Articles

Summer 2006

Historical Scene Investigation (HSI): Engaging Students in Case Based Investigations using Web-Based Historical Documents

Kathleen Owings Swan
University of Kentucky

Mark J. Hofer
College of William and Mary

Lauren Gallicchio
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/articles

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons

Technology Feature
Kathleen Owings Swan & Mark Hofer, Feature Editors

Historical Scene Investigation (HSI): Engaging Students in Case Based Investigations using Web-Based Historical Documents

Kathleen Owings Swan, Ph.D.
University of Kentucky

Mark Hofer, Ph.D.
College of William and Mary

Lauren Gallicchio, pre-service teacher
University of Kentucky

Abstract:

The Historical Scene Investigation (HSI) project builds upon the work of a number of scholars to facilitate the application and acquisition of historical thinking skills in the K-12 classroom. Through a structured yet flexible approach, HSI exercises attempt to provide scaffolding for the analysis of a variety of historical documents to simultaneously develop an understanding of the content focus of the investigation and the historiography skills embedded in their work. HSI exercises are designed to be "interpreted" and edited by classroom teachers in either a low- or high-tech approach. This article explores the background and structure of the model and discussion of the classroom implementation of two examples.

Introduction

Many current students and high school graduates in the United States struggle with remembering even fundamental facts of American history. The 2001 U.S. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) found that 57% of 12th graders scored *below basic* levels in American history, higher than any other subject assessed, including math and science (NCES, 2001). Eighteen percent of respondents identified Germany as one of America's allies entering World War II. Almost two-thirds of students were unable to identify the Boston Tea Party as an event that helped lead to the American Revolution. One reason for these poor results may be related to the manner in which history often is taught in schools. Despite innovative approaches to teaching and the enormous wealth of web-based documents and multimedia resources for teaching history, many students experience history primarily (or only) through dry textbook stories of the past, teacher-centered instruction, an occasional video or movie, and the memorization of disconnected facts, people, and events for quizzes and tests (Goodlad, 1983).

Recent research in the teaching and learning of history advocates instructional approaches that engage students in the process of *doing history*, including building historical knowledge through the use of primary sources, conducting historical inquiry, and encouraging students to think historically (Kobrin, 1996; Levstik & Barton, 2001; van Hover & Yeager, 2002; Wineburg, 1991). This approach encourages students to *do* history, to raise questions, and to marshal solid evidence in support of their answers. The approach also challenges students and teachers to go beyond the facts presented in their textbooks, examine historical documents for themselves, and consult journals, diaries, artifacts, historic sites, works of art, quantitative data, and other evidence from the past. This kind of thinking requires that students take into account the historical context in which these records were created and to compare multiple points of view (Levstik, 1996; Seixas, 1996; Wineburg, 1991; Yeager & Davis, 1996).

Simultaneously, there has been a recent proliferation of web sites or archives of historic documents created by libraries, universities, and government agencies that allow teachers to access documents for use within the social studies classroom. Numerous organizations including the National Archives and Records Administration and the American Memory Project have made countless historical documents available online including Civil War diaries, newspaper from the 1920's, images from the Jim Crow era, and countless other primary source documents. Access to historical documents online and the lessons learned from leading investigations in the classroom (Levstik & Barton, 2001; VanSledright, 2002) combine to provide opportunities for teachers to engage students in authentic historical thinking in ways that simply would not have been possible even five years ago.

Challenges to Historical Thinking

While the conditions seem right and many social studies teachers might accept the premise of teaching and *doing* history, undertaking an historical investigation in the K-12 classroom can present significant obstacles in terms of pedagogy, content coverage, and time. The most daunting challenge, perhaps, lies in the pedagogical support necessary to assist students in this difficult process. In order to read, interpret, and synthesize primary source information, students must work through a sophisticated set of specific processes (Wineburg, 1991). VanSledright (2002) chronicles his year-long efforts in a fifth grade classroom to work with school children in acquiring and developing the skills necessary to undertake evidentiary

reasoning. While his work demonstrates that elementary-age students are capable of working through these complex processes, it quickly becomes apparent the pedagogical challenge he faced when teaching students to question the validity of the sources and to consider multiple perspectives of an event under study. It also is important to note that using primary sources does not automatically translate into historical thinking (Swan, 2004). Rather, it is the teacher who juxtaposes documents against one another, who asks critical thinking questions of a document, or who elicits the bias or perspective of the author of the document that allows students to practice historical inquiry skills. While a number of websites provide some guidance on using a primary source in the history classroom, there is no pedagogical model that teachers can employ to create their own investigation activities.

The time necessary to implement an historical investigation in the classroom and the increasing number of content standards in the K-12 history curriculum provides yet another challenge. With increasing demands on teachers to cover an ever-expanding content base, teachers lack the time to devote to sustained investigations in the classroom. VanSledright (2002) notes the time and coverage factor as a significant concern of his and of the classroom teacher with whom he worked. His collaborating teacher noted that

> My students will never forget what they learned; they'll never forget what they were taught about analyzing and exploring history. The approach that he [VanSledright] used helped my students learn American history in a new way, one that will stick with them. I've never seen them this excited about studying the past. (p. 105)

In an era of high-stakes testing, this benefit of enthusiasm for learning, while certainly worthy and important, will often be outweighed by the pragmatic concern of preparing students for *the test*.

Given these challenges, there is a need to distill both the historical analysis process and to abbreviate the time required to make these kinds of activities accessible in the K-12 classroom. The Historical Scene Investigation (HSI) project was designed to address these pragmatic classroom concerns and to help bridge the gap between the potential of web-based historical documents and the theoretical frameworks that guide historical thinking with an instructional model that scaffolds the analysis process for students.

HSI: Historical Scene Investigation

In an attempt to clarify the process of historical thinking, many scholars employ the use of metaphors. When working with fifth graders to develop historical thinking skills, VanSledright (2002) crafted the metaphor of becoming a detective, designed to shift the way students understood the study of history from "simply memorizing other people's facts to investigating, interpreting, and arguing about the situation themselves" (p. 41). Students were asked to solve the mysteries of the past through clues found in historical documents. Using the courtroom to describe the use of primary sources and the development of historical thinking skills, Wineburg (1991) writes that historians work through documents as if they were "prosecuting attorneys…not merely listening to testimony but actively drawing it out by putting documents side by side, by locating discrepancies and by actively questioning sources and delving into their conscious and unconscious motives" (p. 511). Finally, Yeager and Foster

(2001) describe historical interpretation as a process by which students find meaning through a "variety of actors on the historical stage" (p. 13). The work of these scholars provided the inspiration for the Historical Scene Investigation Project.

The goal of the Historical Scene Investigation (HSI) project is to package discrete online investigation activities, including hyperlinks to valid primary source documents, in a way that supports students through the investigation process. Using the metaphor of a crime scene investigation, the HSI exercises guide students in analyzing selected primary source documents to solve a historical problem or question. In doing so, the HSI model follows the following four steps:

- Becoming a Detective
- Investigating the Evidence
- Searching for Clues
- Cracking the Case

Becoming a Detective. In the first step, "Becoming a Detective," students are introduced to the historical scene under investigation within the context of a historical situation that captures student interest. Students are then presented with a task to help guide the exercise and eventually crack the case. For example, in the *Finding Aaron* exercise on runaway slaves, students are presented with the following introduction of the case:

A descendent has traced her lineage to an enslaved man named Aaron and is trying to piece together his story. You have agreed to help her. She has provided a series of documents that follow. It is your job to determine the type of evidence included within this file, the credibility of each piece of evidence, and how the evidence fits together. Finally, you will be asked to come up with a plausible explanation of what happened to Aaron between December 1767 and January 1771 and how you came to that particular conclusion.

Investigating the Evidence. After familiarizing themselves with the task at hand, students move to the "Investigating the Evidence" section of the exercise. Students are provided hyperlinks to a number of essential, digital primary sources that help them begin to piece together a historical narrative, to research multiple renderings of an historical account, and to assess the credibility of the evidence. Most importantly, these documents talk to one another and assist teachers in using multiple documents to uncover historical dilemmas and controversies with their students. The evidence might include text files, images, audio, or video clips. In the *Finding Aaron* case, students follow a series of runaway slave ads from the Virginia Gazette beginning on December 1767 and ending on January 1771, which are available using the Virginia Center for Digital History's Runaway Slaves online database (VCDH, 2003a). When a slave or servant ran away in the eighteenth century, masters often placed remarkably detailed advertisements for their return. Using the runaway slave advertisements, students follow one former slave named Aaron in his attempt to win his freedom from a Central Virginia court. In the following advertisement (Figure 1), a plantation owner in Chesterfield County, Virginia, explains that Aaron sued for his freedom against the owner's father (VCDH, 2003b).

Virginia Gazette, Jan. 3, 1771:
RUN away from the Subscriber, in Chesterfield, on the 30th of June last, a

Mulatto Man Slave named AARON, who brought suit against my Father (Henry Randolph) in the General Court, for his Freedom, in the name of Aaron Griffin. The Suit was determined last October Twelvemonth in my Father's Favour, though probably the said Fellow may change his Name and endeavour to pass for a Freeman, as many of his Colour got their Freedom that Court. He is two and twenty Years of Age, about five Feet nine or ten Inches high, and marked on each Cheek IR, the Letters very dull; he has straight Hair, and a very remarkable Set of Teeth, which ride one above another. The said Fellow is outlawed. Whoever brings me his Head shall have TEN POUNDS reward; and if brought alive, or secured so that I get him, FIVE POUNDS. JOHN RANDOLPH. N.B. All Masters of Vessels are forewarned from carrying any such Fellow out of the Country.
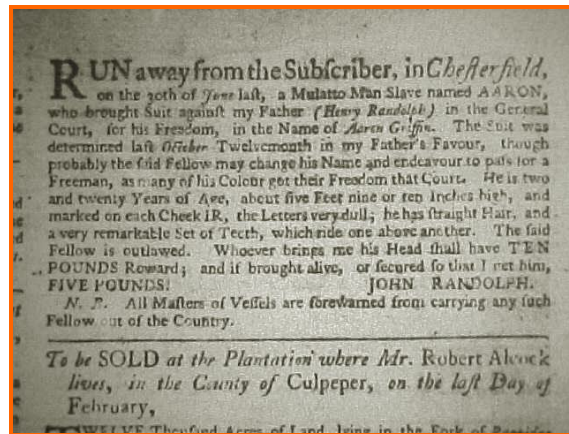

Figure1. Virginia Gazette, Jan. 3, 1771

Searching for Clues. When "Searching for Clues," students are provided with a set of questions in the form of a Detective's Log to help guide their analysis of the selected documents. Step-by-step instructions, including an analysis of the individual documents as well as a comparison between documents, assist students through each step of the process. This scaffolding can be very structured or more open-ended, depending on the instructional goals and the abilities of the students and the teacher. For each case, the Detective Log is provided both in the form of a printable handout and a customizable word processing file from which students work.

In the *Finding Aaron* case, the Detective's Log challenges students with a range of questions that begin with sourcing the documents (i.e., authorship, audience, context, etc.) and typically end with some sort of judgment as to the reliability of the document. After examining the evidence, students are then asked to summarize frustrations they encountered when trying to piece together the account. For example, students are regularly asked within the exercise, "Based on this investigation and what you know about the process of history, what are some difficulties historians face in reconstructing history?"

Cracking the Case. Finally, in "Cracking the Case," students present their answer to the original question accompanied by a rationale rooted in the evidence. Additionally, students are encouraged to ask new questions that arose during the process for future investigation. The answer can take many forms. An Advanced Placement U.S. History teacher might opt for

students to write a traditional five-paragraph essay supporting their conclusion, using the documents as they would in the requisite document based question (DBQ). An elementary school teacher might choose to have students participate in a structured classroom debate. In the *Finding Aaron* activity, students merely are asked to write a plausible explanation of what happened to Aaron between December 1767 and January 1771, indicating whether they were satisfied with the evidence and listing any additional questions that were left unanswered. Whatever the end product, it is important that students provide an answer to the original question with supporting documentary evidence.

Teacher's Section

In addition to the case file, there is a section for the teacher in which objectives for the activities are provided with links to national content and process standards. Additionally, background information on the content addressed in the activities is provided with links to additional resources, including related primary source documents. The model is intentionally standardized so that teachers can easily browse the activities to quickly understand the process and purpose. All activities include a rich text file which can be downloaded and customized using a word processing program so that teachers can modify the exercise as needed.

In the Classroom

The HSI project originally focused primarily on providing pedagogically sound ways to use digital historical documents in the classroom; with the technology in the background, it was primarily a way to deliver the content. Consequently, many of the initial investigations housed on the site can be used effectively either on or offline. For an investigation, the teacher could download the case file and either modify the activity or use it as is. We think of this as the *low-tech* approach. More recently, however, we have also added investigations in which technology plays a more integral role. For example, in the investigation on the *March on Frankfort* discussed below, audio and video files and written transcripts of oral histories are also utilized. In this case, technology helps to bring the emotion, feeling, and passion of the speakers directly to the students. We consider this kind of investigation a *high-tech* approach. We know that given the uneven access of technology between and within schools, both approaches are useful.

"Low-tech": The Starving Time in Jamestown

Recently three 5th grade classes in Lexington, Kentucky engaged in an HSI investigation called *The Jamestown Starving Time*. During the course of this investigation, which encapsulated a total of two forty-minute social studies blocks, students were challenged to read eight different historical documents to determine the cause of the *starving time* in Jamestown Colony in the winter of 1610 in which 440 out of 500 English settlers died--a lingering question for historians today. As a whole group, the students read and discussed photocopied versions of the textbook account of the starving time and an excerpt from the journal of John Smith, leader of the colony. During this reading and discussion, students filled in their Detective's Logs including information on the author and date of the document, the type and purpose of the document, and the audience for which the document was intended. Throughout the discussion, the teacher prompted the students to explore the discrepancies between the documents. Once students became comfortable with reading and analyzing the documents, pairs of students explored two

additional, first-hand accounts of the starving time and filled in their logs. At the beginning of the second day, the teacher and students worked through a document containing census data on the original settlers, including names and occupations. They were asked to make inferences about the value of this document and what the colonists' occupations might have had to do with the starving time. Finally, student pairs read through excerpts from two interviews--one with a modern forensic pathologist and another with an archeologist--both of whom offered new insights into the possible causes of the starving time. For homework, students were asked to review their logs and the documents and compose a plausible explanation of what they perceived as causing the near failure of the Jamestown Colony in 1610. While this exercise could have been implemented in a computer lab with students viewing the documents on screen, this type of HSI case may be used just as effectively in this paper-based approach. Other cases, like the one described below, require greater access to technology for optimal effectiveness.

"*High-tech*": The March on Frankfort

In this exercise, students are asked to sort through a number of oral history documents which recount the events from participants who were at the March on Frankfort, Kentucky in 1964. During this march, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., baseball legend Jackie Robinson, and Kentucky Civil Rights' leaders led 10,000 people to rally at the Kentucky state capitol in a peaceful demonstration, calling for a "good public accommodations bill" to prohibit segregation and discrimination in stores, restaurants, theaters, and businesses. The participant interviews were conducted within the past five years by the Kentucky Oral History Commission and have been digitized and parsed into vignettes that focus on the roles of individuals leading up to, and following, the march. A local newspaper account of the march has been included to bring voice to the main speaker, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Students are asked to become members of a history commission selected to review the historic event from the perspective of those interviewed and to ultimately decide: *Who will go down in history?* As students explore the evidence, they work through the Detective's Log to analyze and chart findings from the sources. In addition to exploring events and issues from the Civil Rights Movement, the goal is that students deliberate on two points: a) the criteria that historians use in deciding historical significance and b) the dependability of oral history itself.

Below, Lauren Gallicchio shares her experience in implementing this activity during her student teaching experience:

> I used The *March on Frankfort* HSI exercise in my Survey of Social Studies course. In this setting, I feel that it is imperative that students understand the role of a historian in interpreting and deciphering the events of the past; gaining this knowledge enables students to truly comprehend that studying history is more   than merely memorizing facts. Consequently, I chose to use this HSI lesson during my Civil Rights Movement unit to illustrate to students that interpreting historical events is not an easy task: sometimes the information presented in primary source documents can be skewed by the biases and perceptions the individual brings to the discussion. Since I wanted my students to see how this bias shaped how individuals recalled their past, I used the documents in this exercise to illustrate to my students that primary source documents and oral history accounts can be interpreted in many different ways by an historian.

When I conducted this lesson in my classroom, I began by engaging my students in a discussion that required them to identify any positive or negative aspects of using oral history to understand the past. During this discussion, I was shocked by my students' ability to acknowledge these strengths and weaknesses of oral history; however, when my students began the activity, I was overwhelmed by the fact that my students were not able to independently apply analytical skills to a primary source document. In other words, my students were unable to identify the deficiencies of the oral history accounts that they had just mentioned on their own. Trying to find the deeper meaning in all of the documents proved to be too arduous for my students. One student even replied that she could not fill in her Detective Log. As a result, I had to make some modifications in the way in which I was teaching this lesson.

As it became clear that my students were unable to interpret the documents on their own, I began to increase my scaffolding to assist in the comprehension of the documents. When the students would listen to an oral history account, I would ask them basic cognitive questions that led to more complex questions that really tested the students' knowledge of the passage. At one point, I even asked my students to pretend they were hearing contradictory gossip from their two best friends on a topic. How would they decide which friend was telling the truth? Analogies such as these enabled the students to understand that they analyze events in their lives much in the same way that they would primary source and oral history accounts. As my scaffolding increased, my students' comprehension of the material also improved. Even though the activity had an overarching goal, students learned that there are no completely right or wrong answers when an historian is interpreting primary source documents. In the end, the students were able to learn what questions they should ask whenever they are examining a primary source document or oral history account.

At the conclusion of the lesson, I asked my students about whether or not they felt that this assignment was hard. When most students replied "yes," I informed them that the activity that they had just completed modeled the everyday role of an historian: to interpret history. The students learned that the questions they asked concerning the documents could influence their interpretation of this material. As a result, one student could come to a completely different conclusion on the underlying meaning of an individual's interview than another student who asked the same question of the very same document. Establishing this connection at the end of the lesson allowed my students to realize that the events of history are not always set in stone: The interpretation of primary source documents enables an historian to have a great deal of power in rewriting the past.

The following links lead to the digital audio recordings of interviews with Lauren Gallichio: [Students' Experience](#) and [Teacher's Experience](#)

Conclusion

Strengths of the HSI project include the flexibility afforded to the classroom teacher. Lauren's example demonstrates both the flexibility of the model and underscores the importance of the teacher's close monitoring of the students' progress and subsequent adjustments to the process. As discussed above, the cases are complete exercises and can be used *as is*. At the same time, the documents and the potential approaches for analysis are rich enough so that many assessment options are possible. The "Cracking the Case" activity might be used to wrap up a topic of study, create a transition to the next unit of study, or serve as a springboard to a culminating project. It should be noted that the assessment may include the use of technology as in a digital documentary but could just as well be a class debate or more traditional activity. The HSI project recognizes that the creativity and experience of the classroom teacher is what makes an investigation successful with students.

This HSI model was created in the hopes that it might facilitate historical thinking in the K-12 classroom by assisting teachers in the leg work of locating primary sources and, more importantly, by using these sources in a way that fosters historical inquiry. Each exercise is designed so that students not only begin to unearth plausible explanations to historical questions but also learn the processes that guide the analysis. To date, several activities centering primarily on United States history have been developed, including additional teacher materials (see Table for listing). These activities are hosted on the HSI website (http://www.hsionline.org) and are freely available for use in the classroom. While the initial activities were developed in concert with social studies teacher educators, the creators are currently working with K-12 teachers to develop additional activities. As we move forward, we will not lose sight of the need to create investigations which can be effectively used in a low-access school as well as leverage the enormous potential power of web-based historical documents to connect students with history and more closely align the history classroom with the work of historians. Regardless of how these investigations were intentionally set up, we hope to correspond with teachers like Lauren Gallicchio, who might give us insight into improving or implementing the HSI model.

References

Goodlad, J. (1983). *A place called school.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Kobrin, D. (1996). *Beyond the textbook: Teaching history using documents and primary sources.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

Levstik, L.S. (1996). Negotiating the historical landscape. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 24,* 393-397.

Levstik, L.S. (1997). "'Any history is someone's history:' Listening to multiple voices from the past*." Social Education 61*(1), 48-51.

Levstik, L.S., & Barton, K. (2001). *Doing history: Investigating with children in elementary and middle schools (* 2nd ed.). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

National Center for Educational Statsitics. (2001). *National assessment of education progress: The nation's report card, U.S. History 2001.* Retrieved May 1, 2006, from http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/ushistory/results/.

Seixas, P. (1996). Conceptualizing growth in historical understanding. In D. Olson & N. Torrance (Eds.) *Education and Human Development*. London: Blackwell.

Swan, K.O. (2004). Examining the use of technology in supporting historical thinking practices in three American history classrooms. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Virginia.

van Hover, S.D., & Yeager, E.A. (2002). "Making students better people?" A case study of a beginning teacher. *The International Studies Forum, 3*(1), 219-232. VanSledright, B. (2002). *In search of America's past*. New York, New York: Teachers College Press.

Virginia Center for Digital History. (2003a). *Virginia runaways*. Retrieved May 1, 2006, from http://etext.virginia.edu/subjects/runaways/.

Virginia Center for Digital History. (2003b). *Virginia Gazette (Purdie & Dixon), Williamsburg, January 3, 1771.* Retrieved May 1, 2006, from http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/costa-browse?id=r71010531.

Wineburg, S. S. (1991) On the Reading of historical texts: Notes on the breach between school and academy. *American Educational Research Journal, 28(*3), 495-519.

Yeager, E.A., & Davis, O.L., Jr. (1996). Classroom teachers' thinking about historical texts: An exploratory study. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 24,* 146-66.

Yeager, E.A., & Foster, S. (2001). The role of empathy in the development of historical understanding. In O. L. Davis, E. Yeager, & S. Foster (Eds.) *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Table 1
Student Exercises from The Historical Scene Investigation site

Summary of the Nine Exercises currently housed on the HSI site	
Jamestown Starving Time	In the winter of 1609-1610, 540 of the 600 settlers at Jamestown colony died. Even today it is unclear what exactly caused this calamity—often referred to as the "Starving Time." Students examine a variety of primary sources which include journal entries and ship logs as well as modern-day theories to determine: *What caused the Starving Time?*
Boston Massacre	In the fall of 1770, British Captain Thomas Preston and eight of his regulars were tried for the alleged murder of five Boston colonials. At the conclusion of the trial, Captain Preston and six of the eight soldiers were acquitted while the remaining two soldiers were found guilty of manslaughter. Students investigate a range of primary sources, including lithographs and court transcriptions, to answer the question: *Was justice served?*
Lexington Green	The day the British regulars met with the minutemen in Lexington Green is often called the "Shot Heard Around the World." Many textbooks assume the British fired that shot, but other evidence points to the contrary. Students analyze a number of journal entries, newspaper articles, and other sources to answer: *Who fired the first shot at the Battle of Lexington and Concord?*
Finding Aaron	A descendent has traced her lineage to an enslaved man named Aaron and is trying to piece together his story. You have agreed to help her. She has provided a series of runaway slave advertisements, and students are asked to come up with a plausible explanation of *What happened to Aaron between December 1767 and January 1771*?
Children of the Civil War	Given a series of diary entries of children from the home front and battle lines in the Civil War, students make inferences as to the different challenges children faced during this difficult time. Ultimately, students answer the question: *What aspects of living through the Civil War would have been most difficult?*
March on Frankfort	In 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jackie Robinson led 10,000 people in a rally in Lexington, Kentucky to end discrimination and segregation. Students are asked to analyze a number of oral and written accounts of the March on Frankfort, Kentucky in 1964 in order to come up with a plausible historical argument surrounding the question: *Who will go down in history?*

School Desegregation	In 1956, in Sturgis, Kentucky, ten black students attempted to attend the all-white high school. Other schools in Kentucky desegregated around this time as well and experienced varying levels of resistance. In this exercise, students examine various oral history recordings of what it was like for many Kentuckians on the first day that their school was integrated. Ultimately, students answer the question: *What was it like during the first days following school desegregation in Kentucky?*
When Elvis met Nixon	Amid concerns about illegal drug use in 1970, an interesting meeting took place in the Oval Office. Using a set of photographs depicting Richard Nixon and Elvis Presley meeting in the oval office in 1970 along with a series of white house letters, students answer the question: *Why was this photograph of Elvis Presley and President Richard Nixon taken in December of 1970?*
The Case of Sam Smiley	This exercise serves as an engaging introduction to the process of historical inquiry. After the mysterious death of the fictional Sam Smiley, students explore evidence in the case to build a profile of the late Smiley, create a timeline of his last day, and answer the question: *What happened to Sam Smiley?*