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Methods to use Digital Resources to Teach Primary Sources

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Digital Resources for Teaching with Primary Sources

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Using digital resources for teaching primary source analysis can enrich pedagogy whether you are a subject specialist or a librarian by suggesting new ideas for lessons and/or supplementing those you created previously to expand their reach. Digitized holdings from national-level institutions give students the opportunity to compare and contrast local holdings with major repositories. Guides created by archivists and librarians enrich undergraduate or graduate student learning by providing different professional skill sets and vocabularies. Blogs provide the opportunity to share public scholarship while social media expands the audience for collections and scholarship even further.

Many repositories create teaching kits of textual and visual analysis lessons keyed to their own collections. However, the majority of these resources are aimed at K-12 populations, usually middle and high school students. But this earlier focus does not mean that these materials cannot be used in college classrooms; rather, they should be adapted to augment higher-level discussions. Many of the richest examples of how to pair holdings with pedagogical materials have been provided by national-level institutions. These examples can be adapted to suit undergraduate subject requirements and skill levels.

- National Archives: Docs Teach and History Pin
- Library of Congress: General lesson plans and Primary source sets
- The Folger Shakespeare Library: Teaching modules

Timelines are helpful in order to contextualize items from a local repository with those from larger institutions. Timelines also model how archival holdings fit into a broader historical narrative. One prospective assignment would have students view example timelines and then create their own. Some useful examples to share for this prospective lesson might include:

- Digital Public Library of America: Timeline

- [Metropolitan Museum of Art](): [Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History]().

Alternatively, assigning readings from these timelines may help students understand similar local holdings. For example, "[The Origins of Writing]()," a thematic essay provided by the Heilbrunn Timeline, introduces students to the cuneiform tablets that are the earliest objects in many university collections.

Resources designed to help instructors stress both primary source analysis and research methods demonstrate how to integrate archival holdings into close readings as well as within more comprehensive projects. Visiting LibGuides written by librarians at your own institution or at other universities is a great way to begin thinking about how to introduce more advanced topics. More focused options include:

- [TeachArchives.org](): [Exercises]()

- The Society of American Archivists: [Using Archives: A Guide to Effective Research]() and [Finding and Evaluating Archives]()

Both of these sites provide focused approaches to curricular development on primary sources.

Guides on specialized topics created by librarians, conservators, and archivists reinforce to upper-level undergraduates and graduate students how their research benefits from consulting different professional perspectives. A few examples of online guides that bolster students' vocabulary, allowing them to write with more specificity, include:

- [The Folger Shakespeare Library](): [The Folger Bindings Image Collection]()

- [Yale Special Collections Conservation](): [Medieval Manuscripts: Bookbinding Terms, Materials, Methods, and Models]()

- [Society of American Archivists](): [Archival and Records Terminology]()

While a simple quiz could be made from these terms to test a class on how much they retained after a visit to special collections, students can also use these guides to ensure their writing speaks accurately to members of their discipline. Instructors could check that those specialized vocabularies are used

correctly by generating composition assignments around describing the types of items from these glossaries.

Blogs allow scholarship to connect to diverse audiences of researchers, students, and an interested general public. Most major repositories run blogs that provide crucial cultural history on topics related to their holdings. For instance, the Ransom Center's [Cultural Compass blog](#) publishes posts on topics like [Anne Frank and the archive](#), Eric Colleary's description of the publication history of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. The Beinecke at Yale runs a number of blogs on collections ranging from [American Literature](#) to [African American Studies](#). As with the timelines I discussed earlier, these blogs can be a place to find supplemental readings for a class. Additionally, individual posts can serve as examples for a writing for the web assignment. If students are emulating these blogs in their own writing, but taking local holdings as their subjects, perhaps they can even submit their work to be published through your university's blog. After all, publication can be a lure to motivate students through the research and composition process.

Social media feeds may not offer prescribed lesson plans, but they provide a large amount of content on specific subjects in a format that most students find exciting as well as user-friendly. While there are too many important feeds to list here, significant projects exist on collections ranging from the medieval to the modern. Consider:

- [Roman de La Rose Digital Library](#): Tamsyn Rose-Steel's [@RoseDigLib](#)

- [The University of Iowa Library's Special Collections and University Archives](#): Laura Hamptin's [Hevelin Collection](#)

Just as the topics on social media can vary widely, the platforms themselves are diverse. As each outlet claims a slightly different function and set of users, cultural heritage institutions select platforms that best suit their collections, followers, and staff interests. It never hurts to check out the most popular platforms—Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and Tumblr—but do not ignore more specialized options like

Pintrest, Flickr, Vine, or even Snapchat when searching for venues on a particular topic or by a certain repository. Social media feeds do the same work as digital repositories by presenting similar items to compare and contrast against those held in your repository. They also enliven discussions by providing examples of types of materials that are not available locally. An assignment that requires students to browse your repository's feed can also be a helpful way to introduce them to special collections prior to a planned visit. Additionally, if it is allowed by your special collections library on the content you are interested in, you might encourage your students to create their own social media feeds. Facilitating social media work with rare books and manuscripts can provide the excitement necessary to encourage students to tackle difficult content.

Consider the needs of your students when choosing digital resources for you to use to structure your class sessions. On the one hand, entry-level options for digital primary source work involve adapting online curricula to suit the needs of your students and your local materials. On the other hand, if you want to take a more advanced approach, social media and blogs give you the opportunity to compare and contrast your university's holdings against those of another repository while also discussing writing for the web or even how cultural heritage institutions use new platforms for publicity, research, and instruction.