

Strategy 17

Personal Correspondence as a Primary Source

POSTCARD EXPLORATION

The students sorted through the postcards they had been given. They knew to touch gently and had all washed their hands before beginning the activity.

"Here's another postcard addressed to 'Elva,' but she has a different last name."

"That's weird," Jose said with a furrowed brow. "They both have the same address, so it must be the same person."

"Maybe she got married," offered Julie helpfully. The teacher smiled to herself. Her great-grandmother Elva had actually been married three times!

Julie and Jose smiled, and all three of the team members began to write enthusiastically on their data sheets.

"This is so funny," comment Jin. "They're writing about our city, San Francisco!"

"It's dated 1913! Wow, that was before my grandma was alive," commented Jose as he squinted to read the tiny handwriting. "Listen to this! She wrote: 'The houses are so unusual, all very close together and skinny. We had a dandy time at the dance, wish you had come.'"

"That's funny," said Jin. "I never thought about our town that way, but I guess she is right."

"Yeah, it's funny that dancing was popular then just like it is now," responded Julie.

"I'm sure they danced a lot differently," laughed Jose. "And I wouldn't be caught dead using the word *dandy*!"

Written correspondence such as letters and postcards can support students in learning about the past in a personally relevant manner. These primary sources provide students with insight into the past and the opportunity to develop empathy and greater understanding of a historical event through first-person narrative (McCormick, 2004), as well as aid in the development of historical perspective (Nash, Crabtree, & National History Task Force, 1996).

When primary sources are difficult to understand or are a poor match for a child's developmental level, it is unlikely that a quality learning experience will occur. It is also

important to incorporate items that students will be able to connect with personally and find interesting (Chapin, 2006). Using postcards or letters is way to bring primary source data into the classroom in a way that is relevant and understandable to students. They also will allow students to explore the role of bias in primary sources and how to use that bias as information rather than disregard the source altogether.

Sources: National Council for the Social Studies, 1994; National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, 1996.

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

- Strand I: Culture
- Strand II: Time, Continuity, & Change
- Strand IV: Individual Development & Identify

Standards for the English Language Arts

Oral interviews support students in comprehension of the spoken word as well as effective methods of orally communicating themselves. Allowing students to use their first language during the project is further supportive of language arts development.

- Standard 4: Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Standard 5: Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

Technology Connection

Students can learn more about vintage postcards as well as see images from their home state at the following Web site: <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~usgenweb/special/ppcs/ppcs.html>.

Please visit
www.sagepub.com/Imelberstudy
for the updated National Council of
the Social Studies standards.

KEY THEMES

- Making observations
- Analyzing postcards
- Making inferences based on data
- Communicating explanations and interpretations

MATERIALS

All that is required for this activity is a collection of written postcards. You may already have your own collection. Another option is to ask friends and family to mail

you child-friendly postcards whenever they are on a trip to build a collection. A third option is to purchase historic postcards at a swap meet or flea market. Traditionally, postcards with writing, postmarks, creases and stains lose collectable value and are available in bulk at very low cost. Whatever the source, it will be important to determine that the messages and images are appropriate for young eyes. You might also choose to use the four sample postcards provided until you can achieve a larger collection of your own (see Figure 17.1 on p. 123).

PROCEDURES

Explain to students that one way social scientists learn about the past is by studying artifacts and other primary sources from long ago. Just as they read letters and postcards to learn about their friends and families, reading postcards from long ago can provide us with information on lifeways of the past.

Before asking students to work independently, it is best to project an image of a postcard in front of the class and lead a preparatory discussion. Younger students will likely benefit from a lengthy discussion. Older students may need just a little orientation, leaving much discussion for them to do in their groups. The presentation can be done with whatever technology is present in the classroom. Copying a postcard onto a transparency and using with an overhead projector is one option. Scanning the image and using an LCD projector is a more technologically advanced option. You will want to use both the image and the message side of the postcard. Lead a class discussion about the postcard image first. Potential questions include:

- What can we tell from the picture about when this card was sent?
- Does the image show a city or natural location?
- What in the image do students find most interesting?
- Do students see anything in the image that reminds them of their own city?
- Is there anything in the image very different from students' own experiences?

Next, lead a discussion regarding the message of the postcard. If using vintage cards, personal handwriting and faded ink may be hard to read. In this case, transcribe the message using a basic font so students can observe the original handwriting for context, but can use the transcription to read for understanding. Potential questions include:

- What is the message about?
- How are the sender and the recipient related?
- When was the postcard sent?
- How is the message similar to one that a student might receive on a postcard today?
- How is the address different from your own address?
- Is there a postmark? What information does this provide?

After leading a class discussion, modeling the analytical process, place students in groups of four. You will provide each student with his or her own postcard, but encourage students to share and discuss their postcard with the group before completing their data sheet. After setting aside 10 minutes for open discussion, instruct students to begin work on their data sheet (see Figure 17.2 on p. 127), recording the discoveries that came from their analysis. After they have completed their data sheet, provide students with the template (see Figure 17.3 on p. 129) to create an original postcard.

With their assigned postcard in front of them as reference, instruct students to write a response to the sender as if they were the addressee, staying true to the details they gleaned through their analysis. To provide students with plenty of time to do their best work, without fatigue, it might be helpful for third to fifth graders to do this second part of the activity on a subsequent day.

GRADE-LEVEL MODIFICATIONS

K–2nd Grade

Because students in this grade range are likely to be emergent readers, the handwriting of personal letters may be difficult for them to decipher. Options are to conduct the activity with a few adult helpers who can read the cards to the students and lead a group discussion rather than having to work independently and record their responses on a data sheet. Another option is to ask friends to send postcards from other states using simple language and easy-to-read handwriting that will be readable by emerging readers. Conducting the first part as a class discussion and instead focusing on the response card as the individually conducted activity can be a helpful modification.

3rd Grade–5th Grade and 6th Grade–8th Grade

Students in both of these grade ranges will be able to read the letter or postcard messages and decipher what the message can tell us about what was happening at the time, and a little about the history of the individual. Transcriptions may be necessary on the most faded or flowery handwriting styles. For sixth- to eighth-grade students, holding only a brief prediscussion is recommended to encourage them to develop their own questions for analysis. Listing a few sample questions from those listed previously on a board or a handout can serve as a starting place.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

Many English learners are more fluent in conversational vocabulary than academic language. Reviewing letters or postcards, students are likely to encounter vocabulary they are already familiar with. By working in groups, students can also support each other with reading comprehension. The short length of the documents is a manageable task that is less likely to discourage English learners than an entire textbook chapter. If you are fortunate to have students with friends and family living and traveling outside of the country, including foreign postcards as part of the lesson can be an exciting extension.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Students with learning disabilities may have even more difficulty than their peers in reading the personal handwriting on a postcard. Creating a typed version of the message using easy-to-read font will aid in the reading portion without taking away from the analysis aspect of the activity. Students with disabilities in the area of fine motor skills may benefit from placing the postcards inside an 8½ by 11-inch plastic sleeve, which may be easier to turn over than the smaller postcards.

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTION

At the conclusion of the activity, students will be able to:

- Make careful observations of postcards
- Analyze messages and images from postcards
- Make inferences about senders and recipients of postcards
- Communicate interpretations through postcard creations

Students' final data sheets can be assessed using the following rubric:

Score	Criteria
4	All sections of the data sheet are complete with exceptional detail and insight.
3	All sections are complete with an acceptable level of detail.
2	Most of the sections are complete with an acceptable amount of detail, or all sections completed with significant errors.
1	Few of the sections are complete, or multiple errors present.

Students' original postcards can be assessed using the following rubric:

Score	Image	Message/Address
4	Illustration is complete, with exceptional detail and appropriate for timeframe of original postcard.	Address is correct format. Message is in line with time period and content of original postcard, and contains extensive detail.
3	Illustration is complete but lacks either detail or color.	Address is in correct format. Message is in line with time period and content of original card but with limited detail.
2	Illustration is complete but lacks both detail and color.	Address and message are both present, but errors with format, time period, or content are present.
1	Incomplete illustration.	Only one of the two elements are present, or there are considerable errors with both sections.

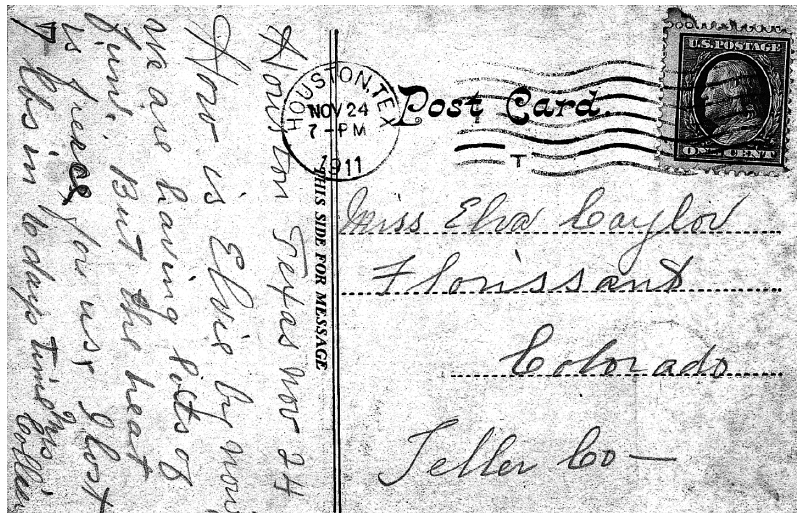
Children's Literature Connection

The series "Postcards From" focuses on children sending postcards home from places all around the world describing their experiences. Titles include travels to China, Mexico, Australia, Japan, and others. Search available titles at: <http://steckvaughn.harcourtachieve.com/en-US/steckvaughn.htm>.

Quick Fact

From 1901 to 1907, the back of a postcard was reserved for only the address of the person it was being sent to. Senders were often relegated to writing any message over the picture on the front of the card. After 1907, divided backs allowed room for an address and a message. The term for the study and collections of postcards is *deltiology*.

FIGURE 17.1 Sample Postcards



To Miss Elva Caylor

Nov. 24, 1911

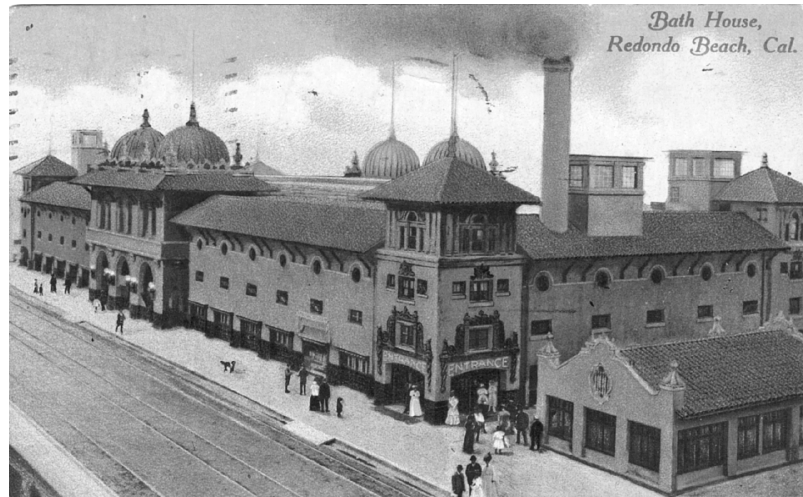
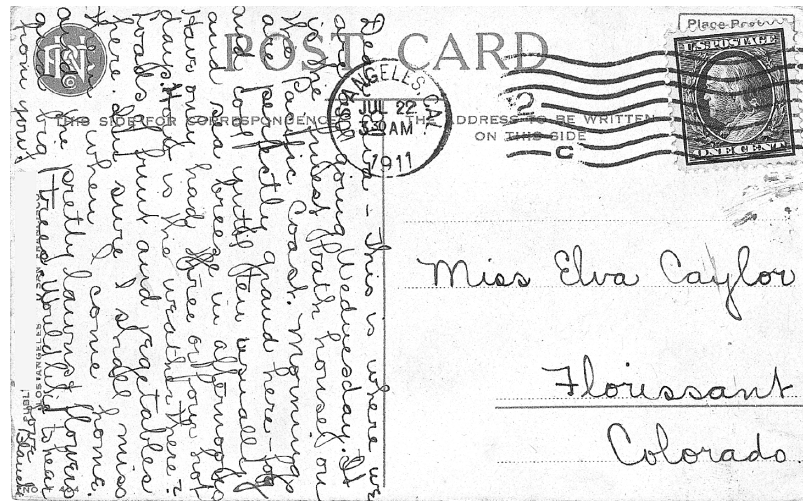
Houston, Texas

How is Elvie by now? We are having lots of fun. But the heat is fierce for us. I lost 7 lbs in 6 days time.

Mrs. Collier

(Continued)

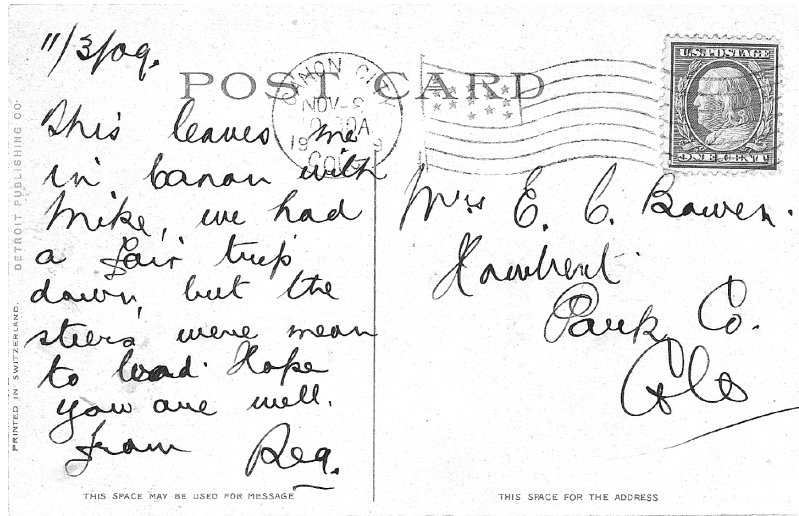
FIGURE 17.1 (Continued)



Miss Elva Caylor

July 22, 1911

Dear Elva—This is where we are going Wednesday. It is one of the finest bath houses on the Pacific Coast. Mornings are perfectly grand here—fog and cool until ten usually and sea breeze in afternoons. Have only had three or four hot days. How is the weather there? Loads of fruit and vegetables here. I'm sure I shall miss them when I come home and the pretty lawns and flowers and big trees. Would like to hear from you (address). Love, Blanche



To Mrs E. C. Bowen

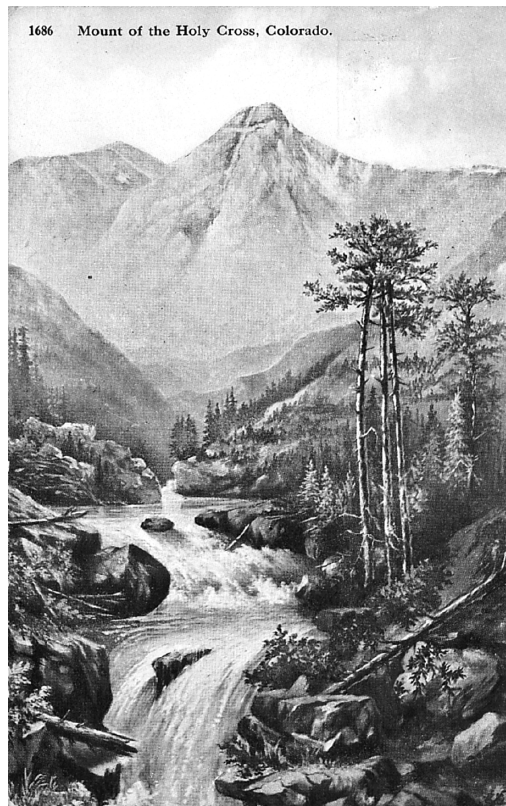
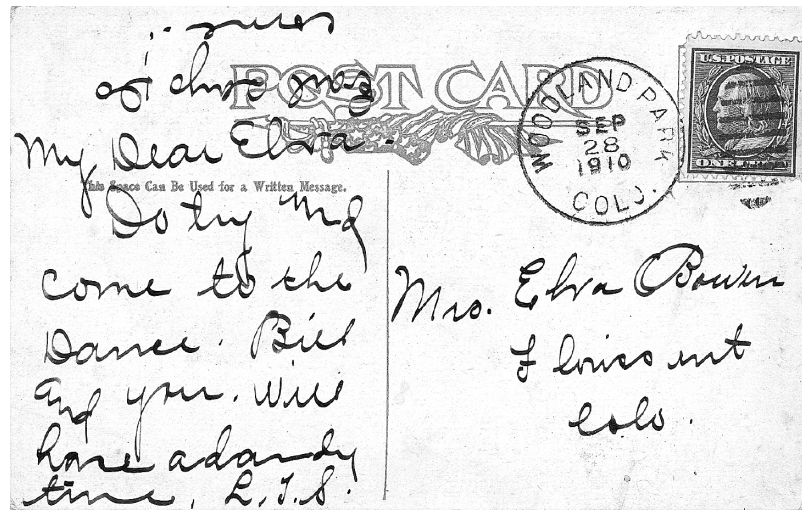
Nov. 3, 1909

This leaves me in Banan with Mike. We had a fair trip down, but the steers were mean to lead. Hope you are well.

From Rea

(Continued)

FIGURE 17.1 (Continued)



To Elva Bowen

Sept. 28, 1919

Do try and come to the dance. Bill and you will have a dandy time. L. T. S.

(upside down . . . Earl says do come!)

Source: Postcards courtesy of the Davis Family.

FIGURE 17.2 Postcard Stories Sample Data Sheet 1 3rd–5th, 6th–8th

Historian: _____

Briefly describe the image:

What elements of the image are similar to today?

What elements of the image are different from today?

Briefly describe the message:

(Continued)

FIGURE 17.2 (Continued)

3rd–5th, 6th–8th

What elements of the message are similar to a postcard you might receive today?

What elements of the message are different from a postcard you might receive today?

Briefly describe the address:


What elements are similar to the way mail is addressed today?

What elements are different from the way mail is addressed today?

FIGURE 17.3 Postcard Response Sample Data Sheet 2 K–2nd, 3rd–5th, 6th–8th

Historian: _____

Select one of the postcards. Pretend you are the addressee and write a response to the postcard you have selected. You will also want to create an image that you think would be relevant and accurate for the time as well as the location where your addressee lives.

	<div style="text-align: right; margin-bottom: 20px;">  </div> <hr style="width: 80%; margin: 0 auto;"/> <hr style="width: 80%; margin: 0 auto;"/> <hr style="width: 80%; margin: 0 auto;"/>
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Message

Image

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