OBJECTIVES FOR THIS LESSON:

1. To learn to evaluate the reliability, the bias, and the usefulness of primary source documents.
2. To use your history background knowledge to understand and make inferences about primary source documents.

THE PRIMARY SOURCES AND THE EXERCISES

Evaluating Evidence & Primary Sources

The primary source documents for this lesson are displayed on the next three pages. All of the exercises for this lesson are based on these primary sources and the background information provided here.

INTRODUCING THE LESSON

The primary sources for this lesson all have to do with the ancient civilizations that grew up along major rivers in Eurasia or, in the case of ancient Egypt, in North Africa. These primary source documents are all displayed on pages 6–8.

These sources could be used to write a complete essay about these ancient river valley civilizations. However, in this lesson, we do not give you a document-based question (DBQ) asking you to focus on all ten of the sources. You will deal with DBQs and other essay questions in later lessons. The aim of this lesson is to help you think more carefully about primary sources themselves. Learning to work with such sources is a skill. The exercises for this lesson will help you learn to work with primary sources and better understand what you can and cannot learn from them.

KEY CONCEPTS AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

Basically, the exercises will focus your attention on the following broad concepts and strategies in analyzing primary sources:

1. You need to decide how reliable or trustworthy a primary source is. That is, how accurate it is or how dependable the information or evidence in it is.
2. You need to decide how biased or one-sided a source is — and whether or not it is still useful in spite of, or because of, its bias.
3. You need to use all your background history knowledge in interpreting, or making sense of, any primary source.
4. You need to make reasonable inferences, or logical conclusions, about sources.
5. You need to deal with and use sources that often conflict with one another.
The Documents
The Ancient River Valley Civilizations

Document 1
A topographical map of Mesopotamia several thousand years ago when Sumer and other ancient civilizations thrived there.

Documents 2, 3 & 4
On the left is a contemporary scene from the valley of the Indus River, where the Indus civilization grew up. On the right are two photographs of the ruins of ancient Harrapa, one of the two key cities of the ancient Indus civilization. The large curved wall in the center photo may have been part of a large central drain. Lower down may have been a well and bathing area. The photo on the right is a covered drain to collect household wastes and drain streets.

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The Documents

Document 5
A wall painting from the tomb of a wealthy Egyptian showing him and his wife harvesting wheat, pulling up reeds and engaging in other agricultural pursuits.
Graham Harrison.

Document 6
A photo of terraced rice paddies in a hilly region of southern China.
© Keren Su/CORBIS

Document 7
Sumerian cuneiform script scratched with a wedged-tip instrument into a hardened clay tablet.
© Gianni Dagli Orti/CORBIS
The Documents

Document 8
Two huge statues of the pharaoh Ramesses II outside his temple at Abu Simbel.
Graham Harrison

Document 9
If a son strike his father, his hands shall be hewn off.
If a man put out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out.
If he put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value.
If anyone is committing a robbery and is caught, then he shall be put to death.
If anyone steal a water wheel from the field, he shall pay five shekels in money to its owner.
If anyone open his ditches to water his crop, but is careless, and the water flood the field of his neighbor, then he shall pay his neighbor corn for his loss.
If a man marry a woman and she bear sons to him; if this woman then dies, then her father shall have no claim on her dowry; it belongs to her sons.

Specific laws from the Code of Hammurabi, a king who in the 18th century B.C. created a vast empire including what had been Sumer and much of the rest of Mesopotamia.

Document 10
Scribes kept many written records for the pharaohs, especially about the land, crops and animals of his subjects. This made tax collecting much easier. Here a man is punished for failing to pay his taxes.
© Bettmann/CORBIS
Primary sources are records from the past. But this does NOT mean they can always tell you exactly how “it really was” in the past. You need to evaluate such sources carefully to be able to learn things from them. For example, one important question you need to ask of every primary source is this:

**How trustworthy or reliable is this source?** In other words, can you depend on it to give you information that you can use to answer the specific DBQ or essay question you have been given? Keep in mind that a reliable source need not be accurate or truthful. An inaccurate report, for example, may still be reliable as evidence of what people believed at the time.

This exercise will help you think about source reliability. Four of the lesson’s documents are listed here. Next to each are three statements about the document’s trustworthiness or reliability. For each document, choose the one statement you agree with most. Mark your choice in the space provided. Discuss your choices in class.

**Doc. 3**
A. The document is reliable evidence of what Harrapa looked like in 2000 B.C.
B. The document is reliable evidence of some kind of a drainage system in ancient Harrapa.
C. The document is reliable evidence that Harrapans bathed every day in order to keep clean.

*Your Choice ___*

**Doc. 5**
A. The document is reliable evidence of ancient Egyptian agricultural practices.
B. The document is reliable evidence of what life was like for most Egyptians.
C. The document is reliable evidence of what this particular couple looked like.

*Your Choice ___*

**Doc. 6**
A. The document is reliable evidence of rice paddy terracing techniques in ancient China.
B. The document is reliable evidence of typical land-use patterns in China today and in the past.
C. The document is reliable evidence of a strong drive in China to use all available agricultural land as efficiently as possible.

*Your Choice ___*

**Doc. 8**
A. The document is reliable evidence of Egyptian ideas about their pharaohs.
B. The document is reliable evidence of what Pharaoh Ramesses II looked like
C. The document is reliable evidence of how well-loved Ramesses II was by his subjects.

*Your Choice ___*
Exercise 2
Primary Sources: How Biased?

Official documents, paintings, drawings, diary entries, ads, photos and other primary sources are often created by people with specific goals and strong personal opinions. **This can make a source one-sided, or “biased.”**

Sometimes this bias is easy to notice — as when an author states a point of view strongly. But more often, the bias is harder to detect. It can be found as much in what is left out as in what is included. Bias can be expressed simply by including some facts while leaving others out. In a visual source it can be shown by an exaggerated or a distorted perspective, or by a selective emphasis on some details in a scene but not others.

You can also get important clues as to bias by noting the **author or creator** of the source, his or her **purpose in creating that source** and the **audience** for the source. To help you think about this, choose two documents from those for this lesson. Choose one that is clearly and strongly biased and one that seems biased but in a much less noticeable way. Then answer the questions below.

1. **Clearly Biased:** Document ________
   
   Why do you think this document is biased? ________________________________
   
   ________________________________
   
   A. How might knowing about the author or creator of the document help explain its bias? ________________________________
   
   ________________________________
   
   B. Who was the intended audience of the document, and how might that help to explain its bias? ________________________________
   
   ________________________________
   
   C. For what purpose was the document created, and how might that help to explain its bias? ________________________________

2. **Bias Harder to Detect:** Document ________
   
   Why do you think this document is biased? ________________________________
   
   ________________________________
   
   A. How might knowing about the author or creator of the document help explain its bias? ________________________________
   
   ________________________________
   
   B. Who was the intended audience of the document, and how might that help to explain its bias? ________________________________
   
   ________________________________
   
   C. For what purpose was the document created, and how might that help to explain its bias? ________________________________
Exercise 3
Interpreting Primary Sources: Using Your Background Knowledge

Sometimes, you can understand a primary source even if you know nothing about its time period. But this is rare. Usually, you must use your background knowledge of the historical period to help you interpret, or make sense of, the source. Keep this in mind when answering a DBQ. The primary sources won’t make much sense if you do not already know something about the time in which they were produced. That is, the documents do not “speak for themselves,” and it is not enough just to mention them in laundry list fashion. You need to use your background knowledge to interpret the documents and explain how they help answer the DBQ.

You often won’t even notice how much your own background knowledge affects your understanding of a source. This exercise may help you see this better. Study each document for this lesson and think about what a person needs to know to understand that document fully or be able to use it in a history essay. In the space provided below, write down two facts or broad trends from ancient history that help explain each document. As a class, share your lists to see how much background knowledge it takes to properly interpret these primary source documents.

Doc. 1
1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________

Doc. 2, 3 & 4
1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________

Doc. 5
1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________

Doc. 6
1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________

Doc. 7
1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________

Doc. 8
1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________

Doc. 9
1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________

Doc. 10
1. ____________________________________________
2. ____________________________________________
Exercise 4
Interpreting Primary Sources: Making Inferences — 1

You often need to make inferences about primary sources. An "inference" is a belief you come to accept based on other facts. For example, suppose you find milk spilled on the kitchen floor. You may "infer" that your brother spilled it — even though you didn’t actually see him do this. This inference is logical and reasonable, yet it still may not be true. For example, the cat may have knocked over a glass of milk, not your brother. You can usually make many reasonable inferences from a primary source. But as this "spilled milk" example shows, you need to be careful about this. Be sure of all your facts and of what the primary source shows. Use your background knowledge, and keep in mind what knowing about the source’s “author, audience and purpose” tells you. If the inference still seems logical, you may be able to use it in your essay or answer.

Below are six statements about Document 7 (a clay tablet with cuneiform marks on it). Some of the statements are reasonable inferences; others are not — that is, they are not supported by Document 7. In the spaces provided, write "yes" or "no" for each statement that is or is not a reasonable inference about Document 7.

1. The ancient Sumerians had writing implements able to make precise marks in clay.
   A reasonable Inference? _____

2. The ancient Sumerians had produced a great body of literature and poetry.
   A reasonable Inference? _____

3. The ancient Sumerians probably had not learned how to produce paper.
   A reasonable Inference? _____

4. The ancient Sumerians had some sort of script or writing system.
   A reasonable Inference? _____

5. The ancient Sumerians used hardened clay tablets to record taxes and keep records.
   A reasonable Inference? _____

6. The ancient Sumerians had a need to keep permanent records of some sort.
   A reasonable Inference? _____
Exercise 5
Interpreting Primary Sources: Making Inferences — 2

Making inferences is easily one of the most important skills needed to write effective essays answering DBQs. Often the best ideas you can get from a source are those you infer from it. Therefore, you need to interpret your sources. That is, you need to look at them closely and think about the clues they may contain on the topic of the DBQ. Since making inferences about sources is so important, here is another exercise asking you to do it.

Again, be sure of all your facts and of what the primary source shows. Use your background knowledge, and keep in mind what knowing about the source’s “author, audience and purpose” tells you. If the inference seems logical, you may be able to use it in your essay or answer.

Below are five statements about Document 9 (laws from the Code of Hammurabi). Some of the statements are reasonable inferences; others are not — that is, they are not supported by Document 9. In the spaces provided, write “yes” or “no” for each statement that is or is not a reasonable inference about Document 9.

1. The people to whom this code was directed lived under some sort of government that tried to control behavior through a system of general rules.
   A reasonable Inference? _____

2. In Mesopotamia during the time of this code, slaves were considered property and had less protection under the law than non-slaves.
   A reasonable Inference? _____

3. Women under Hammurabi’s rule had the same rights within the family as men.
   A reasonable Inference? _____

4. Rules regarding the control and distribution of water were very important at the time of this code.
   A reasonable Inference? _____

5. This code of law was based on a single idea of justice that could be summed up as “an eye for an eye.”
   A reasonable Inference? _____
Exercise 6
Interpreting Primary Sources: When Sources Conflict

Sometimes primary sources conflict with one another. In other cases, they simply do not seem to fit with one another in any clear way. In other words, they give you evidence that could lead to different or even opposing conclusions about a time period. This can be a problem when answering a DBQ based on several primary sources. It is a problem every historian faces. Sources rarely all agree with one another. This means that you need to make some decisions — about which source is more reliable, more useful or more typical of the time period. It also means you must be cautious in making sweeping statements about what the sources prove. (That's why historians usually say things such as, “For the most part, we know that ...,” instead of, “We know for certain that ...”)

From the documents for this lesson, choose two that you think conflict or do not fit with one another. In the space below, write a paragraph or two describing the documents you have chosen. Explain why you think these documents do not fit or agree with one another. Then write another paragraph in which you try to explain how such conflicting sources could have come from the same historical time period.