

# Inquiring Minds Want to Know: Teaching Students to Ask Primary Source Questions in the ELA Classroom

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Right Question  
Institute

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**TEACHING** WITH **PRIMARY SOURCES**

Consortium Member

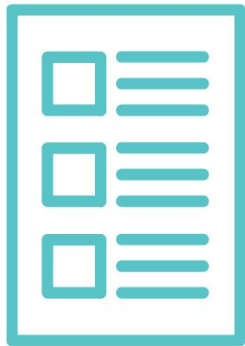
[rightquestion.org](https://rightquestion.org)

# Find Today's Slides & Free QFT Resources

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Slides: <https://tinyurl.com/RQIatNCTE>

More: <https://rightquestion.org/education/resources>



**Classroom Examples**



**Instructional Videos**



**Planning Tools & Templates**

# Use and Share These Free Resources

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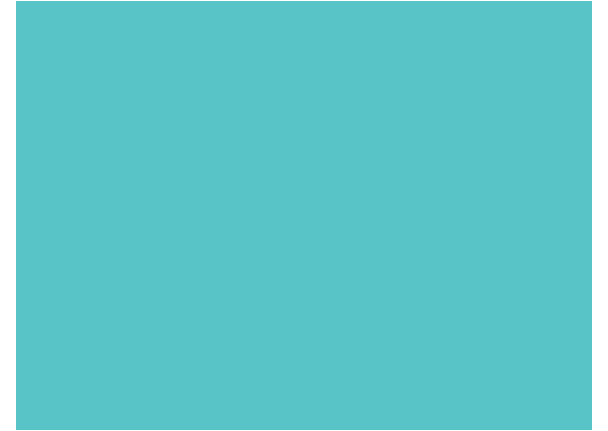
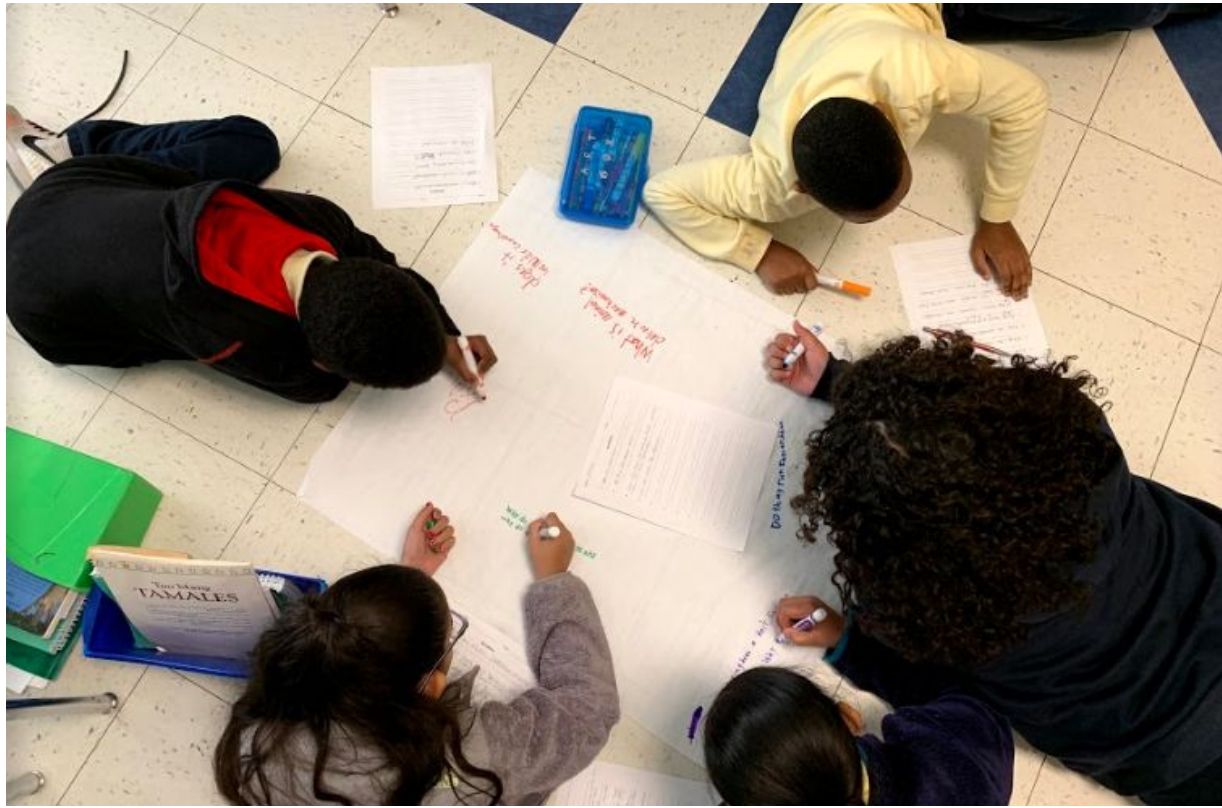
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“Source: The Right Question Institute (RQI). The Question Formulation Technique (QFT) was created by RQI. Visit [rightquestion.org](https://rightquestion.org) for more information and free resources.”

# Today's Agenda

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- 1) Why spend time teaching students to question primary sources?
- 2) Collaborative Learning with the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) using Primary Sources
- 3) Exploring Classroom Applications & Student Work
- 4) Where to go to learn more at [rightquestion.org](http://rightquestion.org) and the Library of Congress



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Why spend time teaching students to question primary sources?

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# Origin of The Right Question Institute: Parents in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1990

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“We don’t go to the school because we don’t even know what to ask.”



# The Library of Congress: loc.gov

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<https://www.loc.gov/item/2007684215/>

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2011646837/>



# What teachers say about combining Inquiry & Primary Sources

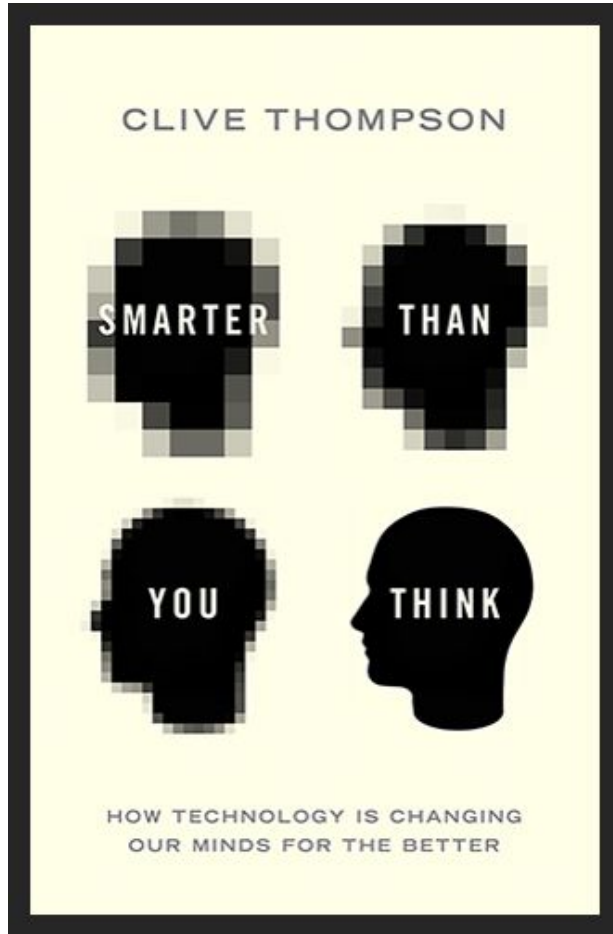
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# In the Age of Google

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“How should you respond when you get powerful new tools for finding answers?

Think of harder questions.”

– Clive Thompson

Journalist and Technology Blogger

# A Foundational Question: What is a “primary source”?



- Title:** Columbus taking possession of the new country
- Creator(s):** [L. Prang & Co.](#),
- Date**  
**Created/Published:** Boston, U.S.A. : Published by the Prang Educational Co., 1893.
- Medium:** 1 print : chromolithograph ; 63.3 x 83 cm (sheet)

# Here's what the Library of Congress would say

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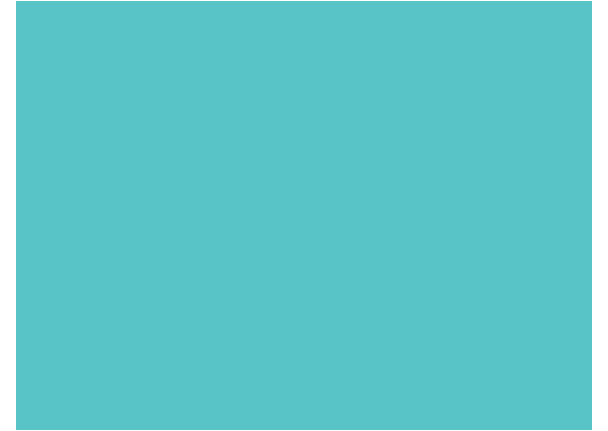
It depends...

What topic and time period are you studying?

If you're studying lithographs from the 1800s, then yes.

If you're studying Columbus' arrival to the Americas in the 1490s, then no.





+ Collaborative Learning with the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) using Primary Sources

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# The Question Formulation Technique (QFT)

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## Individuals learn to:

- **Produce** their own questions
- **Improve** their questions
- **Strategize** on how to use their questions
- **Reflect** on what they have learned and how they learned it

# Rules for Producing Questions

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1. Ask as many questions as you can
2. Do not stop to answer, judge, or discuss
3. Write down every question exactly as stated
4. Change any statements into questions

Which rule may be difficult for you to follow?

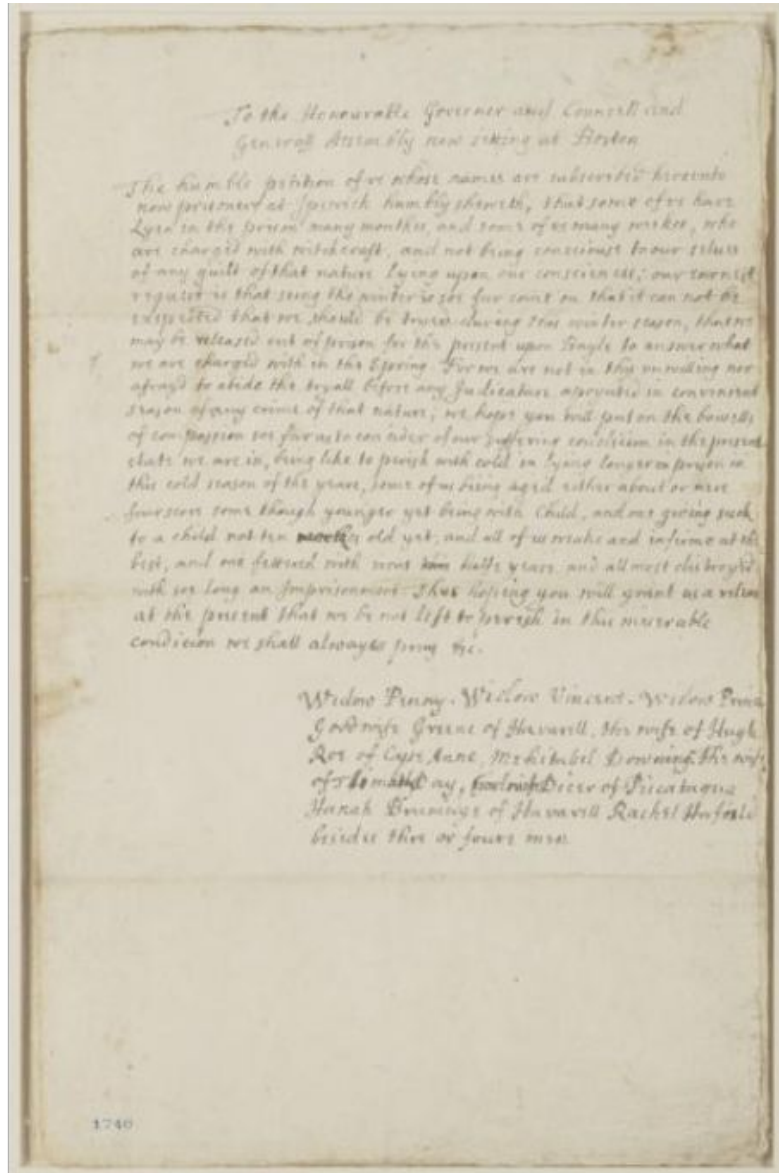


# Produce Questions

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1. Ask Questions
2. Follow the Rules
  - Ask as many questions as you can.
  - Do not stop to answer, judge, or discuss.
  - Write down every question exactly as it was stated.
  - Change any statements into questions.
3. Number the Questions

# Question Focus



Remember to **number** your  
**questions** and follow the rules:

- Ask as many questions as you can.
- Don't stop to answer, judge, or discuss.
- Record each question exactly as it was stated (or first came to mind).
- Change any statements into questions.

# Prioritize Questions

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## **Review your list of questions, then:**

- Choose three questions that you are most curious about.
- Discuss why you chose those questions and where those questions fell in your original sequence. Be prepared to share.



# Reflect

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- What did you learn?
- In a classroom, what could you do next to seek answers to priority questions?

# A Look Inside the Process

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# The QFT, on one slide...

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1) Question Focus

2) **Produce** Your Questions

- ✓ Follow the rules
- ✓ Number your questions

3) **Improve** Your Questions

- ✓ Categorize questions as Closed or Open-ended
- ✓ Change questions from one type to another

4) **Strategize**

- ✓ Prioritize your questions
- ✓ Action plan or discuss next steps
- ✓ Share

5) **Reflect**

1. Ask as many questions as you can
2. Do not stop to discuss, judge or answer
3. Record *exactly* as stated
4. Change statements into questions

**Closed-Ended:**  
Answered with “yes,” “no”  
or one word

**Open-Ended:** Require  
longer explanation

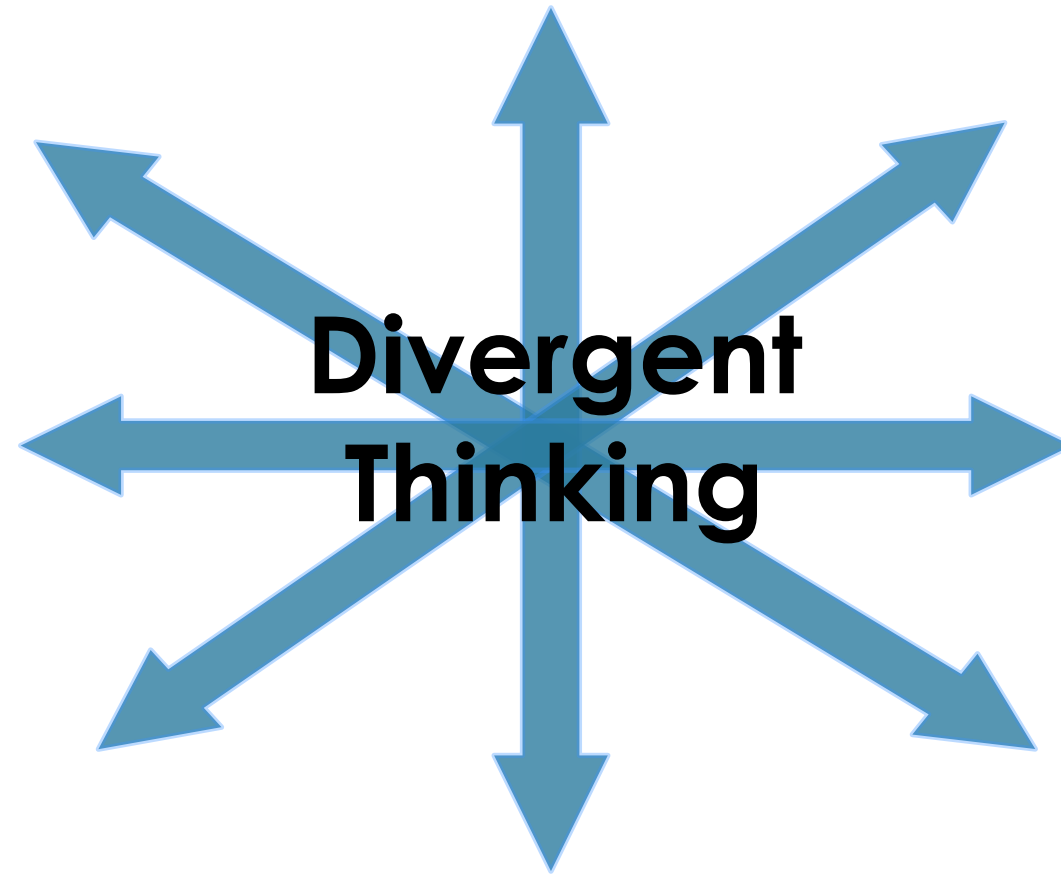
Three thinking abilities  
with one process

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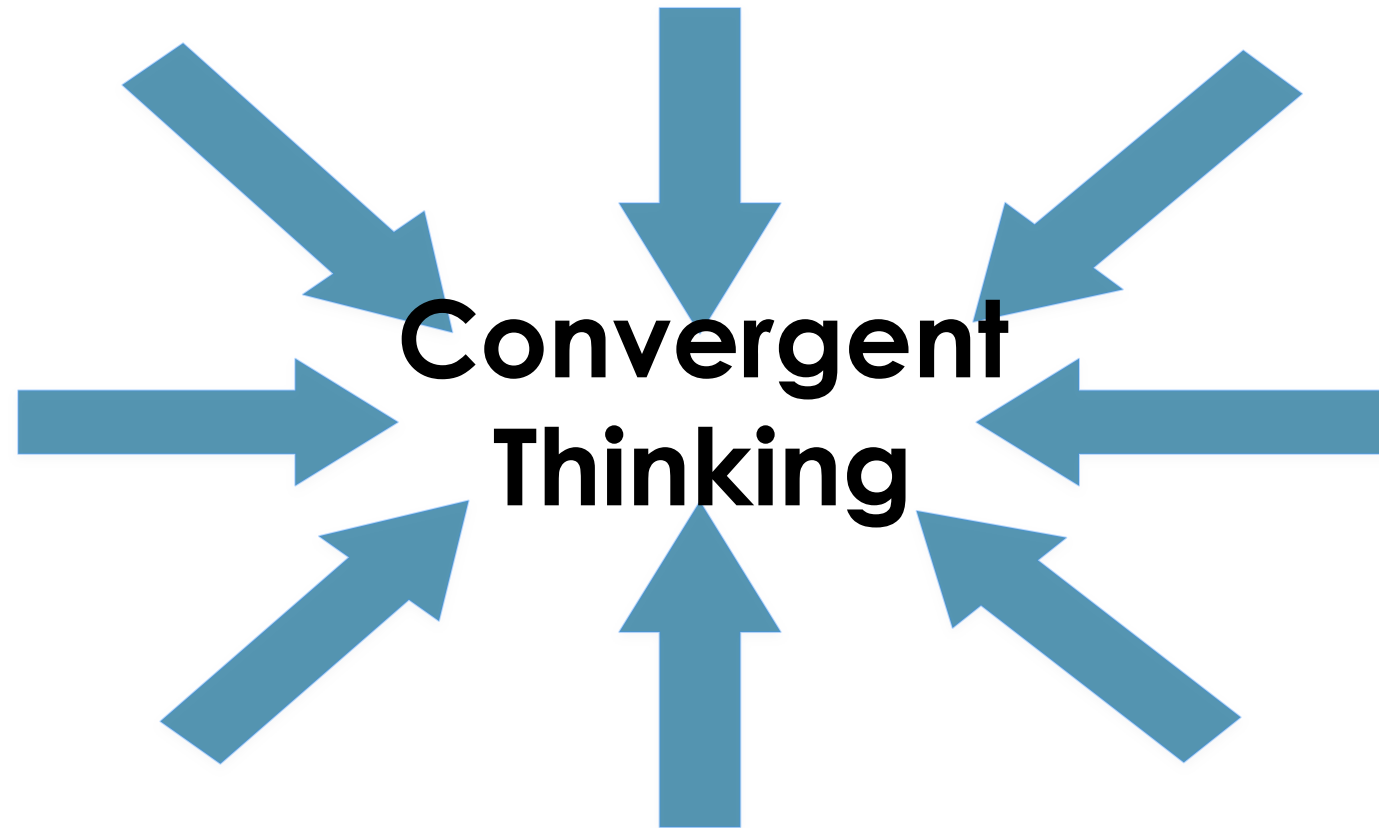
# Thinking in many different directions

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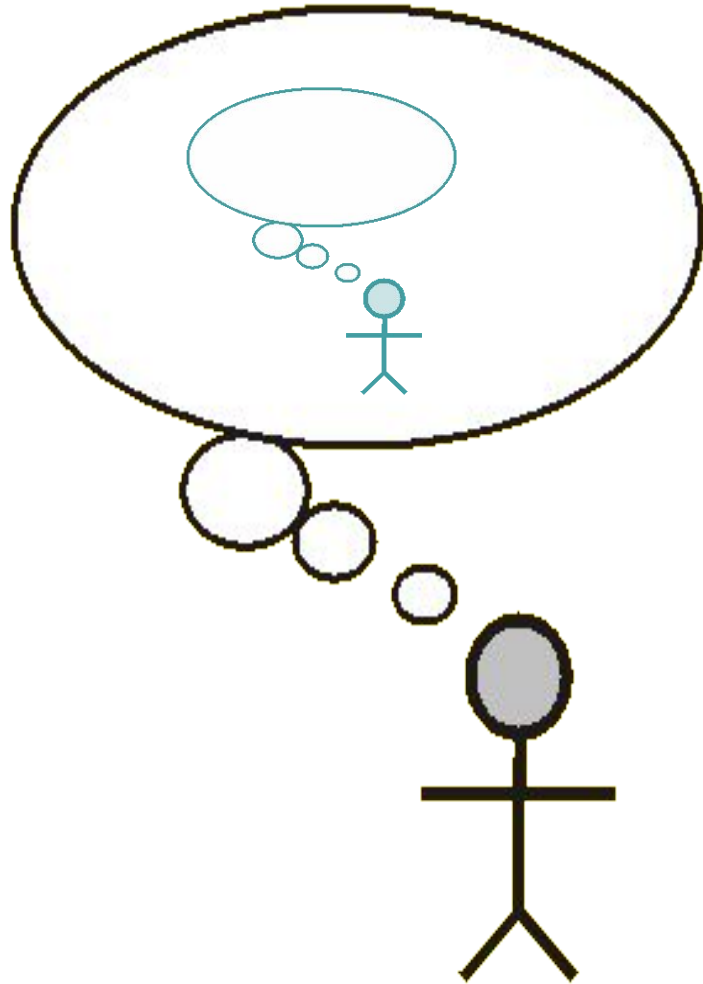
# Narrowing Down, Focusing

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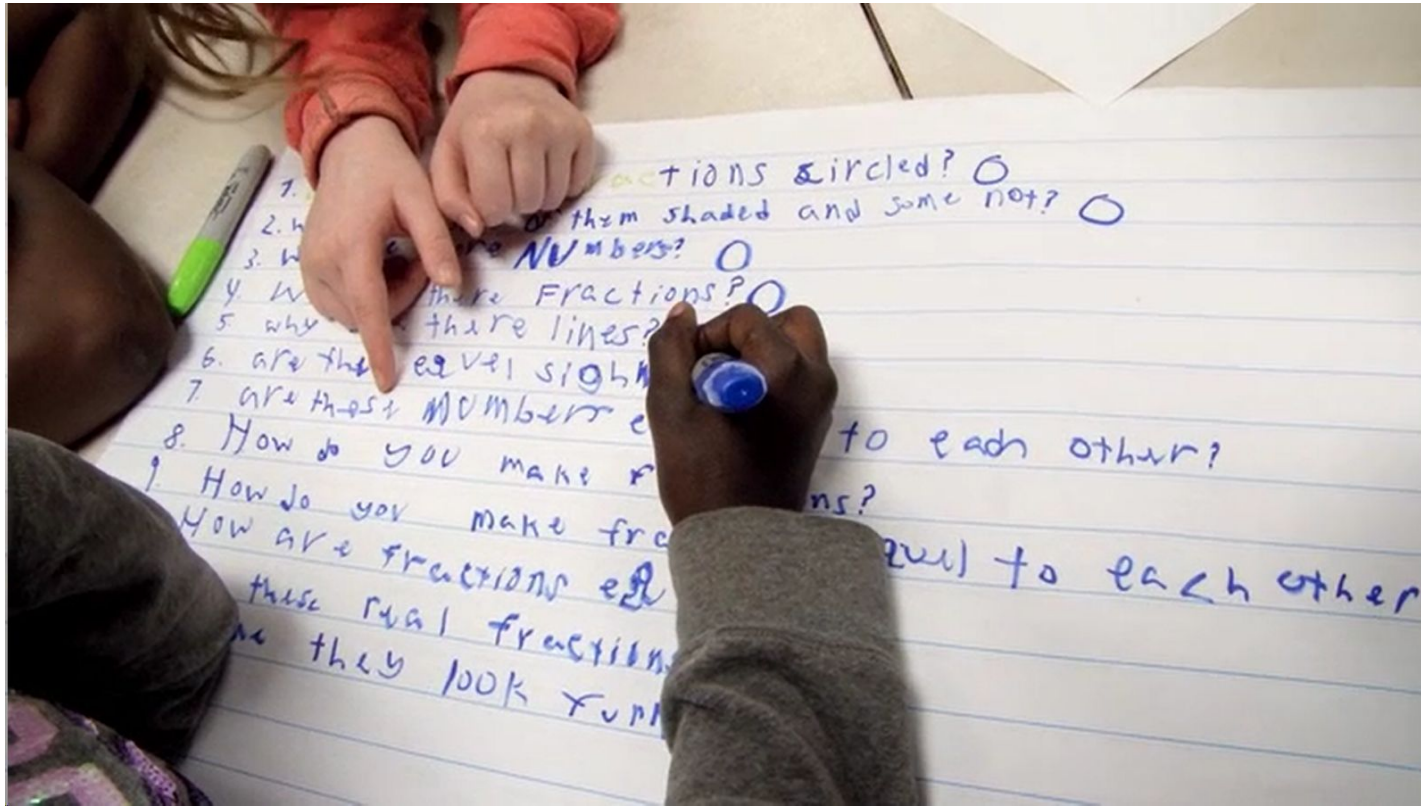


# Thinking about Thinking

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**Metacognition**



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## Exploring Classroom Applications & Student Work

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# Classroom Example: 10th Grade Honors English

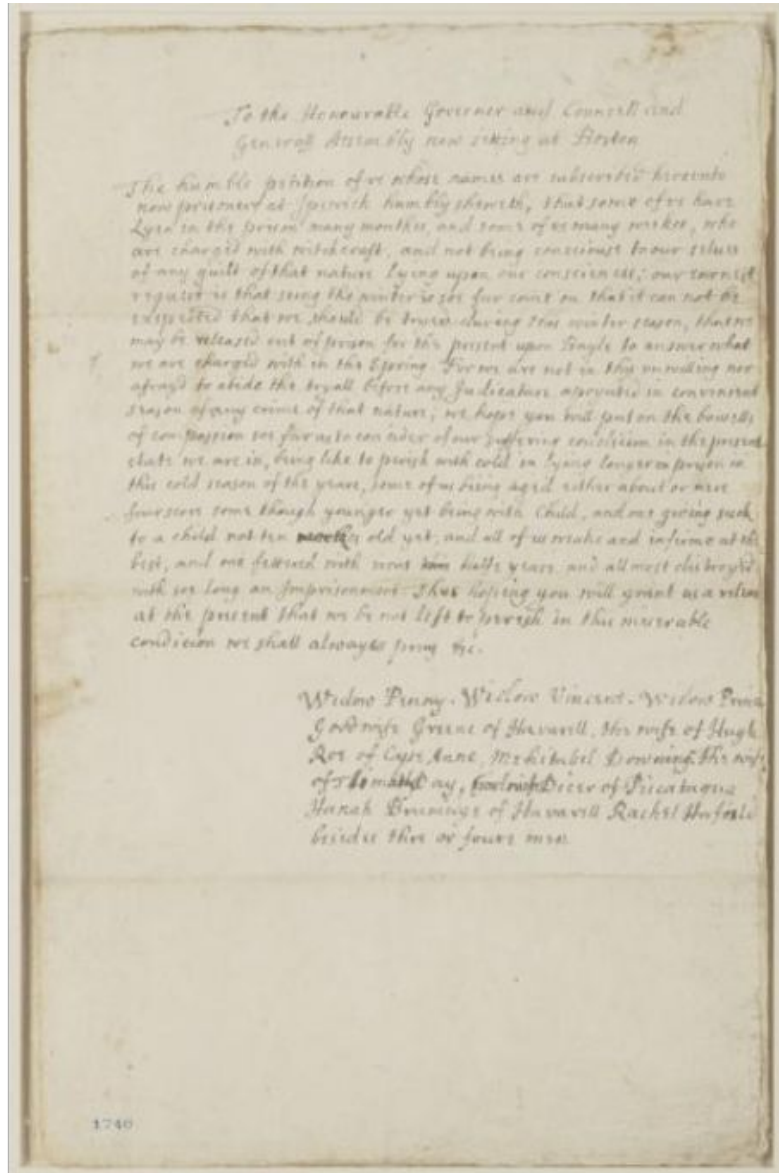
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Teacher: Lauren Carlton, Foxborough, MA

Topic: *The Crucible*

Purpose: To build students' background knowledge about the Salem Witch Trials and build empathy for the real victims who inform this work of fiction.

# Question Focus



“To the honorable governor and council and general assembly now sitting at Boston:

The humble petition of us whose names are subscribed here unto now prisoners at Ipswich humbly share, that some of us have lain in the prison many months, and some of us many weeks, who are charged with witchcraft, and not being conscious to ourselves of any guilt of that nature lying upon our consciences...”

# Selected Student Questions

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1. Did they write it themselves or did someone write it for them?
- 2. Did they ever get released?**
3. Why were they allowed to write a letter?
- 4. If the women who were pregnant died, would the governor or the court get in trouble?**
5. Did the guards at the prison try to stop them from writing this?
- 6. How long is four scores?**
7. Were the prisoners allowed to interact with each other in jail? If so, how did they communicate?
- 8. Were the prisoners just trying to manipulate the governor into letting them out?**
9. Will the fact that so many women signed the document impact the assembly's willingness to take it into consideration? Do those in charge want the accused to suffer?
9. (cont'd) Why else would the prisoners be kept in such conditions?
- 10. Where was the baby that was born kept?**
11. Why have they not been tried yet?
12. Is this their first attempt to be released?
13. Why are there a lot of widows?
14. Are they really unafraid?
15. Who else is in support of this request whose names were not listed?
16. Who are the men and why can't they sign their names?
- 17. Why did they have to write their marriage status when signing their name?**
- 18. Why are the names of the women phrased differently from person to person?**
19. Could they have been punished for writing this?

# Next Steps with Student Questions

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- Student questions about the letter itself served as a jumping-off point for analyzing the rhetorical devices used.
- They investigated types of persuasive tactics the prisoners used to plead their case and considered the efficacy of certain appeals.
- Student questions about perspective informed a creative writing assignment in which students assumed a role and wrote a letter in response to the petition—they adopted the point of view and writing style of their chosen role and used appropriate rhetorical appeals.



# Student Sample: Rhetorical Analysis

10 Honors Mrs. Carlton *The Crucible*

Let's think about this letter, and figure out how the prisoners tried to win over their audience.

Who are the **writers**? Prisoners in Ipswich suspected of witchcraft.

Are they **credible** sources? No, because they have been suspected of witchcraft, they are criminals, they want to get out of jail, they are women.

Why do we think these writers are/are not credible, based on what we know about them? The prisoners are criminals, suspected of witchcraft, and they are women!

What is the **subject** of this letter? They are arguing that they should be let out of prison until the spring when they will be tried.

Why might the writers be credible sources for this subject? They are experiencing it firsthand, they are not denying that they are witches, they have valid logic, they may have ulterior motives.

How does the **content** of this letter establish the writers' credibility? Think about what they say in the letter that indicate they might be reliable sources of information here. Be specific. They say that they are willing to be tried. They know the intended audience and address it. Mental status made you more respectable. They show respect for the audience.

How do the writers feel about this **subject**? What is the attitude, or tone, of the letter regarding the **subject**? They feel strongly, it is a matter of life and death. Angry, but they don't expect that in the letter, persuading them will be better. Desperate.

Find some specific words, phrases, images, and/or literary devices that indicate the writers' tone **toward the subject** and record them in the chart below.

Tone toward subject	Evidence (specific word/s, quote)	Intended Effect
Desperate	"we hope that you will put on the harness of compassion so far as to consider of our suffering condition in the present state we are in."	They want to guilt-trip the audience, want to feel like good people for letting them out, appealing to humanity.
logical	"our earnest request is that seeing winter is so far gone that... we may be released!"	It is stating that if they are not tried, they should be released.
earnest important serious	"humbly share"	They are using formal language, properly address the problem.

10 Honors Mrs. Carlton *The Crucible*

Who was the intended audience for this letter? How do the writers acknowledge their awareness of, and attention to, the targeted audience? Give specific examples.

The intended audience is the governor and general assembly at Boston. They address their targeted audience in the beginning when they say, "To the honorable governor and general assembly now sitting at Boston."

How do the writers want their intended **audience** to feel? How do they achieve this goal? Be specific. Look at specific word choice. What is the letter's **tone toward the audience**? Why? Record your ideas in the chart below.

Tone toward audience	Evidence (specific word/s, quote)	Intended Effect
empathetic	"thus hoping you will grant us a release at the present that we be not left to perish in this miserable prison."	They want them to feel compassion to ease their current situation.
urgent	"the present state we are in, being like to perish with cold in lying longer in the prison..."	They want to direct the audience to the fact that if they are not let out, they will die before the trial.
respectful	"our earnest request" "honorable governor"	They want to show they are educated and that they have respect for the authority - to convince them.

What is the **purpose** in writing this letter? What do the writers hope to accomplish? The writers/prisoners want to be freed from jail until the trial.

Based on what you know about the witch trials, and having read *The Crucible*, do you think this letter would have been effective? Why or why not?

I do not think that this letter would be effective. The authority will do anything for their own benefit, and the opinion of an accused witch, would not be credible and nobody would believe it.

Can you think of any additional "strategies" the writers could have used to appeal to their audience? Again, base this on your knowledge of the trials and the play.

The writers could have included parts that allude to the bible, to make them believable, which is ethos. They could also say that if they release them, they would be able to save resources, which is logos. They could include their husbands names to seem more believable.

If you were the intended audience for this letter, how would it make you feel? What were the most compelling aspects for you?

I would feel compassionate towards the prisoners, and I would want to let them out. They said they would still go on trial in the spring and that was convincing. They also mentioned how some are weak and close to dying.

# Student Sample: Creative Letter

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To the mighty Governer of our beloved Bay Colony and the esteemed Generall Assembly at Boston:

It is out of great fear that I write to you this evening. Not more than an hour ago it was brought to my knowledge that the witches now laying in the prison at Ipswich have presented to you a petition for their bail, but I beg you not to be deceived. While they may cry innocent to witchcraft, I know only of their crimes. 'Twas this summer that my wife gave birth to our first daughter, and unexperienced in maternity she employed the help of Goodwife Greene of Haverhill, who has already raised such good and pious girls. However, in her presence our precious baby neither ate nor slept. "Do not fret," she would tell us, "she will eat when she must", but mark this, when she left our house our baby's appetite returned. My wife and I have spent much time discussing this matter and are certain that Goodwife Greene of Haverhill wishes to use her supernatural abilities to starve our child. We think it obvious that Lucifer has bid her to murder the future of our prosperous Puritan faith, as Reverend Thomas and more than two others tell me the same thing happened with Goodwife Greene and their young. While I may not be able to contest to the crimes of the others, I am certain that their accusers are as honest and moral as myself. Why else would such a significant population of the prisoners request bail if they were not united under the common instruction of Satan? Because of such remarkable evidence, I think it clear that the prisoners supposed innocence is merely pretense. This notion deeply troubles me, and I think it necessary that you should not grant such accommodations to these witches. Let not their pleas for comfort lead you to unleash their evil presences upon our town. Does the Bible not instruct us to rid our world of witches? Worry not about their well-being, but the threat their existence poses to your good, Christian authority. In these troubling times, I think it necessary that the town at least have the protection of your rule. I will warn you once more, should you release the prisoners you will bring Hell upon our already shaken town and sacrifice your throne to their almighty Satan. Please, for the prosperity of Christianity and your authority, I call upon you to leave the witches in prison until they can be tried under our reliable courts.

Yours Respectfully,

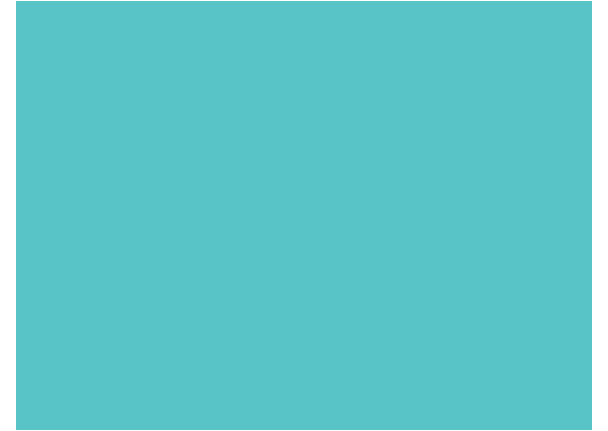
Henry Johnson

# Student Reflections

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- “Working with my group was definitely a highlight of the activity. I enjoyed hearing and found it interesting that everyone noticed different things about the letter. Through our collaboration, we were able to make new questions that dug deeper into the source like why these specific people wrote the letter and how those in charge felt about the prisoners...”
- “It gives me a better understanding because it helps show the real life events that occurred from the witchcraft, I never realized the impacts it could inflict on people and how it could really impact families.”





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# Where to go to learn more

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# Two ways to easily find primary sources:

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- **Browse** pre-curated sets at the Library of Congress  
<https://www.loc.gov/programs/teachers/classroom-materials/>

When you are open to different possibilities

When you have a common topic

- **Google Search** and filter

When you have a specific topic in mind

When you have a slightly obscure topic

# LOC pre-curated sets and collections

The [Library of Congress Teachers section](#) is a treasure trove of:

- [Primary Source Sets](#) (find on the Teachers page)
- [Free to Use and Reuse](#)
- [Prints & Photographs](#)

## Primary Source Sets

Sets of primary sources on specific topics.

### Search Primary Source Sets



#### Abraham Lincoln: Rise to National Prominence

A selection of Library of Congress primary sources exploring Abraham Lincoln and his national role. This set also includes a Teacher's Guide with historical context and teaching suggestions. Speeches, correspondence, campaign materials and a map documenting the free and slave states in 1856 chronicle Lincoln's rise to national prominence.

Date: 1855



#### Alabama: Selected Library of Congress Primary Sources

Highlights from the past and present of Alabama, from the rich online collections of the Library of Congress.



#### Alaska: Selected Library of Congress Primary Sources

Highlights from the past and present of Alaska, from the rich online collections of the Library of Congress.



# Search

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- Many ways to search, but I like to use a site-limited Google search and then search by images.

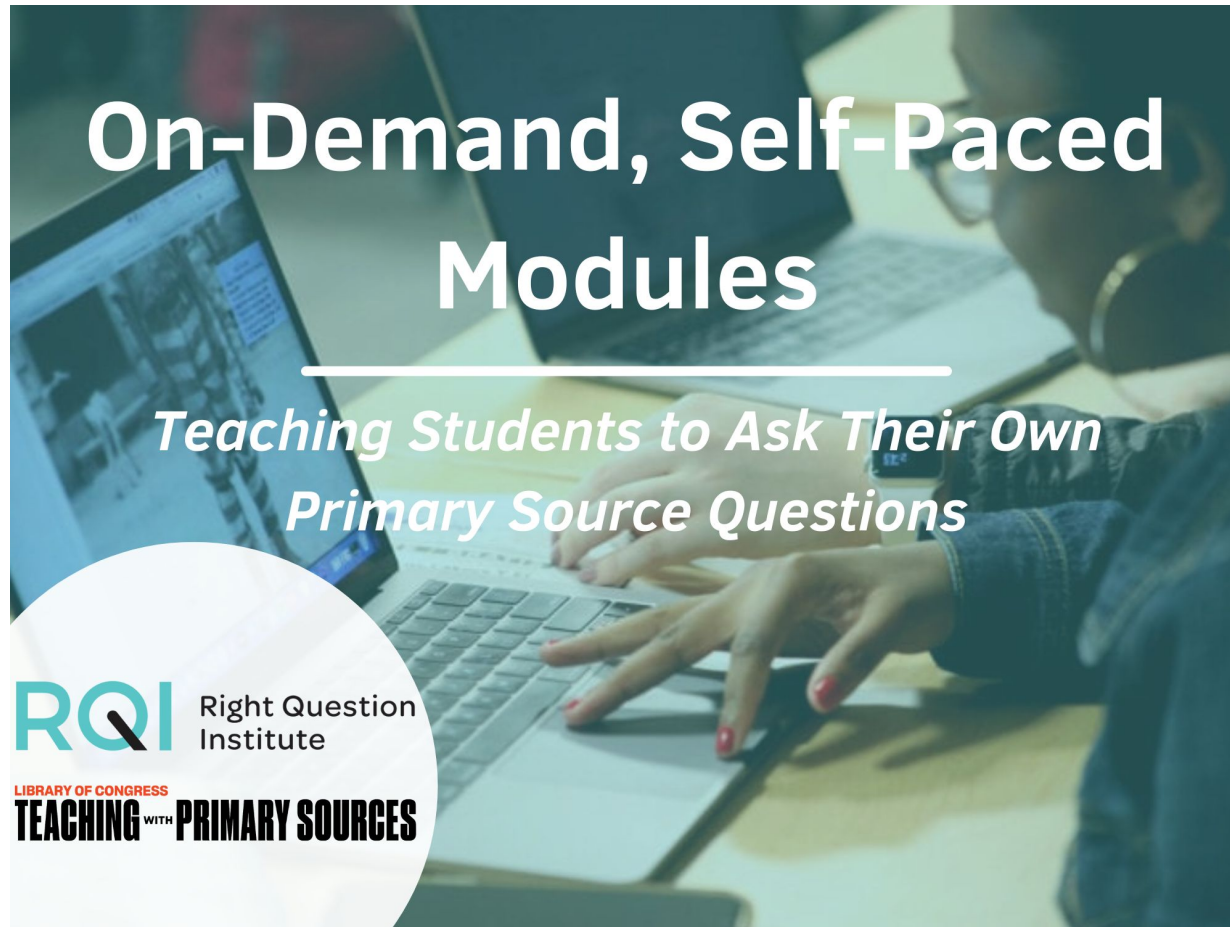
Keyword site:loc.gov



No spaces here

# Free RQI Resources on the QFT & primary sources

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A person is shown from the side, wearing glasses and a dark jacket, typing on a laptop. The laptop screen displays a website with a grid of images. The background is slightly blurred, showing another laptop and some papers on a desk.

**On-Demand, Self-Paced  
Modules**

*Teaching Students to Ask Their Own  
Primary Source Questions*

**RQI** Right Question  
Institute

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
**TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES**

Watch videos to hear from  
teachers and students

Check out real lesson plan  
examples

Learn more on your own time

Explore our free [Resource Hub](https://rightquestion.org/primary-sources) for Using the QFT with Primary Sources  
at [rightquestion.org/primary-sources](https://rightquestion.org/primary-sources)

# Find us on social media!

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@rightquestion



[facebook.com/rightquestion](https://facebook.com/rightquestion)



@right\_question

# Resources

Today's Slides: <https://tinyurl.com/RQIatNCTE>

Other resources to use QFT-TPS in your classroom:

- [Lesson Planning Workbook](#)
- [QFT Student Worksheet](#)
- [Library of Congress](#)
- [Library of Congress Teaching With Primary Sources Program](#)
- [TPS Analysis Tool](#)
- [Right Question Institute Primary Sources Online Modules](#)

# The Right Question Institute at NCTE

THURS

11/21

## Inquiring Minds Want to Know: Teaching Students to Ask Primary Source Questions in the ELA Classroom

Presenters: Laura Carlton, Sarah Westbrook



3:15pm - 3:45pm | Room 104 B

FRI

11/22

## Cultivating Curiosity: Questioning and Literacy Strategies for Young Children

Presenters: Cora Causey, Amelia Spencer

2pm-2:30pm | Room 158

FRI

11/22

## Sharing the Power of Questions: A new model for fostering independent thinking and democratic habits of mind

Presenters: Dan Rothstein, Luz Santana

2:45pm-3:15pm | Room 155

FRI

11/22

## Curiosity Killed the Cat: The Power of Not Knowing in the Humanities Classroom

Presenters: Lauren Carlton, Dana Huff, Ling-Se  
Peet, Jose Reyes, Sarah Westbrook

11:00am-12:15pm | Room 205B

## AUTHOR SIGNING

Meet the co-founders of RQI and the authors of *“Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions”* and *“Partnering with Parents to Ask the Right Questions: A Powerful Strategy for Strengthening School-Family Partnerships”* Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana!

Friday, Nov 22  
4:30pm-5:15pm  
Booth #227

