Primary Sources are the raw material of history – what was happening in the moment. And when we approach and analyze primary sources, it helps to sharpen our observational skills, develop analytic capacities, hone our critical thinking, and engage in problem-solving. It's really the detective work of history.

We begin with observations. We think about what pops in the image or the document, what surprises us, what details do we notice. And then we move to the reflection where we think about our observations synthetically.

We think about them together, and we develop theories, possible hypotheses, or explanations for what we've observed – what we've noticed. Then we move to the questioning phase where we want to really develop researchable questions. And we want to ask the “who,” the “what,” the “where,” the “when,” the “why,” about the source, and we want to really dig in and think about what was happening at the time to contextualize the source, and also to access enduring human questions to put yourself in that moment, and to think about what the people at the time were thinking.

And what are the persistent issues? How does history relate to issues in your own life, to ongoing struggles, to ongoing questions that relate to society today?
Ben Weber: Political Flyers

When you approach this primary source, you start with general observations, and you look at the title, "Why Should We March." You look at the questions that were posed. What are the immediate goals? Why should we march? And then you zoom in and collect some details. You see a quote down there by A. Philip Randolph about winning the war for democracy. You see a picture of a mass-gathering of people. And when you turn to reflect on this primary source, you take those observations – the details you see (the date 1943), the names the titles of questions – and you think about possible explanations for those details in those observations and theories explaining what this source was doing at the time that it was created – who the audience was and things like this.

When you reflect on the primary source, you want to also relate it to issues in your own life. Have you seen political flyers? Have you seen or been part of a march, or rally, or protest? What are the kinds of things that people gather for today?

And then also, you want to think about the context of what you are learning about the civil rights movement and what you learned earlier about the 1940s. That date, 1943 – if you do the detective work – you see that it's in the future tense, not in the present or the past tense. So you're in the early 1940s, and you think about this war for freedom. They must be referring to World War II, which is going on at the time.

And you look at those four freedoms – the freedom from want, the freedom from fear, and the freedom from Jim Crow – and you might remember that F.D.R.'s original four freedoms was the freedom of want, the freedom of fear, the freedom of speech, and freedom of worship. And so there is added in the Jim Crow. And this ties into a long legacy of calling upon the nation to live up to its ideals – the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence – of liberty, equality, rights, and opportunity and democracy, and using the political language, appropriating political speeches, and adding in new claims.

And when you turn those observations and those reflections into researchable questions, you have to move past literal answers. So you have to ask the “who,”
the “what,” the “when,” the “where,” and the “why.” But if the answer to the “who” can’t stop at a literal, “Well, you know, this was done by A. Philip Randolph.” You have to say, “Well, who is this guy? What is he involved in?” And that generates a whole set of questions. Similarly, with the “what,” it’s the literal answers – “It’s a political flyer.” But you have to move beyond the literal and ask, “What was it calling for? What was the meaning of a march on the nation's capital in the early 1940s when the nation was at war?”

And when you start to dig in and do some outside research, you'll find that this particular demonstration, although it never happened, put pressure on F.D.R. to desegregate – to call attention to the issue of discrimination in war industries. And F.D.R. desegregated the war industries with Executive Order 8802, and later Truman desegregated the Armed Forces. And this is all part of the long history of civil rights. And it also calls attention, this particular source, to the importance of the Double V Campaign for African-American civil rights struggle. It was victory against Nazism and fascism abroad, and victory against racism and discrimination and segregation here in the United States. It also – lastly – this source shows you the long history of the March on Washington Movement. That as early as 1941, this was a political tactic adopted by social movements, and along history, the eventual March on Washington in 1963, where a quarter million people turned out to protests in support of equal rights for African-Americans.
Ben Weber: Maps

BEN WEBER:

Maps are really cool primary sources. And you notice in this map, if you start with general observations, you see that it shows a portion of the United States. There are southern states. There are cities like Washington DC and Nashville. And then you zoom in, and you collect some details. What sticks out to you? What surprises you? You notice in block letters, there are explanations of the amount of people that were jailed, released, and where they encountered violence.

The key to interpreting any map is the legend. And you look down at the bottom – this legend tells us the date, 1961. It tells us the precise day of each of the different routes, marked with different thickness and dotted lines and arrows, and it tells us that that asterisks – or that little star – symbolizes where these people encountered violence along the way.

You take those observations then, and you reflect. You develop some theories that explain what these routes might be about. And here is where you bring in your outside information – what you're studying about the civil rights movement... some outside research. You notice that by far, that most of the trips left from DC, which makes you maybe wonder what was it about DC. What kind of people? What kind of organizations? Why was that such an important place for these bus trips to leave from? And you develop a theory that you can then test with outside research.

You also notice that each of the routes went between states or across state lines. Even the shortest one that went from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to McComb. And that might raise some questions as you reflect. Why are they all going between states? Why are they long? Why do they have multiple stops? You also, when you reflect, you want to put yourself in that historical moment. If you are one of these Freedom Riders on the bus, what would that feel like, knowing that violence that they encountered? Or, knowing the history, would you volunteer to be one of these brave people? The first Freedom Ride involved eight black volunteers, eight white volunteers. They're challenging segregation practices of separating the races in the south.
And so when you put yourself in that moment and begin to think and feel as these people might've thought and felt, then you turn those observations and reflections into researchable questions. You see that the background map was written by Sid Moody as an AP news feature, that in text he describes some background on CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, which was the organization that organized these rides, their tactics of direct nonviolent action, and also a deeper history and background of the 1947 Freedom Ride organized by Bayard Rustin, to really let people know about the Supreme Court case that was as early as Morgan versus the Commonwealth of Virginia. Supreme Court had ruled that it was illegal to segregate – to separate – the races in interstate bus terminals, but for Bayard Rustin and people like Bayard Rustin, he said it is not enough that the Supreme Court issues just decisions, but that people have to be aware. And so he organizes these initial rides to educate people along the way in these towns in the South that had segregated or separated the races in these bus terminals and had often times defended those practices through violence. And so, in researching that deeper history, you begin to ask a set of questions. There's also a researchable question in here about the role of the media. Is it important that this news feature went out to the papers? What if no one knew about these Freedom Riders and what they encountered in these segregated bus terminals, and what if they were not able to raise national awareness about the issues of discrimination and racism?
Ben Weber: Photographs

Photographs are unique primary sources because they give us a window into the past, and they capture a particular moment. When you analyze a photo, you want to start with general observations and think about what do you notice in the image? What strikes you? What surprises you? What pops out? And then you move in and zoom in on some details. And all of those observations provide clues to understanding the primary source and also to understanding its importance.

When you move from those observations into the reflections, you begin to think about those observations together and test possible theories or possible explanations for what’s going on in that image. You see that the girl is carrying a binder. She’s wearing sunglasses. You notice the expressions on the faces of the people behind her. You notice this woman yelling at her. You think about relating that to issues that you’re studying about civil rights. What kind of harassment do these students have to face?

Another reflection that you want to do with this source is to relate it to yourself and to issues in your own life. Think about what that girl must be feeling. Think about what you would be feeling if you were in that position. And think about what that image makes you feel now, looking at it. Then you turn those reflections and those observations into researchable questions. You think about the context – what’s happening at the time.

You bring in outside research, and you look at those clues and try to provide answers to the “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” and “why” questions. What was going on at the time? And you find, when you do some research, that this photo was taken of Elizabeth Eckford in September of 1957, and that she was one of the group of students to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. They became known as the Little Rock Nine. When you look at the Little Rock Nine, you noticed that six of the nine were female, and that becomes a researchable question about boys and girls – about assumptions and schooling. And you find that a historian like Rachel Devlin recently showed that the majority of the school desegregation cases at the primary and secondary level involved girls. And the question is, what assumptions does that raise or challenge about boys and girls about schooling? When you look at the expression and you think about what the
woman behind her must be yelling, you think about the harassment; you think about school bullying. That becomes researchable questions. You think about the limits of hate speech and the First Amendment in protecting people from inciting violence. And that also becomes a researchable question. So buried in this image are clues to all kinds of broader issues that were happening at the time about segregation, about schooling, about the history of school desegregation cases from Brown vs. The Board of Education, to Brown II, to all these other cases.
Ben Weber: Music

BEN WEBER:

With sheet music as a primary source, you start similarly with general observations: the title, “We Shall Overcom,” the authors. You notice that this is by Zelfia Horton, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan, and Pete Seeger. You want to zoom in on details – things that might be unnoticed – or for clues to the broader understanding and importance of the text. Here you’ll see that it says that there are “new words and music adaption,” which might make you think there must be an old version. You think like a detective. So if there are new words added, why did they change it? What is the story there? Then you take those observations and you turn them into reflection. Relate that to issues in your own life. This was a powerful song in the 1960s in the civil rights movement. What are powerful songs for you?

What’s the most moving music that you’ve heard and why? And then think about how it makes you feel – how it makes other people feel. Does it matter if you listen alone or in public? If you sing alone or together with other people? And then you take those reflections, and you dig into the “who,” the “what,” the “when,” the “where,” the “why” questions, and you contextualize that source.

The African-American Odyssey Library of Congress Collection tells us that Lyndon Baines Johnson, the President, used... startled many of his audience when he used that phrase, “And we shall overcome,” in ending his speech in support of the 1965 Civil Rights Act. And when you dig into the context, and you start to look after that clue about the older version, you notice that this version actually came from a 1940s song that was sung by striking tobacco workers in Charleston, South Carolina; that Zelfia Horton had been the music director at the Highlander Folk School Workshop and had taught that song; learned the song from tobacco workers and taught it to musicians like Pete Seeger, who are active in the civil rights movement; that her successor there, Guy Carawan, had taught it to the members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

And when you do some outside research, you find that historians like Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham have written about the Albany movement in Georgia as the first time they use community singing as a source of empowerment. People sang in jailhouses in protest. They sang for collective unity. And all that becomes a
researchable question about music as a source of empowerment, as a source of social critique, and questions about when it becomes political, and how it enters and is appropriated by different levels of political discourse.