SUE BLANCHETTE:

Hello, I'm Sue Blanchette, past president of the National Council for the Social Studies, and for thirty-two years I have taught U.S. History in the Dallas Independent School District. Our topic today is primary sources – specifically, how to determine the validity of primary sources. The actions that led to the passage of the 19th Amendment provide a fertile ground for an exploration of primary sources. The 19th Amendment is the culmination of almost one hundred years of discussion, persuasion, agitation, and occasional violence that echoes back to the very origins of the United States. Terms like “vote,” and “citizen,” and “franchise” are central to basic American tenants. But achieving them was never easy.

The origins of the 19th Amendment can be found in the Declaration of Sentiments issued in 1848 by the Seneca Falls Convention. That document uses the historical antecedent of the Declaration of Independence to justify its demands for equal treatment of women, equating the actions of King George III in 1776 to those of American men in the 19th century. The question that then arises is, how was this document to be verified? Is it valid? The first examination of a document should refer to the basics.

The first things to look at in a document are the date, the source, the author, and the audience. These pinpoint the document in time and place and can eliminate those that are obviously not applicable to the topic. What is harder to determine is bias – that inclination or tendency in a document – especially one that prevents an unprejudiced analysis of the information. These are the underlying elements in the document that can tip it in multiple directions, and it must be understood in order to appraise the validity of the document.

All documents have bias. The key is to determine whether that bias undermines or augments the argument being made. As you look at the document, consider the following: Number 1, who produced it? Does the author have an agenda to be furthered by the document? In the case of the Declaration of Sentiments, the author, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, did have a specific purpose in mind: equality for women. Yes, she benefited, but so did all women. Next, does the author benefit
personally or monetarily? For instance, if the document is a photograph, does the photographer gain if it is published, and will that influence the choice of subject?

What verifiable information is contained in the document? Can it be corroborated by another source, and is that source valid? Does the document evoke an emotional response that overrides factual consideration? Do we see the glitz and not the substance? What is the source of the document? Is a reputable? This is especially important today when considering Internet sources. Our ease of obtaining information is not necessarily factual when we look at the Internet.

Are there historical antecedents that bolster the document? Is there a precedent being followed? And finally, does the document reflect or refute the social norms of the time period?

The next two images illustrate how bias can influence the document. In the famous depiction of Manifest Destiny, Lady Liberty is shown bringing civilization and light from the East, to the dark and savage West, reinforcing the prevailing views of the time. Historical research has shown that the coming of American civilization forever altered traditional Native American culture, and not always in a positive manner. But in the 1870s, this was not a consideration for most Americans. The pro-suffrage cartoon uses the same imagery of Lady Liberty, this time implying that it is in the Western part of the nation, bearing the light to oppressed Eastern women.

The image does contain factual information, showing that the Western States did indeed grant suffrage to women before the Eastern states did. However, the implication that suffrage alone will lift women from the quagmire against which they struggle, is indeed the opinion of the artist. The final map provides specific data illustrating not only when states granted complete female suffrage, but also showing that some degree of female suffrage existed in some of the eastern states prior to the passage of the 19th Amendment. This slide both supports and refutes the emotional message contained in the Mayer editorial cartoon. So, when considering a document, the “who,” the “what,” the “where,” the “when,” and most importantly the “why,” is essential in determining the validity of that argument.