

Close Looking at Correspondence: the Transcription Process

Class time: 90 minutes

Instruction level: Undergraduate level; suitable for courses in the disciplines of History and English

Materials used: Brandeis University collection of Michael Lally letters
(<http://ir.brandeis.edu/handle/10192/28550>)

Objectives:

1. To introduce students to using primary source documents as research sources.
2. To introduce students to the process of transcribing 19th century documents.

Lesson Components and Methods:

1. Introduce activity by telling students they will be reading and transcribing a letter written by a soldier during the civil war. Explain that a letter is considered a Primary Source, and define the term for them: *Primary sources provide first-hand testimony or direct evidence concerning a topic under investigation. They are often created by witnesses or recorders who experienced the events or conditions being documented. Often these sources are created at the time when the events or conditions are occurring, but they can also include memoirs, autobiographies, and oral histories recorded later.*
2. Ask students to give examples of Primary Sources. Discuss the differences between the three types of primary sources: original documents, original creative works, and artifacts/memorabilia. Reinforce the idea that primary sources reflect the time when they were created.
3. Discuss with the students the different methods of accessing primary source material, such as doing a keyword search in a database such as ArchiveGrid (<https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/>) or within the finding aid database hosted by their college/university. Remind students that often primary source documents exist only in their original state, and material often needs to be transcribed—something which is usually left to the researcher to do.
4. Hand out the letter (**January 27, 1865**) that students will be transcribing (alternatively, if class is held in a space where computers and Internet access is available to students, they are free to select another letter that is of interest to them). Tell students that they should read through the entire letter once before they transcribe it. Allow students approximately 30 minutes to read and transcribe the letter.

5. On the blackboard/whiteboard/overhead, write out the following 3 thought questions:
 - a. After reading this letter, what kind of details can you glean regarding Lally's relationship with his wife, Bridgett?
 - b. Reflect on the process of transcribing a letter from the 19th century.
 - c. Compare and Contrast the different types of information you gain from primary and secondary sources (Secondary sources are sources that analyze primary sources; examples of secondary sources include newspaper or journal articles, books, and textbooks.).
6. When students have completed the transcription of the letter, break them into discussion groups and ask them to discuss the 3 thought questions. As a group, students should write a 1-2 paragraph response to each question.
7. After groups have formulated responses to each of the thought questions, discuss each of the groups' responses as a whole class.