

Evaluating Sources

Materials:

- Evaluating Sources Worksheet

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: *As we've seen in the Lunchroom Fight and Snapshot Autobiography lessons, different people often have different accounts of what happened in the past.*

One question that historians face all the time is who to believe? What makes one account more trustworthy than another?

2. Hand out Evaluating Sources Worksheet and divide students into groups of three. Have them complete worksheet.
3. Discussion: Review student answers. Use the following answer key to guide discussion:

NOTE: The key takeaway from this activity is that historical understanding is intertextual. Though students are asked to choose one source over the other in this lesson, they would ultimately need to corroborate their sources with additional evidence in order to adequately answer these historical questions.

Answer Key:

1. Source 2: Historians base their accounts on multiple primary and secondary documents and extensive research. Hollywood films have no standards for historical accuracy.
2. Source 1: Audience shapes the stories we tell. We can imagine that even in 1936, a former slave would be wary of criticizing slavery to a white government official. That is not to say that Source 1 is necessarily accurate; we can imagine a former slave might exaggerate accounts or possibly not remember details so well. Of the two sources, however, Source 1 will probably be more trustworthy.
3. Source 2: Human memory is notoriously unreliable. A map of a concentration is technically an "objective" source. On the other hand, there is no guarantee that the map perfectly mirrored the layout of the camp.
4. Source 2: Any government film created in 1942 to explain internment would be propaganda. The declassified evidence in the Congressional report makes Source 2 more reliable.
5. Source 1: Sworn testimony is the gold standard of evidence. Although testimony can be corrupted by lying, coercion, and the shakiness of human memory, in this instance Source 1 is

- more reliable than a public speech by a General whose reputation is on the line.
6. Neither: Textbooks from the 1980s tended to overlook and/or neglect the experiences and accounts of Native Americans. On the other hand, a newspaper account from 1876 would likely have lacked credible evidence about the battle and/or have been biased towards Custer and his men.

Name _____

Evaluating Sources

1. **Historical Question:** Who was present at the signing of the Declaration of Independence?

Source 1: Hollywood movie about the American Revolution made 2001.

Source 2: Book written by a famous historian who is an expert on the American Revolution, published in 1999.

Which do you trust more? Why?

2. **Historical Question:** What was slavery like in South Carolina?

Source 1: Interview with former slave in 1936. The interviewer is a black man collecting oral histories for the Federal Writers' Project.

Source 2: Interview with former slave in 1936. The interviewer is a white woman collecting oral histories for the Federal Writers' Project.

Which do you trust more? Why?

3. **Historical Question:** What was the layout of the Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz?

Source 1: Interview with 80 year-old Holocaust survivor in 1985.

Source 2: Map of concentration camp found in Nazi files.

Which do you trust more? Why?

4. Historical Question: Why were Japanese Americans put in internment camps during WWII?

Source 1: Government film explaining internment from 1942.

Source 2: Government report on Japanese Internment from 1983 based on declassified government documents.

Which do you trust more? Why?

5. Historical Question: Did American soldiers commit atrocities during the Vietnam War in 1969?

Source 1: Sworn testimony by American Sergeant in Congressional hearings in 1969.

Source 2: Speech by American General touring the United States in 1969.

Which do you trust more? Why?

6. Historical Question: What happened at the Battle of Little Bighorn?

Source 1: High school history textbook from 1985.

Source 2: Newspaper account from the day after the battle in June 1876.

Which do you trust more? Why?