

My Favorite Grab-and-Go Places for Finding Primary Sources to Use with QFT

By: Connie Williams

As a librarian, it's in my wheelhouse to spend time searching for 'what's out there.' The Library of Congress is right there at the top of my go-to sites for anything historical, and especially for finding primary sources to use with the Question Formulation Technique (QFT).

Before starting your search, it's important to enter with the right mindset. There are two key things you should know about searching in libraries. One: they are not encyclopedic. You won't always find exactly what you came in looking for. Part of searching archives involves serendipity. Embrace that and you will discover some mighty interesting things you never knew existed. Two: Libraries, or archives, are organized in collections. Investing the time to familiarize yourself with these collections and what they have to offer will help you utilize the archives to their fullest. Here are some of my favorite places to get started at [the Library of Congress](https://www.loc.gov/) (<https://www.loc.gov/>).

1. Primary Source Sets

<https://www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/classroom-materials/primary-source-sets/>

Primary source sets are collections of materials that relate to one subject curated by the librarians with k-12 school curriculum in mind. Each set has eight to twelve primary sources and a teacher's guide, which often serves as a very useful secondary source. (I even like to send students into the teacher's guide as a way to quickly answer some of their basic context questions after the QFT). Some of the subjects covered by primary source sets are: World War I, Thanksgiving, political cartoons, baseball, weather forecasting, Rosa Parks, growing up in the early 1900s, Harlem Renaissance, sets from all 50 US states, and so much more. This is where I found [one of the images](#) we used with the QFT as an introduction to *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017747598/>

2. Prints & Photographs Division

Go to <https://www.loc.gov/collections/>, then click "Prints and Photographs Division" on the left hand slide

Photographs like the one above work especially well as QFocus prompts for questions. You can discover more photographs and other images by filtering for the "prints and photographs division" within the Library of Congress's [digital collections](#). You'll discover 77 collections displayed in a handy gallery format. Once you click into a collection, you'll land in the "about this collection" page where you can learn more information or check out featured content, but click over to "collection items" to see everything and further narrow your search using the filters on the left hand side. Besides photographs, this is a great place to find posters (from the iconic to the artistic, war propaganda to social issue) and satirical cartoons. Posters and cartoons are both excellent choices for a QFocus—not only can they elegantly encapsulate a key understanding from a particular moment in time, they often use vibrant colors, bold symbols, and larger than life characters to do it, all elements just begging for students' attention and curiosity.

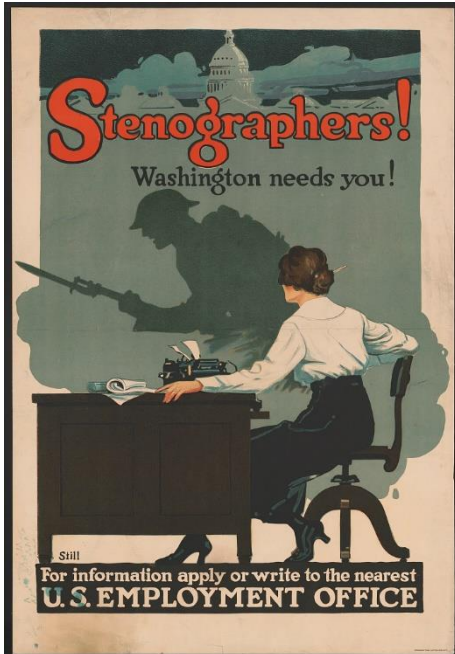
3. Teaching with the Library of Congress Blog

<https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/>

The blog for Teaching with the Library of Congress is invaluable as a source of inspiration for ideas on *how* to use primary sources as well as where to find them. All posts are tagged and organized by category so that you can click on a category and quickly find several relevant posts.

I find the blog particularly helpful for those working with a specific student population (for example, the [Young Learners](#) category) or in a subject area that may not be as frequently represented in the Library's

collections (for example, check out the [Science, Technology and Math](#) category or the [Fine and Performing Arts](#) category.) There is also a [Contemporary United States \(1945-present\)](#) category for those looking for more modern resources which, again, are a little more rare at the Library of Congress.



<https://www.loc.gov/item/2002722567>

But, carve out some time to check out [all of the blogs](#). I find they are most valuable as vehicles for providing interesting and extremely curious topics that work especially well as QFocus ideas. Many teachers utilize the theme of heroes in class and assign students to choose someone whose actions have produced change or otherwise opened our eyes to injustice. Check out the [Headlines and Heroes](#) blog. One of the blog posts that stood out for me was on Ida B. Wells, titled: [“Ida B. Wells and the Activism of Investigative Journalism”](#). This blog post gives information about her work as an investigative reporter – a new field in journalism at the time, and one rife with danger from those who disagreed with the author. She dug deep and wrote widely exposing the horrors of the capricious lynching of Black men and raping of Black women on the shallowest of excuses. This post and the information in it can be used in a wide variety of classroom settings.

4. [Explore the Exhibitions](#)

<https://loc.gov/exhibits/>

From the Library of Congress home page you can find [Exhibitions](#). These exhibits are the online versions of the site exhibits. It is therefore important to note that not all exhibit items will be linked back to digital collections, and may be hard to find again. I like exhibits because participants can see how the primary source they’ve chosen shows part of the story they’re

telling. [World War I: American Artists View the Great War](#) tells the story of World War I through art of all mediums--advertisements and political cartoons to illustrations and photographs—and from a variety of perspectives. Using one of the curated resources as a QFocus can get students thinking about why a particular item was chosen and how it adds to the story the exhibit is conveying. The curation also helps students to explore and conduct research on their own.

5. [Fun: Free to Use and Reuse](#)

<https://loc.gov/free-to-use/>

These collections are, as one of the Librarians of Congress explained, “free of copyright entanglements” so that you can use them for video, audio and other presentations. While most of what you will find on the Library of Congress Teachers page (including the blog and the primary source sets) is also pre-vetted to avoid any copyright restrictions, the Free to Use and Reuse sets are wonderfully fun and eclectic, and include items you may be surprised are copyright-free—such as films or mid-20th century travel posters. Collections run the gamut from shoes to children’s books to art and architecture to African American change makers. If you’re looking for more modern images (post-1920), which can be harder to find digitized and copyright-free at the Library of Congress, this is a good place to start.



<https://www.loc.gov/item/75693623/>

One set that I particularly like is the [maps of cities](#). By clicking on the map of Los Angeles in 1871, I was able to see a large version. I was also then able to find the larger collection of maps that the Library has. Clicking there, I could find maps of my town from the early 1900s. This is an excellent primary source to begin a unit on local history. I could envision using a historical map side by side with today’s Google image of the same place as a QFocus. What has changed? How did it change? Who helped make the change? There are so many possibilities for the images that they’ve added to this collection. Another that

I found for a possible use alongside my maps were travel posters from around the world. Students could plan their virtual trip to New York or Chicago in the early 1900s. What if students were to create their own travel posters for their state, city, or town? Using one of the posters as a QFocus would get them asking questions that could help them learn about metaphors, symbols, design, and story; all of which they'll apply to their own poster.

6. **[Ask a Librarian](#)**

<https://www.loc.gov/rr/askalib//index.html>

This is such a wonderful service ...and they DO respond. It takes about a day or so, but you'll get your answer! I was helping a teacher find an image for her class. She found the perfect one on the LOC site but discovered that it wasn't available digitally. I emailed the "Ask a Librarian" for help: Could I purchase a copy, and if so, how? If purchasing it was not available, might there be something similar? I wasn't having much luck and this one seemed to be just right. The response was timely, about 2 days. I was correct, the image was not available; it was under copyright. They gave me the information I needed if I wanted to write to the copyright holder. But better yet, they also pointed me to two other images that I hadn't seen and one of them was just as interesting to the teacher as her original find.

7. **[The TPS Teachers Network](#)** (join with a free account)

<https://tpsteachersnetwork.org/>

The TPS Teachers Network is a social network for educators working with primary sources. Started in 2013, the TPS Teachers Network now hosts over 10,000 teachers. Through the classes that are offered by the Library of Congress and their partners, many of the projects, primary source sets, and other lessons are included in this network. This is a great place to go for primary source resources from many sites, not limited to the Library of Congress. Participants can join interest groups for specific student populations, subject areas, topical themes, or instructional purposes. A lesson in the disability history group asks the question, "Why did FDR feel the need to hide his disability?" Other groups include TPS Commons, which has the widest diversity of discussion topics, including timely resources on current events in the news, Teaching Online with Primary Sources for remote teaching help, and The Question Formulation Technique for Primary Source Learning group for QFT ideas.

Explore and Enjoy

There are so many places to go in the Library of Congress to find curious and interesting resources. There is no reason why the history of any subject need be boring. With the many entry points to a huge collection of materials, teachers have access to lots and lots of the most fascinating things here. Utilizing any of these as an engaging QFocus will really get things rolling. And to that end, just for fun, here's one more before I go: three images from the [wedding set](#) in the Free to use and Reuse section. Layer these for a QFT on ceremony, gender, or any world culture topic, and then let students' curiosity run wild!



<https://www.loc.gov/item/2018707872/>



<https://www.loc.gov/item/2004672922/>



<https://www.loc.gov/item/92511284/>