MAIN COOKING TECHNIQUE

Small group work, presentations



MAIN INGREDIENTS

- A selection of primary and secondary sources relating to U.S. presidents. The number of presidents you use for the exercise and the number of sources you select for each president will depend upon your class/group size. I like to use groups of three to five students and four to six sources per president.
- Lidded, unmarked boxes to hold the materials for each president (Highsmith has some brightly colored boxes that work nicely, or you can use banker’s boxes, etc.).
- For a gourmet version, an instructor’s workstation with projector and document camera could be used to enhance the group presentations.

PREPARATION

Select presidents. Pull primary and secondary sources for each president from your collection and place the materials in boxes. You need to be familiar with the sources you select so that you can work effectively with the groups as they evaluate their materials and present their findings.

THE INSTRUCTION SESSION

1. Introduction

- a. Discuss the definitions of primary and secondary sources, suggesting examples of each type of source. Discuss why both types of sources are important for research. Field any student questions.

2. Activity

- a. Divide class into groups.
- b. Have each group choose a box without opening it. The boxes are lidded and unmarked, so the contents are a surprise. At this point, students will be somewhat perplexed as to what all of this is about.
- c. Inform the students that the goal of this exercise is to Meet the Presidents. Each group will (hypothetically) explore the life and times of a particular president using both primary and secondary sources.
- d. Each box contains a selection of materials that could be used for their research. The students must determine which materials could serve as primary sources and which could serve as secondary sources.

- e. The students decide how to approach and divide the workload, but the entire group must reach a consensus for each source in the box.
 - f. Float between the groups to answer questions and keep discussions on track.
3. **Discussion**
- a. Regroup for presentations and discussion.
 - b. Have each group identify their president, show their materials, and explain the decisions they made about the sources in their box.
 - c. Prompt the groups during their presentations to elicit their reasons for labeling a source as primary or secondary.
 - d. Allow classmates to ask questions or dispute findings to get the entire class involved.
4. **Review**
- a. Save time at the end of the activity to review what the students have learned and answer any remaining questions.



ALLERGY WARNINGS

Some students balk at working in groups, so you may have a little resistance to the activity at first, but the process of selecting the boxes usually generates some curiosity and enthusiasm. You have to interact with the groups as they are working to ensure that everyone is taking part in looking at and evaluating the sources and not just rushing to finish by allowing the more vocal students make all the decisions.

CHEF'S NOTE

When I first began teaching primary vs. secondary sources to our adult learners, I used a variety of topics for this exercise – some historical, some literary, some popular culture. I found that a number of my students were completely unfamiliar

with some of the subjects I had chosen, which made them less interested and hampered their ability to evaluate the materials. I revised the activity using materials related to the presidents because all of my students at least had heard of the different presidents and often knew a bit about them, and even a small library like ours has a decent selection of materials that I could use. This exercise has worked very well for my classes so far – students who have never encountered these concepts before leave with the ability to differentiate between primary and secondary sources. And after they get involved with the materials and start to discuss their president with their peers, the students are interested and engaged.

