

# Tampering with History: Adapting Primary Sources for Struggling Readers

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History teachers are faced with an impossible dilemma. Voices from every corner urge them to use primary sources. Sources, teachers are told, are to history what the laboratory is to science: the place where the subject becomes most vital. At the same time, any teacher who has used sources knows the many obstacles. Written in language that differs radically from our own, original documents pose challenges that daunt our best readers—let alone those reading below grade level. Isn't it unrealistic to give students sources when so many struggle just to get through the textbook?

Using sources to make history come alive is great in principle, but complicated in practice. Consider an example: a teacher wants to use original sources to explore John Smith's first encounter with Pocahontas's father, Powhatan. The following excerpt from Smith's 1608 travel log, *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note as Hath Hapned*, vividly illustrates the challenges:

Arriving at Weramocomoco, their Emperour proudly lying uppon a Bedstead a foote high, upon tenne or twelve Mattes, richly hung with Manie Chaynes of great Pearles about his necke, and covered with a great Covering of Rahaughcums. At heade sat a woman, at his feete another; on each side sitting uppon a Matte uppon the ground, were raunged his chiefe men on each side of the fire, tenne in a ranke, and behinde them as many yong women, each a great Chaine of white Beaddes over their shoulders, their heades painted in redde: and with such a grave and Majesticall countenance, as draue me into admiration to see such state in a naked Salvage.<sup>1</sup>

Many students will be daunted by this document's unconventional spelling, bizarre punctuation, and free-style capitalization. They will scratch their heads over its archaic phrasing and obscure terminology, and a context foreign at best and positively inscrutable at worse. Instead of igniting students' interest, sources can pose challenges that quash students' motivation. What's a teacher to do?

A majority will ignore sources altogether, a finding borne out by national surveys.<sup>2</sup> History in sourceless classrooms becomes limited to the textbook, effectively silencing the rich chorus of voices that could speak to contemporary readers. Exposure to authentic texts—a treasure trove of different language registers and genres (letters, diaries, edicts, secret communiqués, church bulletins, songs, and so forth)—falls victim to an unintended but pernicious form of curriculum differentiation. Our best readers are given this rich textual diet while those most in need are served up the textbook's thin gruel.<sup>3</sup>

Let's return for a moment to John Smith's words. Teachers will dismiss this document as too hard for their

struggling readers—and rightly so. Yet, too often the decision to use a particular source is cast in the brittle terms of "yes" or "no." In the remainder of this article, we propose a way out of this dilemma, a solution that allows us to provide *all* students with access to the rich voices of the past. The real question for teachers is not whether to use or not to use primary sources. The crisis in adolescent literacy is too grave and the stakes too high for such neat choices.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the question for teachers must be: How can I *adapt* primary sources so that all students benefit?

## Tampering with History

*Adapt?* True, skilled teachers have long selected and excerpted primary sources for classroom use. But we advocate here something more radical. We are urging teachers to physically *alter* sources: to change their syntax and vocabulary; to conventionalize their spelling, capitalization, and punctuation—even rearranging sentence sequences, if necessary—so that eleventh graders reading at a sixth grade level might benefit from *some* of the flavor, cadence, feel, and ethos of John Smith's (or Augustine's, or Jefferson's or Frederick Douglass's) words.

We are unabashedly urging teachers to *tamper* with history.

We recognize that such a suggestion will infuriate purists. "An outrage that dumbs down and cheapens the past," critics charge. Inserting contemporary language into documents while retaining

the designation 'primary source' is dishonest! If history is about getting at truth, how can you justify lying to do so?"

In our work with teachers, we've heard similar objections, and our answer is always the same: Don't lie. When students first encounter a primary source, always have them compare the original to the adaptation to demonstrate that the sources they will be using have been specifically prepared for the classroom. Students quickly learn that head notes and source information are part of this preparation. In other lessons, students can generate questions about the original after working with the adapted forms, or directly compare one or two sentences, considering if and how the editing affected their understanding. Every time we provide an adapted source, the original is available so that students can see exactly what we've changed.

To those who would persist in their objections, we recommend a brief trip to a typical middle or high school in one of our nation's urban centers, where whole classes of young people fail to achieve even the "basic" level of competence as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress Reading exam. ("Basic" in NAEP terminology means having a "literal understanding" of text and the ability to make "some interpretations."<sup>5</sup>) Old ways of teaching history to struggling readers—having them read the textbook aloud or even reading it aloud to them, having them draw "knowledge posters" or color personal crests, or simply turning on the DVD and leaving it at that—are not only bankrupt, they send a whole generation of students into the world as functional illiterates.<sup>6</sup>

Over the past decade, we have experimented with adapting sources for struggling readers, first in a National Science Foundation experimental curriculum in Seattle public elementary schools, next in our work with new teachers, and continuing with our current work publishing web-based digital inquiry units at [www.historicalthinkingmatters.org](http://www.historicalthinkingmatters.org).<sup>7</sup> As a result, we have formulated three principles that guide our adaptations:

1. *Focusing:* The judicious excerpting of documents (including the liberal use of ellipses) to focus students' attention on the source's most relevant aspects, while trying to limit its length to 200–300 words. The goal of source work is to teach students how to read carefully. The longer the document, the less likely this goal will be achieved.
2. *Simplification:* The selective modification of complex sentences and syntax; conventionalizing spelling, punctuation, and capitalization; changing some vocabulary in order to render the document more accessible to struggling readers.
3. *Presentation:* Presentation is all-important to struggling readers, who typically shut down when faced with a page of densely packed text. All

of our sources are presented using a large font (at least 16-point type) with ample white space on the page. Anything less intimidates readers accustomed to failure.

### An Example: Lincoln-Douglas Debates

To see how these principles work in practice, consider the following example taken from the first Lincoln-Douglas debate held at Ottawa, Illinois, on August 21, 1858.<sup>8</sup> Lincoln's retort to Douglas's opening statement runs some 8,078 words, about 16 single-spaced pages. His promise "not to interfere with the institution of slavery in states where it exists" while maintaining that Blacks are "entitled to all of the Natural Rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence" makes this document one of the most cited in the entire corpus of Lincoln's

Figure 1: Excerpt

*From Abraham Lincoln's reply to Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois, August 21, 1858.*

Now, gentlemen, I don't want to read at any greater length, but this is the true complexion of all I have ever said in regard to the institution of slavery and the black race. This is the whole of it, and anything that argues me into his idea of perfect social and political equality with the negro, is but a specious and fantastic arrangement of words, by which a man can prove a horse-chestnut to be a chestnut horse. [Laughter.] I will say here, while upon this subject, that I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so. I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary, but I hold that notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the White man. I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.

papers. George Mason University's historymatters.org website, a popular online portal to resources for teaching the U.S. survey course, condenses Lincoln's retort to 1,092 words, a considerable reduction, but one that still fills two densely packed pages—a formidable challenge for many college students, let alone 14-year-olds.

In Figure 1, we excerpted Lincoln's speech by taking the George Mason document and further reducing it by two-thirds. The resulting 326 words still exemplify Lincoln's many sides: a politician speaking to southern Illinois constituents, many of whom were favorably disposed toward slavery and suspicious of radical abolitionists; a moral beacon, laying the seeds for what historian James McPherson has called the "Second American Revolution" by arguing that the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as enumerated in

the Declaration of Independence, be extended to Blacks; and a deft wordsmith who navigated the contentious climate of his time to forge a new Republican position on the slavery issue palatable to voters from across the political spectrum.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 2 shows Lincoln's original words adapted for eleventh graders reading significantly below their grade level. To explain the changes we've introduced, we refer to our three principles.

**Focusing:** Our first act in focusing was to eliminate the opening 80 words of the document and begin instead with the words, "I will say here." In our experiments with adaptation, we used ellipses liberally, but soon found that struggling readers tripped over the "three dots" even after lengthy explanations. Hence, we started shortening documents without ellipses and referring students to the

original if they were curious about what we eliminated. Compared to the original, our adaptation comes in at 224 words, or 100 fewer than the excerpt shown in Figure 1.

**Simplification:** We simplified the document from the start, taking the phrase "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery" and replacing it with the breezier "I have no intention to interfere." Tampering with original language often sacrifices nuance, and that was the case here. The modifiers "directly or indirectly" have a different feel than the balder "intend," reflecting a man who will not only uphold the law of the land as an elected official but vows not to work behind the scenes to undermine it. Indeed, for the Lincoln scholar, this phrase has particular resonance, as Lincoln used the same formulation in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1861. Every adaptation is a tradeoff. But we decided that this nuance could be sacrificed in order to focus carefully on word choice elsewhere in the document (see below). Our other simplifications are indicated by underscored text in Figure 1, words and phrases that we eliminated to streamline the document.

**Presentation:** The brevity of the adaptation allows for large type and single-page presentation with plenty of white space. Such considerations may seem trivial, but teachers who work with struggling readers know that the initial appearance of a text can often mean the difference between a reader putting forth effort or shutting down. In addition to font size, two other features distinguish our presentation: (1) the use of italics to signal key words and, (2) a vocabulary legend at the bottom of the page. We use italics sparingly but strategically to focus attention on words that readers might skip or overlook. For example, a casual reader may miss the import of the word "perhaps" in line 3, paragraph 3, of the adapted document. Lincoln admits a physical difference between the races but says there is only "perhaps a difference in moral or intellectual endowment." While overlooked by many contemporary read-

## Figure 2: Adapted Document

*From Abraham Lincoln's reply to Stephen A. Douglas at Ottawa, Illinois, August 21, 1858.*

I will say here that I do not intend to interfere with slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so. I have no intention of introducing political and social equality between the white and black races. There is a physical difference between the two, which will probably forever forbid their living together in perfect equality.

If it is necessary that there must be a difference between the two races, I, as well as Judge Douglas, am in favor of the race to which I belong having the superior position. I have never said anything to the contrary. But I still believe that there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence: the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

I hold that the Negro is as much entitled to these as the White man. I agree with Judge Douglas that the Negro is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.

entitled to: deserving of

inclination: intention

enumerated: spelled out, listed

ers, this “perhaps” would not have been missed by Lincoln’s audience, for even to raise the possibility of moral and intellectual equivalence of the races must be understood against the backdrop of mid-nineteenth-century White racism.<sup>10</sup> By putting this word in italics, we cue the student to its importance and provide a reference point for further analysis and discussion.

## Conclusion

Our approach is not a formula. Depending on students’ reading level and experience with sources, teachers can tailor the number and kinds of adaptations to make. With practice and coaching, students’ skills will sharpen and adaptations will become less necessary. In the meantime, new technologies have made locating a usable source as easy as a few clicks of a mouse. Instead of a trip to the library and laborious retyping, teachers can copy selected text from a digital archive, paste it into a new document with a single keystroke, and cut and adapt with ease.

“Tampering” with sources allows all students, not just those ready and able to digest difficult text, to enter a world where the study of the past is raucous, engaging, complex, and often ambiguous. Lincoln’s words confuse at first. Even in their adapted form they conflict with what many students believe the Great Emancipator represented. Yet these words offer a window into an antebellum world that no homogenized textbook paragraph can provide. Lincoln’s speech demands that students consider not only what this American hero said, but also why he said it and whom he addressed. When students never engage with sources, they not only miss out on the stirring (or disturbing) words that make up our past, but they are also shut out from learning to ask questions and think critically about prose. In short, they are barred from developing those skills of interpretation and inference that define a proficient reader.

In a recent presentation of John Smith’s 1608 document, one middle

school teacher blurted out “But are you *allowed* to do this?” She was worried that by adapting sources, teachers would be breaking some rule or unwritten law. We admit that at the beginning of our journey, we shared some of her concerns. With each passing day, however, we worry less. For struggling readers, the alternative to reading adapted sources is a world dictated solely by the textbook. For us, this represents a more severe problem than whether to update or even paraphrase an original document. Adapting sources allows teachers to steer students toward authentic historical inquiry and away from a version of history that rests on the textbook’s monopoly.

We are aware that it is possible to challenge each change we’ve made to our documents. But we don’t believe that our larger point can be disputed. In order for students to become fluent readers they must be exposed to the broad array of nonfiction genres contained in the documentary record. To deprive students of such riches, regardless of income or skill, limits their horizons. It diminishes their chances to become fluent readers and thinkers, and ultimately informed citizens—which may be the greatest loss of all. ☐

## Notes

1. *Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606-1625* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1907), 27-71. Retrieved online facsimile edition June 3, 2004 at [www.americanjournneys.org/aj-074/](http://www.americanjournneys.org/aj-074/).
2. See, for example, Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). Little has changed in recent years. For example, in the 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress of U.S. History, more than half of all 12th grade students reported that they “rarely” or “never” used letters, diaries, or essays by original historical actors in their social studies classes. Sources are even rarer at the middle and elementary levels. Seventy percent of 4th and 8th grade teachers reported they never, hardly ever, or once or twice a month use sources.
3. See Gina Biancarosa and Catherine E. Snow, *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 2004). This report cites 12 research-based principles for effective instruction, including the use of diverse texts that mix genre and style, “at a variety of difficulty levels and on a variety of topics,” and text-based collaborative learning, “which involves students interacting with one another around a variety of texts” (p. 12). The report names the use

of diverse texts and genres as a central ingredient in the development of adolescent literacy.

4. See Susan Cooper Loomis and Mary Lyn Bourque, eds., *National Assessment of Educational Progress Achievement Levels, 1992-1998 for Reading* (Washington, D.C.: National Assessment Governing Board, 2001), 13. At the same time that reading scores for 4th graders on the NAEP have shown steady improvement since 1992, there has been no similar improvement for 8th graders. The news for 12th graders is worse: since 1992, there has been a slight decline in NAEP reading achievement.
5. Loomis and Bourque.
6. For reports of how some teachers, frustrated with students’ inability to comprehend at grade level, have resorted to reading the textbook aloud, see Ruth Schoenbach, Cindy Greenleaf, C. Cziko, and L. Hurwitz, *Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1999); The 2005 NAEP results in reading showed that in urban areas—places like Cleveland, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and the District of Columbia—more than half of the 8th graders tested failed to reach even the “basic” level on the NAEP. Only 35 percent of 12th graders reached the “proficient” level, down from 40 percent in 1992. See [nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/) for complete data.
7. See Reed Stevens, Sam Wineburg, Leslie Herrenkohl, and Phillip Bell, “Comparative Study of School Subjects: Past, Present, and Future,” *Review of Research in Education* 75, no. 2 (2005): 125-157; Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin, “Reading and Re-writing History,” *Educational Leadership* 62, no. 1 (2004): 42-45; Daisy Martin and Chauncey Monte-Sano, “Inquiry, Controversy, and Ambiguous Texts: Learning to Teach for Historical Thinking,” in *History Education 101: The Past, Present, and Future of Teacher Preparation*, eds. Wilson J. Warren and D. Antonio Cantu (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2008); Avishag Reisman and Sam Wineburg, “Teaching the Skill of Contextualizing in History,” *Social Studies* 99, no. 5 (2008): 202-207; Daisy Martin and Sam Wineburg, “Seeing Thinking on the Web,” *History Teacher* 41, no. 3 (2008): 1-15; and Daisy Martin, Sam Wineburg, Roy Rosenzweig, and Sharon Leon, “Using the Web to Teach Historical Thinking,” *Social Education* 72, no. 3 (2008): 140-143, 158.
8. Downloaded from [www.mrlincolnanfreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=228&subjectID=2](http://www.mrlincolnanfreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=228&subjectID=2)
9. See James McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
10. Sam Wineburg, “Reading Abraham Lincoln: An Expert/Expert Study in the Interpretation of Historical Texts,” *Cognitive Science* 22 (1998): 319-346.

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