

## TRUTH IS BETTER THAN FICTION: BUST MYTHS BY THINKING LIKE A HISTORIAN

The ability to critically examine claims and ideas is essential to making good decisions in the modern world, but it can be a difficult skill to master. A historian's job, however, is to critically examine a variety of sources and to then develop ideas about the past to inform our own understanding of the present.

This activity will show you and your students the process historians go through as they critically evaluate historic sources in order to determine whether or not they are reliable. The accompanying activity will give students the chance to critically examine an excerpt from the book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, by Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, which presents the idea that quilts were used to convey secret messages to slaves preparing to run North to freedom before the American Civil War.

This method of critical thinking can be applied across disciplines and different types of media.

### OBJECTIVES:

After doing this activity, students will be able to:

- Ask critical questions about a source's claims and ideas.
- Make judgments about a source's credibility based upon the answers to those critical questions.

### ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Social Studies: 7.1.17, 8.1.29, USH 9.2

Literacy in History/Social Studies: 6-8.LH.2.1, 6-8.LH.2.2, 6-8.LH.4.2, 9-10.LH.2.1, 9-10.LH.2.2, 9-10.LH.4.2, 11-12.LH.2.1, 11-12.LH.2.1, 11-12.LH.4.2

English/Language Arts: 4.RN.4.1, 5.RN.4.1, 6.ML.1, 6.ML.2.1, 6.ML.2.2, 7.RN.4.1, 7.ML.2.1, 8.RN.4.1, 8.ML.1, 9-10.RN.4.1, 9-10.ML.1, 11-12.ML.1

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

"The Use of Myth in History" by Gil Klein, featured in the *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*, Summer 2012 edition. <http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/summer12/myths.cfm>

History Myths Debunked by Mary Miley Theobald, a historian at Virginia Commonwealth University. <https://historymyths.wordpress.com/>

Teaching American History Online, includes access to a variety of primary documents divided by time period. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/>

## BUST MYTHS BY THINKING LIKE A HISTORIAN

### A Historian's Guidelines

**A historian's job is to critically examine many different types of source materials and develop ideas and conclusions about the past. Some sources are reliable and provide good evidence for how past events unfolded. Other sources are not reliable and may give false impressions or create myths about what really happened.**

**On the page below are a number of critical thinking questions historians need to ask as they examine their sources. Use this to guide your own critical examination of any historic source.**

As historians examine sources, there are certain things they should consider:

1. Is the source primary or secondary?
  - a. Primary sources are things such as letters, diaries, images, and audio recordings created by the people who experienced the events they describe.
  - b. Secondary sources are things like books, articles, documentary films, and museum exhibits that use many sources to tell the larger story of a person or event.
    - i. Secondary sources should always tell you where their information comes from.
2. Who created the source?
  - a. What was the creator's point of view, and how does that affect the source? For example, a diary written by a person living in the North during the Civil War is likely going to be very different from a diary written by a person living in the South.
3. Why was the source created?
  - a. Was the source intended to be persuasive? Informative? Entertaining? These differences might change the way events and people are described.
4. When was the source created?
  - a. Was the primary source created the day after the event it describes or many years later? The difference might affect how events are remembered.
  - b. Creators of secondary sources are often influenced by the times in which they were living. For example, books written by historians after the Civil Rights Movement tend to focus more on the experiences of African Americans in US history than did books written before the 1950s.

5. Who is the intended audience of the source?
  - a. Was the source intended to be something private, like a diary, or was it meant to be seen by many people, like a newspaper editorial?
6. What questions does the source raise?
  - a. Is there anything in the source that seems incorrect or strange? These things may require further investigation.
7. Are there other sources that support the source's claims?
  - a. Do other sources exist that provide evidence that what your source is saying is accurate? Where does the weight of the evidence lead?

Answering these questions will help you determine whether or not a source is trustworthy.

BUST MYTHS BY THINKING LIKE A HISTORIAN

The Underground Railroad is a mysterious subject in American history. Because running from slavery and assisting those who had fled were illegal before the Civil War, many of those who participated in these activities never kept written records or spoke of their experiences. Because there is so much mystery around the subject, oftentimes myths and legends get confused with truth.

One such example is the idea that quilts were used to convey secret messages to fugitive slaves or those who were planning to escape. A book published in 1999 called *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, by Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard, relies on the oral testimony of one woman, Ozella McDaniel Williams. Williams was a quilt merchant who claimed that quilts contained secret codes to guide escaping slaves to freedom in the North. *Hidden in Plain View* was the first major published source to make such a claim. This book has been controversial, with many historians arguing that it is more fiction than fact.

The excerpt below describes the essential elements of Williams's quilt code. Read the excerpt. Then, use the guidelines for thinking like a historian found on the previous page to evaluate this source.

*"When Ozella first revealed the code to Jacki, she instructed her to write down the numbers one through ten. She then listed nine patterns and one phrase: Monkey Wrench, Wagon Wheel, Log Cabin, Shoofly, Bow Ties, Cathedral Church, Double Wedding Rings, Flying Geese, Drunkard's Path, and Tumbling Boxes. Then Ozella recited the code. However, the code she recited also included the following quilt pattern names: Bear's Paw, Crossroads, and Stars... According to Ozella, there were ten quilts used to direct the slaves to take particular actions. Each quilt featured one of the ten patterns. The ten quilts were placed one at a time on a fence. Since it was common for quilts to be aired out frequently, the master and mistress would not be suspicious when seeing the quilts displayed in this fashion. This way slaves could nonverbally alert those who were escaping. Only one quilt would appear at any one time. Each quilt signaled a specific action for a slave to take at the particular time that the quilt was on view. Ozella explained that when the Monkey Wrench quilt pattern was displayed, the slaves were to gather all the tools they might need on the journey to freedom."*  
HIPV, p.70

1. Is the source primary or secondary? If it is secondary, does the source tell us where the information comes from?

2. Who created this source? How might his or her perspective affect the information presented in this source?
  
3. Why was this source created?
  
4. When was the source created?
  
5. Who is the intended audience for the source?
  
6. What questions does the source raise? Is there anything in it that seems strange or possibly inaccurate?
  
7. Are there other sources that support this source's claims? For this, you may have to do additional research to see what other sources say on the matter.
  
8. Finally, based on your answers to the above questions, does this source and its claims seem credible?

TRUTH IS BETTER THAN FICTION:  
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1. Is the source primary or secondary? If it is secondary, does the source tell us where the information comes from?

*HIPV is a secondary source that relies on the oral testimony of Ozella McDaniel Williams. She is the only source for the quilt code.*

2. Who created this source? How might his or her perspective affect the information presented in this source?

*Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard wrote HIPV. Tobin is a self-proclaimed “writer of women’s stories.” Their source, Ozella McDaniel Williams was a quilt merchant who had a financial interest in selling quilts.*

3. Why was this source created?

*Tobin heard the story of the quilt code from Williams. She found it very interesting and wanted to share it.*

4. When was the source created?

*The book was published in 1999.*

5. Who is the intended audience for the source?

*People interested in Underground Railroad history. It is also worth noting, that although Raymond Dobard worked for Howard University, which has Howard University Press for printing scholarship in African American studies, HIPV was printed at Anchor Books, a division of Random House intended for general readers rather than scholars.*

6. What questions does the source raise? Is there anything in it that seems strange or possibly inaccurate?

*Possibilities include:*

- *Q. Did all of the quilt patterns exist during the time of the Underground Railroad? A. No, several of the patterns, including Drunkard’s Path and Double Wedding Ring developed after the Civil War.*
- *Q. Was it realistic for slaves to own 10 quilts? A. No, slaves had very few material possessions, so it is unlikely for any to own this many quilts.*
- *Q. Who made the quilts? A. No stories of the quilt code mention who made the quilts.*
- *Q. Who put the quilts out for display? How did he or she know when to display them? A. Again, these questions aren’t answered in any of the existing quilt code stories.*
- *Q. Did monkey wrenches exist during the time of the Underground Railroad? A. They were invented in the 1850s, but were mostly used on steam locomotives, where very few slaves would have had access to them.*
- *Q. Wouldn’t it have been easier and less risky to simply use word of mouth to communicate about the Underground Railroad? A. This would almost certainly have been easier and less risky.*

7. Are there other sources that support this source’s claims? For this, you may have to do additional research to see what other sources say on the matter.

*Encourage students to look at testimonies from 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionists and former slaves or at the Works Progress Administration's Slave Narratives gathered during the Great Depression to try to locate other sources that may describe quilt codes. Slave narratives are widely available online. Many can be found through the Library of Congress at <https://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>.*

*None of the existing accounts from former slaves or abolitionists mention quilt codes.*

8. Finally, based on your answers to the above questions, does this source and its claims seem credible?

*Students should determine that HIPV is not a credible source and that the story of quilt codes is a myth.*