

Research Lesson Plan: Interpreting the Past-Dueling Documents

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Targeted Grade Level: 4-5

Essential Question: Why are there different explanations of the same event in history?

Formative Assessment Prompts:

Instructional Chunk #1: Analyze a document to determine what happened on July 11, 1804, Who fired the first shot?

Instructional Chunk #2: What are the different points of views of this event? Why are they different?

Instructional Chunk #3: Why are there “holes” in evidence? Why might historians come up with different conclusions about the past?

Standard Addressed: History Standard Three 4-5a: Students will explain why historical accounts of the same event sometimes differ and will relate this explanation to the evidence presented or the point-of-view of the author.

Problematic Prior Knowledge (PPL) Addressed

This unit addresses a number of preconceptions and misconceptions that research involving elementary students suggests are common, for example:

- History is “just a bunch of facts.”
- There is a single truth that we can uncover about past events.
- History textbooks contain factual, authoritative accounts of the past. They also contain the “correct” answers.
- To know something you have to witness it.
- If two historical sources conflict, one is wrong.
- If a historical account contains any bias or point of view, it must be taken with a grain of salt.
- Knowing about the author/creator of a document or image is unimportant.
- Secondary sources are less reliable than primary sources.
- Historical claims *must* be backed up by a lot of supporting evidence.

Activating Strategies: identify the strategies you will use to tap prior knowledge, activate schema, warm the students up for the lesson.

Strategy 1: Jigsaw

Strategy 2: Reading Buddies

Strategy 3: Pair Share

Key Vocabulary to preview

- Duel
- Second
- Eyewitness account
- Holes in the evidence

Teaching Strategies:

- Whole group
- Pairs

Graphic Organizer(s) Used:

- Duel Interpretations
- Bulls Eye

Materials Needed:

- Copies of Appendix – [DOCUMENT \(Excerpted Version\)](#): Statement of Aaron Burr’s second
- Copies of Appendix – [Document \(Excerpted Version\)](#): Statement of Alexander Hamilton’s second
- One copy of [Appendix 1 – Bulls-Eyed Version of Pendleton’s Statement](#)
- One copy of [Appendix 2 – Bulls-Eyed Version of Van Ness’s Statement](#)
- Tape and Pencil
- Copies of [Appendix 3 – Graphic Organizer – Duel Interpretations](#)

Note: Complete versions of both documents are provided for the teacher.

- [DOCUMENT \(Complete Version for Teacher\)](#)
- [Document \(Complete Version for Teacher\)](#)

Differentiation Strategies:

- Provide struggling readers with the modified version of the second’s statements

Instructional Plan: Why are there different explanations of the same event in history?

Instructional Chunk #1:

1. *Jigsaw:* Tell students that they are going to read an eyewitness account of the duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. Split the class into equal halves. Place students in both halves into groups of 3–4. Distribute the handout entitled “**DOCUMENT**” (upper case) to one-half of the groups and **Document** (lower case) to the other half, making sure that an equal number of students get each of the two documents. The documents are labeled with capital/lower case lettering to distinguish them for the teacher and to conceal the differences from the students. You will want students to assume that they are getting the same document. Try to seat the students with competing documents far enough apart to reduce the likelihood that their conversations will be overheard by those with competing documents.
2. *Reading Buddies:* Pair more with less accomplished readers. Have the students read, analyze, and discuss the document they are given. Ask the students to demonstrate comprehension of the document by writing a brief description of what happened on July 11, 1804, in their own words. Tell them to include information relating to the following question: *who fired the first shot?*
3. *Pair-Share:* Couple the students who analyzed the handout entitled “DOCUMENT” (capital letter account) with a student who analyzed the competing “Document” (lower case account). Ask each of the two students in the paired groups to read their descriptions of what happened on July 11, 1804, to the person with whom they are now sitting.
After the students share and respond to each other’s descriptions ask:

- Were your descriptions similar or different? (*They contain competing accounts of the same event*) Why? (*They read different sources*)
- Who authored each document? What do you know or what can you infer about each author? (*Pendleton was Hamilton’s friend and his second at the duel with Burr; Van Ness was Burr’s friend and his second at the duel with Hamilton*)
- How would you define the term *point of view*?
- What was Mr. Van Ness’s point of view?
- What was Mr. Pendleton’s point of view?
- Why might there be two different accounts of the Burr-Hamilton duel?

End of Day 1

- **Remind students about when they compared the Wolf’s point of view in the stories; The Three Little Pigs and The True Story of the Three Little Pigs.**
- **Discuss how a writer’s point of view can influence his or her conclusions and the evidence they choose to share.**
- **Discuss the “holes” in the Wolf’s version. What makes the Wolf’s version trustworthy or not trustworthy?**
- **Connect this thinking with the documents the students read yesterday.**

Dueling Documents: Tell the pairs that they are now going to play a game of Dueling Documents in which their “duel” focuses on deciding which source is “best.” Explain that they have excerpted reproductions of two primary source documents. Their task is to decide which document should win the document duel (or be considered more accurate). Ask them to discuss the following questions as they decide which document wins the duel:

- a. Which document won the duel and why?
- b. Is one source “better” than the other?
- c. What might make one piece of historical evidence “better” than another?
- d. What might make one account of the past better than another?
- e. Which account of the Burr-Hamilton duel should appear in our history textbooks? Why?

4. “*Holes in the Evidence*”

Ask students what it means when someone says that there are “holes in a story?” (*The story is suspect*) Tell students that evidence, just like stories, can have holes in them and that the class is now going to play a game of “Holes in the Evidence.”

Ask the two students who played the role of “seconds” in the Battle of the Bells to come up to the front of the room. Give one of the students [Appendix 1](#) with a piece of tape. Give the other student [Appendix 2](#) with a piece of tape. Ask the two students to stand back-to-back then count off 10 (small based on room size) paces. Ask them to tape their documents on the chalkboard (or wall) where they complete their 10 paces then return to their seats.

Write *Pendleton* or *Hamilton’s Second* under Appendix 1. Write *Van Ness* or *Burr’s Second* under Appendix 2. Draw attention to the bulls-eyes on each document.

Remind students that the overarching question in this lesson is *who fired first*—Burr or Hamilton. Write the question, “*Which piece of evidence (or document), if either, has holes in it and why?*” in large letters between the two documents. Tell the students that you now want them to offer reasons why one document has holes in it, i.e., is less believable or not as “good” as the other in terms of answering the question, “what happened at Weehawken on July 11, 1804.” If a student offers a compelling challenge to one of the documents, use a pencil to place a dot symbolizing a hole on the bulls-eye in the document the student critiqued (pencil recommended in case another student effectively refutes the challenge to the document). If the reason is not as compelling, place a hole outside the bulls-eye symbolizing a less accurate “shot.” The further from the bulls-eye, the less persuasive the argument. Once the students exhaust reasons, decide which document loses the document duel.

5. *Debrief:* Ask:

- a. Why might historians arrive at different conclusions about the past? (*Explain that history is filled with different interpretations. One reason for the different interpretations is that historians often rely on different pieces of evidence to construct their accounts. Another is that people have different points of view that are influenced by factors such as friendships, shared beliefs e.g. political, shared opinions, e.g., about other individuals.*)
- b. Knowing that there can be different interpretations of the past, what are some questions you should be asking of any historical account or piece of historical evidence (e.g., a document) as you read/interrogate it?
- c. What makes some pieces of evidence stronger than other pieces of evidence?

Further explain that most accounts of the past involve interpretations built on evidence that varies in strength. To think historically involves questioning texts, including their textbooks and

encyclopedias, rather than accepting them as facts.

Check for Understanding

- ❖ Distribute copies of [Appendix 3 – Graphic Organizer – Duel Interpretations](#) and have students fill in information that responds to the prompts in the 4 boxes.
- ❖ Paper Thoughts: Have students read an excerpt from a history textbook and record what they are thinking as they read. Check to see if they are interrogating the text 😊 or treating it as authoritative 😊.

Summarizing Strategy

Class discussion,debrief, part 6 of the Instructional plan.

Document

(modified for students)

It becomes proper for the gentleman who attended Colonel Burr to state his impressions on those points where there is a difference of opinion.

The parties [Hamilton and Burr] met and took their positions as directed. The pistols were then handed to them by the seconds. General Hamilton raised his, as if to try the light. He lowered his pistol, saying “I beg pardon for delaying you, but the direction of the light renders it necessary,” at the same time feeling in his pockets with his left hand. He pulled out his spectacles and put them on.

The second asked if they were prepared and they answered yes. The word “Present” was then given, on which both parties took aim. The pistol of General Hamilton was first fired, and Colonel Burr fired immediately after, only five or six seconds later. On this point the second of Colonel Burr has full and perfect memory. He noticed in particular the firing of General Hamilton’s pistol. He looked at Colonel Burr when General Hamilton’s pistol fired, and he saw a slight motion in his person, which made it seem as if he had been shot.

On this point he conversed with Colonel Burr on their return, who said that he had a small stone under his foot and observed that the smoke of General Hamilton’s pistol obscured him for a moment while they were firing.

-Statement by William Van Ness,
Aaron Burr’s Second
July 21, 1804 (Hamilton: Writings, p. 1031)
July 17, 1804 (Freeman, p. 192)

DOCUMENT

(modified for students)

Mr. Pendleton expressed a confident opinion that General Hamilton did not fire first – and that he did not fire at all at Colonel Burr.

General Hamilton's friend thinks that it is a sacred duty to publish the facts. Mr. Pendleton is certain on these points:

1. General Hamilton informed Mr. Pendleton that he had made up his mind not to fire at Colonel Burr the first time, but to receive Colonel Burr's fire, and fire in the air.
2. Hamilton's last words before he was wounded, when he was asked if he would have the hair spring set? His answer was, "Not this time."
3. After he was wounded and laid in the boat, Hamilton said: "Pendleton knows I did not mean to fire at Colonel Burr the first time."
5. One of the boatmen took General Hamilton's pistol to put it into the case. General Hamilton saw this and said, "Take care of that pistol – it is cocked. It may go off and do mischief." This shows that he did not realize that he had fired at all.
6. Mr. Pendleton decided to go to where the duel had taken place to see if he could find some traces of the bullet from General Hamilton. He took a friend with him the day after General Hamilton died, and after some examination, they fortunately found what they were in search of. They determined that the bullet had passed through the limb of a cedar tree, at an elevation of about 12 ½ feet, perpendicular from the ground, between 13 and 14 feet from where General Hamilton stood, and about 4 feet wide of the direct line between him and Colonel Burr, on the right side. The part of the limb through which the bullet passed was cut off and brought to this city.

-Statement by Nathaniel Pendleton, Alexander Hamilton's Second
July 19, 1804 (Hamilton: Writings)
July 16, 1804 (Freeman, p. 193)

Exit Ticket Template

Please take a moment to respond to the Exit Tickets below.

Which document won the duel and why?

Is one source “better” than the other? Which account should appear in our history books and why?

What might make one account of the past better than another?

Name:

Differences

Pendleton

Similarities

Differences

Van Ness