

# CURRICULUM PORTFOLIO:

Worksheet Development  
Lesson Plan Structure  
Close Reading Sample

Jasmine Holmes  
Historian & Research Writer

## **PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH**

This curriculum teaches students to use primary sources and to begin the first steps toward more advanced historical analysis. Students examine the source, contextualize it by naming what they know, build upon their knowledge with new information from the primary source, and look at the source again with new eyes. Primary source literacy is the foundation of historical practice. The curriculum teaches students how to evaluate sources for themselves and supports the habit of constantly evaluating what they know, remaining open to learning something new, and changing their mind. It also supports students as they encounter the potential disequilibrium of learning new information, grounding them in the practice of evaluating what they know based on the most trustworthy information available.

All lessons are aligned with the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.

# ANALYZING PHOTOGRAPHS AS PRIMARY SOURCES

## A LESSON IN HISTORICAL THINKING

Jasmine Holmes | Adaptable for Grades 6–12 | One Class Period (45–50 min)

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What can a photograph tell us about a moment in history — and what can it not tell us?

### OVERVIEW

Photographs are primary sources, but they are not neutral. They are made by someone, for a reason, in a specific moment — and reading them carefully means asking the same questions we ask of any historical document. In this lesson, students practice close visual analysis using Dorothea Lange’s 1937 photograph of a turpentine worker’s family near Cordele, Alabama. By moving through a structured observation framework, students build the habits of historical thinking: examine, contextualize, build, and look again.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify and analyze visual details in a primary source photograph
- Connect prior historical knowledge to a new source
- Understand how context changes the way we read an image.
- Practice asking historical questions rather than drawing unsupported conclusions

### MATERIALS

- Projected or printed copy of Dorothea Lange, Turpentine worker’s family near Cordele, Alabama, 1937
- Analyzing Photographs as a Primary Source worksheet (one per student)
- Pencils; chart paper or whiteboard for shared notes (optional)

### VOCABULARY

Primary source, photograph, historian, observe, contextualize, evidence, interpretation



## LESSON PROCEDURE

### OPENING (5-10 MINUTES)

Display the Lange photograph without any identifying information. Give students one full minute to look at it silently.

Then ask: *What do you see? What's the first thing you noticed?*

Do not introduce the title, photographer, or date yet. The goal is to establish what students actually observe before they know anything else.

### STEP ONE: EXAMINE THE PHOTOGRAPH (10 MIN)

Distribute the worksheet. Guide students through the first prompt: examine the photograph, including its title, photographer, and date.

Now reveal the caption: Turpentine worker's family near Cordele, Alabama. Dorothea Lange, 1937.

- What details do you notice now that you have a title and a date?
- What can you tell about the people in this photograph?
- What questions do you already have?

### STEP 2: BRING YOUR PRIOR KNOWLEDGE (5-8 MIN)

Ask students what they already know that might be relevant to this image.

- What do you know about 1937 in America?
- What do you know about life in the rural South at this time?

*Teacher note: This step surfaces what students bring to the source before they build on it. You're not correcting yet — you're listening.*

### STEP 3: BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE (8-10 MIN)

Share brief background on Dorothea Lange and the context of this photograph:

Dorothea Lange was a documentary photographer hired by the Farm Security Administration to photograph rural poverty during the Great Depression. She traveled across the South documenting the lives of sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and laborers. Turpentine work — the extraction of resin from pine trees — was one of the most dangerous and low-paying forms of labor in the South, performed overwhelmingly by Black workers under conditions that closely resembled those of the plantation era.

- How does this information change what you see in the photograph?
- What does this photograph tell us about this family's life?

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- How does this information change what you see in the photograph?
- What does this photograph tell us about this family's life?

#### STEP 4: LOOK AGAIN (5-8 MIN)

Return to the photograph with fresh eyes. Ask students to look at details they may have passed over the first time.

- What are the children wearing? What can their clothes tell us about their lives?
- Why do you think Dorothea Lange chose this family as one of her subjects?
- Why do you think the woman has on gold earrings?
- How would you describe the facial expressions in this photograph?
- What is this photograph able to tell us? What is it not able to tell us?

#### WRAP-UP & REFLECTION (5 MIN)

Bring the class back together. Ask:

- What questions would you still want to ask if you were a historian studying this image?
- What else would you need to know to understand this family's story?

#### DIFFERENTIATION NOTES

- Middle school (6th–8th): Focus on observation and context. Keep discussion questions concrete and grounded in what students can see.
- High school (9th–12th): Push toward interpretation and historical argument. Ask students to consider Lange's role as a government photographer and what that means for how we read the image.

#### OPTIONAL EXTENSION

Students choose one moment from the photograph and write what they think happened one minute after the photo was taken, one hour after, or one day after. They must base their response on specific details they observed in the image.

# HOW TO READ A PHOTOGRAPH AS A PRIMARY SOURCE

Photographs can serve as primary sources: something produced by an eyewitness of a historic event or topic. This checklist will help you investigate a photograph as a primary source.



Turpentine worker's family near Cordele, Alabama. **Dorthea Lange, 1937**

- First, examine the photograph.** This includes the title, photographer, and year it was taken.  
ex. I notice that there are five children in this family. I see a mother, but no father. The mother has on really nice earrings.
- Bring your prior knowledge.** History is already about building blocks. What do you already know?  
ex. I know 1937 is during the Great Depression.
- Build on your knowledge.** Learn more about the photographer and the time period.  
ex. Lange used photography to show the effects of the Great Depression.
- Look again.** What new details come to the surface once you know more about the photographer and the time period?

**Discussion Questions.** Have students discuss in groups, answer the comprehension questions attached, or reflect in their notebooks.

1. What are the children wearing? What can their clothes tell you about their lives?
2. What else is going on in the world in 1937 that might impact the family in this picture?
3. Why do you think Dorthea Lange chose this family as one of her subjects?
4. Why do you think the woman has on gold earrings?
5. How would you describe the facial expressions in this photograph?

# CLOSE READING OF THE WPA NARRATIVES

## PRACTICING HISTORICAL ANNOTATION

Jasmine Holmes | Adaptable for Grades 6–12 | One Class Period (45–50 min)

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What can close reading of primary sources teach us about history?

### OVERVIEW

The WPA Ex-Slave Narratives are an invaluable primary source. They offer students an opportunity to read eyewitness accounts of slavery. In this lesson, students will read two WPA Ex-Slave Narratives. One will be a pre-annotated opportunity for discussion. The other will be the students' opportunity to practice annotating on their own.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify key details of the lives of the WPA Interviewees
- Connect prior historical knowledge to a new source
- Understand how context changes the way we read a primary source.
- Practice asking historical questions rather than drawing unsupported conclusions

### MATERIALS

- Projected or printed copies of the annotated Elvira Boles narrative and the Tempie Durham narrative.
- Meeting Tempie Durham worksheet (one per student)
- Pencils; chart paper or whiteboard for shared notes (optional)

### VOCABULARY

Primary source, eyewitness, historian, observe, contextualize, evidence, interpretation

### TEACHER NOTE:

These primary sources support students in developing active reading skills by encouraging attention to context, perspective, and subtext. Through close reading of WPA narratives, students analyze both the interviewees and the conditions under which the interviews were conducted, deepening their understanding of how history is recorded and remembered. The lesson also creates opportunities for students to research referenced historical events, construct Civil War and Reconstruction timelines, and discuss the nature and limits of memory in historical sources.

### OPTIONAL TEACHER CONTEXT

WPA narratives reflect complex power dynamics between interviewers and interviewees, which can shape how formerly enslaved individuals describe their experiences—including moments that may appear to present slavery in a more positive light. This tension is central to questions of reliability and interpretation; teachers may choose to address it explicitly depending on student readiness and instructional goals.

## LESSON PROCEDURE

### OPENING (5-10 MINUTES)

Start with this brief introduction about the WPA Narratives:

The WPA Ex-Slave Narratives are over 3,000 interviews collected from the formerly enslaved during the 1930s. They were collected as part of the Federal Emergency Relief Agency arm of the New Deal. The WPA Arts Projects found employment for white-collar workers -- writers, artists, actors, musicians, etc. Most of the interviewees had been children during slavery.

## PART ONE

### STEP ONE: BRING YOUR PRIOR KNOWLEDGE TO THE TABLE (5-8 MINUTES)

Ask students what they already know that might be relevant to this narrative. Guide them through their graphic organizer as they fill out the “What I Know” section.

- What was the cause of the Civil War?
- What kind of conditions did Black Americans live in after the war?

*Teacher note: This step surfaces what students bring to the source before they build on it. You're not correcting yet — you're listening.*

### STEP TWO: READ THE ELVIRA BOLES NARRATIVE TOGETHER (10-15 MINUTES)

Distribute the annotated reading and the worksheet. Guide students through the first two paragraphs, noting the annotations and asking them to provide observations of their own.

- How does Elvira describe the slave auction?
- What was the first kind of work Elvira did?

### STEP 3: FINISH READING THE NARRATIVE (8-10 MIN)

Finish reading Elvira's narrative together.

- Is their prior knowledge strengthened by the narrative?
- Is their prior knowledge challenged by the narrative?

## PART TWO

### STEP 4: READ TEMPIE DURHAM'S NARRATIVE (10-15 MINUTES)

Have students break into groups. Give each group one part of Tempie Durham's narrative. Encourage them to use the spots for annotation as they go along. As you circle the room, listening in to groups, ask questions to prompt deeper reading:

- What does Tempie's relationship with her enslavers seem like?
- How is Tempie's remembrance of her wedding different from Elvira's?
- How often does Tempie get to see her husband before the Civil War ends?

*Teacher's Note: Tempie's narrative has been broken into five sections for four distinct groups. If you have more than four groups, print extra copies of each section. Also, let the students know that this is not Tempie's entire Narrative, which can be found [here](#).*

### STEP FIVE: SHARE TEMPIE'S STORY (5-10 MINUTES)

Have each group go in order sharing the story of Tempie's life. If more than one group has the same passage of Tempie's story, have the groups each share three things they learned about Tempie from their section.

### WRAP-UP & REFLECTION (5 MIN)

Bring the class back together. Ask:

- How was Tempie's story similar to Elvira's? How was her story different?
- How are Tempie and Elvira's attitudes towards slavery different?
- Does Tempie have anything negative to say about her enslavement?
- Does Elvira have anything positive to say about her enslavement?

### DIFFERENTIATION NOTES

- Middle school (6th–8th): Focus on observation and context. Keep discussion questions concrete and grounded in what students can see.
- High school (9th–12th): Push toward interpretation and historical argument. Tempie and Elvira both describe their master's as good – but Tempie's good is very different than Elvira's. Have students discuss the differences and similarities.

### OPTIONAL EXTENSION

- Students can write a timeline of Tempie and Elvira's lives, using information from the text and prior knowledge about the Civil War.
- Students can draw a Venn Diagram of Tempie's life and Elvira's life.
- Students can draw 3 columns: what they knew thought they read; what they learned by reading; what they'll take from this lesson.

**Discussion Questions.** Have students discuss in groups or reflect and take notes.

1. What are the children wearing? What can their clothes tell you about their lives?

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2. What else is going on in the world in 1937 that might impact the family in this picture?

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3. Why do you think Dorothea Lange chose this family as one of her subjects?

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4. Why do you think the woman has on gold earrings?

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5. How would you describe the facial expressions in this photograph?

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**Write 1-2 questions of your own:**

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# Elvira Boles

El Paso, Texas - 1936

Partus sequitur ventrem was a legal doctrine that perpetuated the slavery of children like Elvira. Regardless of who her father was, Elvira's status would be the same as her mother's.

I just remember my first master and missus, cause she don't want me there. **I was a child of the master. They didn't tell me how old I was** when they sold me to Boles. My missus sold me to Boles. They took us to where there was a heap of white folks down by the court house and we'd be there in lots and then the whites would bid for us. **I don't know how old I was**, but I washed dishes and they put me to work in the fields. **We don't get a nickel in slavery.**

Elvira did not know her age, but notes that she was old enough to be put to work in the fields when she was sold.

Her description of her labor is brutal.

Master Boles didn't have many slaves on the farm, but lots of brickyard. I toted brick back and put em down where they had to be. Six bricks each load all day. That's the reason I ain't no 'count, **I was worked to death.** I fired the furnace for three years. Standing in front with hot fire on my face. Hard work, but **God was with me.** We'd work til dark and quit awhile after sundown. **Master was good to slaves and didn't believe in just lashing 'em. He'd not be brutal but he'd kill 'em dead right on the spot.** Overseers would get after em and whoop em down.

Elvira has pointed to her lack of agency three times now.

Religious phrasing

Elvira's lack of certainty about her age is a recurring theme.

I's **seventeen, maybe**, when I married to slave of Boles. Married on **Saturday night.** They give me a dress and they had things to eat, they let me have something like what you call a party. We just had common clothes on. And then I had to work every day. **I'd leave my baby crying in the yard and he'd be crying but I couldn't stay.** Done everything but split rails. I've cut timber and plowed. **Done everything a man could do.** I didn't notice the time, but **I'd be glad to get back to my baby.**

Elvira's metric of good: he doesn't kill his slaves. This also shows how normalized the intense labor was.

Slavery's effect on motherhood.

Saturday was a common visiting day for families

She "works like a man" but is still very much a mother.

We'd ask our friends and dance all night. Then go to work next day. We'd clean off the yard and dance out there. Christmas come, they give us a big eggnog and give us cake. Our **white folks** did. **White folks** children had bought candy. We didn't get any, but they let us play with the **white children**. We'd play smut. Whoever beat with the cards, he'd get to smut you. Take the smut from the fireplace and rub it on your face."

"white folks"

"white children"

If she married at 17, did she bear the Boles child at a younger age? Did this happen while she was married?

Doctor take care of us if we sick, **so get us well to get us to work.**

If they had a pretty girl they would **take em**, and **I's one of em**, and my oldest child, he boy by Boles, almost white.

She understands that her enslavers care for her so she can work.

We had to **steal away at night to have church** on the ditch bank, and crawl home on the belly. **Once overseers heard us praying, give us one day each 100 lashes.**

Elvira paints religious expression as something forbidden.

Again, Elvira reminds us she is a mother, and the grief of loss that slavery brought.

Then when the Yankees come through, they would be good to the slaves, to keep them from telling on them. **Freedom was given January 1, 1865, but the slaves didn't know it til June 19.** We's refugees. Boles, our master, sent us out and we come from Holmes County to Cherokee County by wagon. **We was dodging in and out, running from the Yankees.** Master said they was running us from the Yankees to keep us, but we was free and didn't know it. **I lost my baby, it's buried somewhere on that road. Died at Red River and we left it.** The white folks go out and buy food along the road and hide us. They said we'd never be free if they could get to Texas with us, but the people in Texas told us we's free. Then master turn us loose in the world, without a penny. **Oh, they was awful times. We just worked from place to place after freedom.**

Elvira references Juneteenth, which tells us she ended up in Texas.

The Boles family kept moving their slaves around to avoid freeing them.

Elvira's life was characterized by hard work in slavery and in freedom

## A NOTE ON DIALECT

A common barrier to reading the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives is the use of dialect that renders some words and phrases almost completely illegible. I have taken the liberty of removing a lot of the dialect from the WPA quotes, simply for accessibility (replacing “wuz” with “was,” “de” with “the,” “dey” with “they,” and so on), but I have not fundamentally changed the stories in any other way.

More information and analysis about the collection of the WPA Narratives can be found here: <https://libguides.rice.edu/WPASlaveNarratives>

# Tempie Durham

Durham, South Carolina - 1937



My white folks lived in Chatham County. They was Marse George an' Mis' Betsy Herndon. Mis Betsy was a Snipes befo' she married Marse George. They had a big plantation and raised corn, wheat, cotton, and tobacco. I don't know how many fieldhands Marse George had, but he had a mess of them, and he had horses, too, and cows, hogs, and sheep. He raised sheep and sold the wool, and they used the wool at the big house, too. There was a big weaving room where the blankets was woven, and they wove the cloth for the winter clothes, too...



Share your observations about the text

ex. Tempie says *my white folks*. What does she mean by that?

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# Tempie Durham

Durham, South Carolina - 1937



When I grewed up I married Exter Durham. He belonged to Marse Snipes Durham, who had the plantation across the county line in Orange County. We had a big wedding. We was married on the front porch of the big house. Master George killed a goat and Mis' Betsy had Georgianna, the cook, make a big wedding cake all iced up white as snow with a bride and groom standing in the middle holding hands. The table was set out in the yard under the trees, and you ain't never seen the likes of the eats... Exter done made me a wedding ring. He made it out of a big red button with his pocket knife. He done cut it so round and polished it so smooth that it looked like a red satin ribbon tied round my finger. That sure was a pretty ring. I wore it about fifty years, then it got so thin that I lost it one day in the wash tub when I was washing clothes...



Share your observations about the text

ex. How does Tempie seem to feel about her wedding day?

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# Tempie Durham

Durham. South Carolina - 1937



After the wedding we went down to the cabin Mis' Betsy done all dressed up, but Exter couldn't stay no longer than that night cause he belonged to Marse Snipes Durham and he had to back home. He left the next day for his plantation, but he come back every Saturday night and stay 'till Sunday night. We had eleven children. Nine was before surrender and two was after we was free. So I had two children that wasn't born in bondage. I was worth a heap to Marse George cause I had so many children. The more children a slave had the more they was worth. Lucy carter was the only [one] on the plantation that had more children than I had. She had twelve, but her children was sickly and mine was muley strong and healthy. They was never sick.



Share your observations about the text

**ex.** What does Tempie say made her valuable to her enslaver?

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# Tempie Durham

Durham. South Carolina - 1937



I was glad when the war stopped cause then me and Exter could be together all the time 'stead of Saturday and Sunday. After we was free we lived right on at Marse George's plantation a long time. We rented the land for a fourth of what we made, then after a while we bought a farm. We paid three hundred dollars we done saved. We had a hoss, a steer, a cow, and two pigs, 'sides some chickens and four geese. Mis' Betsy went up in the attic and gave us a table and some chairs. She give us some dishes, too. Marse. George give Exter a bushel of seed corn and some seed wheat, then he told him to go down to the barn and get a bag of cotton seed. We got all this then we hitched up the wagon and threw a passel of children and moved to our new farm, and the children were put to work in the field; they growed up in the field cause they was put to work time they could walk good.



## Share your observations about the text

**ex.** What was Tempie's favorite part about being free? What does this reveal about her feelings about enslavement?

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# CLOSE READING OF THE WPA NARRATIVES

## GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

What I Brought | What I Learned | What I'm Taking Away

### WHAT I BROUGHT (PRIOR KNOWLEDGE & ASSUMPTIONS)

*What did you already know—or think you knew—before reading this source?*

▶		
▶		
▶		
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▶		
▶		

### WHAT I LEARNED (NEW INFORMATION)

*What new details or ideas did you learn from this source?*

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### WHAT I'M TAKING AWAY (SYNTHESIS)

*What is one idea from this source that changes or deepens your understanding?*

**One thing I will take away from this source is that**
