Skills for Primary Source Research

The skill sets listed below are designed to teach students ideas and skills that will introduce them to primary source repositories, help them recognize primary sources, provide them with an understanding of the nature of these sources and model a good research process. The curriculum outline is designed to draw students into—and excite them about—the use of the primary sources. The order of the broad skill sets reflects both the idea of drawing students into the use of primary sources, but also that of reducing barriers to their use. While the order is set out to accomplish these outcomes, the skill sets are flexible and can be interchanged.

1. **Know**

   Teaching students to “know” is to introduce them to the existence of primary sources, teach them to recognize primary sources, and introduce them to the range and variety of these sources as well as their relationship to secondary sources.

   **Outcomes:**
   
   a. Knows that archives and special collections exist and are there to be used.
   
   b. Knows what constitutes a primary source.
   
   c. Is aware of the range of primary sources that may be found in a repository.
   
   d. Understands the role of secondary sources in relation to primary sources.

2. **Interpret**

   Teaching students to interpret is one of the most essential skills students must acquire to work with primary sources. It provides students with the tools and specific skills needed to extract, understand, and interpret the information in a
variety of primary sources. It also teaches students the importance of chronology and context in the formation of a narrative, as well as advanced skills surrounding the interpretation of silences and issues related to under-represented groups in the archive.

**Outcomes:**

a. Knows the importance of, and how to use, observation as a tool to understanding and analyzing documents.

b. Understand the importance of audience (is the audience an individual as in the case of a private letter, or the world as in the case of a press release).

c. Understands the importance of the relationship between the creator and the audience (what one writes to a parent from college is different from what one writes to a friend or sibling and should color the use and evaluation of the content).

d. Understands the importance of date (even subtle things about a date, like that it was written in winter in colonial New England, can add to the researcher’s understanding of the context surrounding the document).

e. Can interpret the tone of a document, lending an understanding of the creator, their mood and their outlook.

f. Knows how to physically evaluate primary documents and books.

   (Understands that the quality of the paper, the ink, the handwriting, and the impression—if printed—play a role in interpreting primary sources.)

g. Has an understanding of the importance and role of chronology.
h. Understands historical context and its importance in the interpretations of primary sources.

i. Can create a narrative to form a better understanding of the primary sources.

j. Understands the nature and syntax of a variety of document types and sources including written, printed, visual, and financial.

k. Can recognize and interpret silences in the archives.

l. Knows how to interpret evidence surrounding under-represented or non-literate groups.

3. Evaluate

“Evaluate” is closely related to “Interpretation” and “Use.” To evaluate encompasses the understanding of the archival principle of provenance and how it relates to finding appropriate repositories, collection and documents.

**Outcomes:**

a. Understands the archival principal of provenance.

b. Knows how to find repositories appropriate to their research topics.

c. Knows how to determining which collections in a repository are appropriate to their research.

d. Knows how to determine which individual sources in a collection are appropriate to their research.

4. Use

“Use” is designed to teach students about the physical handling of primary source materials as well as about restrictions to access. It also aims to impart
the role of citation and, perhaps most importantly, the need for a flexible research process.

**Outcomes:**

a. Knows how to properly physically handle a variety of primary source materials.

b. Understands the concept of a collection (repository, manuscript/record group).

c. Understands the importance of original order.

d. Understands the role and use of restrictions to access and use.

e. Has a basic knowledge of copyright and fair use.

f. Knows how to properly cite primary source materials.

g. Understands the importance of a flexible research process that lends itself to change and deviation when appropriate.

5. **Access**

“Access” teaches students about locating repositories, collections and documents and understanding the role of surrogates.

**Outcomes:**

a. Knows how find primary source repositories.

b. Knows how to find primary source collections.

c. Understands finding aids and their structure.

d. Understands the relationship between originals and surrogates—both print and digital.

6. **Ethics**
“Ethics” introduces students to the ethical use and portrayal of primary source materials.

**Outcomes:**

a. Understands the consequences of removing data from its context in order to reshape it to make a point.

b. Understands the consequences of the destruction or alteration of primary sources and the dangers associated with such actions.

c. Understands the consequences of the misrepresentation of individuals represented in primary sources.

d. Understands the importance of representing alternate points of view.

e. Understands the importance of being true to the chronology.