

The 1920s

Golden Age or Age of Illusion?

by Jonathan Burack

Each unit in *The Historian's Apprentice* series deals with an important historical topic. It introduces students to a five-step set of practices designed to simulate the experience of being a historian and make explicit all key phases of the historian's craft.

The Historian's Apprentice: A Five-Step Process

1. Reflect on Your Prior Knowledge of the Topic

Students discuss what they already know and how their prior knowledge may shape or distort the way they view the topic.

2. Apply Habits of Historical Thinking to the Topic

Students build background knowledge on the basis of five habits of thinking that historians use in constructing accounts of the past.

3. Interpret the Relevant Primary Sources

Students apply a set of rules for interpreting sources and assessing their relevance and usefulness.

4. Assess the Interpretations of Other Historians

Students learn to read secondary sources actively, with the goal of deciding among competing interpretations based on evidence in the sources.

5. Interpret, Debate, and Write About the Topic Yourself

Students apply what they have learned by constructing evidence-based interpretations of their own in a variety of ways.



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MindSparks
10200 Jefferson Boulevard., P.O. Box 802
Culver City, CA 90232-0802
United States of America

(310) 839-2436
(800) 421-4246

<http://mindsparks.com>
access@mindsparks.com

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Teacher Introduction

★ *Teaching the Historian's Craft*

The goal of *The Historian's Apprentice* units is to expose students in a manageable way to the complex processes by which historians practice their craft. By modeling what historians do, students will practice the full range of skills that make history the unique and uniquely valuable challenge that it is.

Modeling the historian's craft is not the same as being a historian—something few students will become. Therefore, a scaffolding is provided here to help students master historical content in a way that will be manageable and useful to them.

Historical thinking is not a simple matter of reciting one fact after another, or even of mastering a single, authoritative account. It is disciplined by evidence, and it is a quest for truth; yet, historians usually try to

clarify complex realities and make tentative judgments, not to draw final conclusions. In doing so, they wrestle with imperfect sets of evidence (the primary sources), detect multiple meanings embedded in those sources, and take into account varying interpretations by other historians. They also recognize how wide a divide separates the present from earlier times. Hence, they work hard to avoid present-mindedness and to achieve empathy with people who were vastly different from us.

In their actual practice, historians are masters of the cautious, qualified conclusion. Yet they engage, use their imaginations, and debate with vigor. It is this spirit and these habits of craft that *The Historian's Apprentice* seeks to instill in students.

★ *The Historian's Apprentice: Five-Steps in Four Parts*

The Historian's Apprentice is a five-step process. However, the materials presented here are organized into four parts. Part I deals with the first two of the five steps of the process. Each of the other three parts then deals with one step in the process. Here is a summary of the four parts into which the materials are organized:

Teacher Introduction. Includes suggested day-by-day sequences for using these materials, including options for using the PowerPoint presentations. One sequence is designed for younger students and supplies a page of vocabulary definitions.

Part 1. A student warm-up activity, an introductory essay, a handout detailing a set of habits of historical thinking, and two PowerPoint presentations (*Five Habits of Historical Thinking* and *The 1920s: Golden Age or Age of Illusion?*). Part 1 (including the PowerPoints) deals with *The Historian's Apprentice* Steps 1 and 2.

Part 2. A checklist for analyzing primary sources, several primary sources, and worksheets for analyzing them. Part 2 deals with *The Historian's Apprentice* Step 3.

Part 3. Two secondary source passages and two student activities analyzing those passages. Part 3 deals with *The Historian's Apprentice* Step 4.

Part 4. Two optional follow-up activities enabling students to write about and/or debate their own interpretations of the topic. Part 4 deals with *The Historian's Apprentice* Step 5.

★ Suggested Five-Day Sequence

Below is one possible way to use this *Historian's Apprentice* unit. Tasks are listed day by day in a sequence taking five class periods, with some homework and some optional follow-up activities.

PowerPoint Presentation: *Five Habits of Historical Thinking*. This presentation comes with each *Historian's Apprentice* unit. If you have used it before with other units, you need not do so again. If you decide to use it, incorporate it into the **Day 1** activities. In either case, give students the “Five Habits of Historical Thinking” handout for future reference. Those “five habits” are as follows:

- History Is Not the Past Itself
- The Detective Model: Problem, Evidence, Interpretation
- Time, Change, and Continuity
- Cause and Effect
- As They Saw It: Grasping Past Points of View

Warm-Up Activity. Homework assignment: Students do the *Warm-Up Activity*. This activity explores students’ memories and personal experiences shaping their understanding of the topic.

Day 1: Discuss the *Warm-Up Activity*, then either have students read or review the “Five Habits of Historical Thinking” handout, or use the *Five Habits* PowerPoint presentation.

Homework assignment: Students read the background essay “The 1920s: How Good Were the Good Times?”

Day 2: Use the second PowerPoint presentation, *The 1920s: Golden Age or Age of Illusion?*, to provide an overview of the topic for this lesson. The presentation applies the Five Habits of Historical Thinking to this topic. Do the two activities embedded in the presentation.

Homework assignment: Students read the “Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist.” The checklist teaches a systematic way to handle sources:

- Sourcing
- Contextualizing
- Interpreting meanings
- Point of view
- Corroborating sources

Day 3: In class, students study some of the ten primary source documents and complete “Source Analysis” worksheets on them. They use their notes to discuss these sources. (Worksheet questions are all based on the concepts on the “Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist.”)

Day 4: In class, students complete the remaining “Source Analysis” worksheets and use their notes to discuss these sources. Take some time to briefly discuss the two secondary source passages students will analyze next.

Homework assignment: Student read these two secondary source passages.

Day 5: In class, students do the two “Secondary Sources” activities and discuss them. These activities ask them to analyze the two secondary source passages using four criteria:

- Clear focus on a problem or question
- Position or point of view
- Use of evidence or sources
- Awareness of alternative explanations

Follow-Up Activities (optional, at teacher’s discretion).

Do as preferred: the DBQ Essay Assignment and/or the Structured Debate.

★ Suggested Three-Day Sequence

If you have less time to devote to this lesson, here is a suggested shorter sequence. The sequence does not include the PowerPoint presentation *Five Habits of Historical Thinking*. This presentation is included with each *Historian's Apprentice* unit. If you have never used it with your class, you may want to do so before following this three-day sequence.

The three-day sequence leaves out a few activities from the five-day sequence. It also suggests that you use only seven key primary sources. However, it still walks students through the steps of the *Historian's Apprentice* approach: clarifying background knowledge, analyzing primary sources, comparing secondary sources, and debating or writing about the topic.

Warm-Up Activity. Homework assignment: Ask students to read or review the “Five Habits of Historical Thinking” handout and read the background essay “The 1920s: How Good Were the Good Times?”

Day 1: Use the PowerPoint presentation *The 1920s: Golden Age or Age of Illusion?* It provides an overview of the topic for this lesson by applying the Five Habits of Historical Thinking to it. Do the two activities embedded in the presentation.

Homework assignment: Students read or review the “Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist.” The checklist teaches a systematic way to handle sources.

Day 2: In class, students study some of the ten primary source documents and complete “Source Analysis” worksheets on them. They then use their notes to discuss these sources. Documents 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 are suggested.

You may wish to make your own choices of primary sources. Use your judgment in deciding how many of them your students can effectively analyze in a single class period.

Homework assignment: Student read the two secondary source passages.

Day 3: In class, students do the two “Secondary Sources” activities and discuss them. These activities ask them to analyze the two secondary source passages using four criteria.

Follow-Up Activities (optional, at teacher's discretion):

Do as preferred: the DBQ Essay Assignment and/or the Structured Debate.

★ *Suggestions for Use with Younger Students*

For younger students, parts of this lesson may prove challenging. If you feel your students need a somewhat more manageable path through the material, see the suggested sequence below.

If you want to use the *Five Habits of Historical Thinking* PowerPoint presentation, this sequence takes four class periods. If you do not use this PowerPoint, you can combine **Day 1** and **Day 2** and keep the sequence to just three days. We suggest using seven primary sources only. The ones listed for **Day 3** are less demanding in terms of vocabulary and conceptual complexity. For **Day 4**, we provide some simpler DBQs for the follow-up activities.

Vocabulary: A list of vocabulary terms in the sources and the introductory essay is provided on page 7 of this booklet. You may wish to hand this sheet out as a reading reference, you could make flashcards out of some of the terms, or you might ask each of several small groups to use the vocabulary sheet to explain terms found in one source to the rest of the class.

SUGGESTED FOUR-DAY SEQUENCE

Warm-Up Activity. Homework assignment: Students do the Warm-Up Activity. This activity explores students' memories and personal experiences shaping their understanding of the topic.

Day 1: Discuss the Warm-Up Activity. Show the *Five Habits of Historical Thinking* PowerPoint presentation (unless you have used it before and/or you do not think it is needed now). If you do not use this PowerPoint presentation, give students the "Five Habits of Historical Thinking" handout and discuss it with them.

Homework assignment: Ask students to read the background essay "The 1920s: How Good Were the Good Times?"

Day 2: Use the PowerPoint presentation *The 1920s: Golden Age or Age of Illusion?* This introduces the topic for the lesson by applying the Five Habits of Historical Thinking to it. Do the two activities embedded in the presentation.

Homework assignment: Students read or review the "Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist." The checklist offers a systematic way to handle sources.

Day 3: Discuss the "Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist" and talk through one primary source document in order to illustrate the meaning of the concepts on the checklist. Next, have students complete "Source Analysis" worksheets after studying primary source documents 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7.

Homework assignment: Students read the two secondary source passages.

Day 4: Students do *only* "Secondary Sources: Activity 2" and discuss it. This activity asks them to choose the two primary sources that best back up each secondary source passage.

Follow-Up Activities (optional, at teacher's discretion):

Do as preferred: the DBQ Essay Assignment and/or the Structured Debate.

Here are some alternative DBQs tailored to the six primary sources recommended here:

Why do you think the 1920s are often called "The Roaring Twenties"? Do you think they deserve this label? Why or why not?

"The prosperity of the 1920s was wide and deep. It is not fair to see it as a period in which the rich had a great time while everyone else struggled." Explain why you do or do not agree with this statement.

Vocabulary: The Introductory Essay

- **contradictory:** Describes a statement or situation for which one part cannot be true if the other part is true
- **conventional:** Following custom; not original
- **cosmopolitan:** Polished and aware of worldwide trends; not parochial or local in awareness
- **demonize:** To characterize someone or something as horrible or evil
- **deport:** To order or force out of a country
- **ethnic:** Relating to groups classed by national, religious, linguistic, or other cultural background factors
- **evangelical:** A religious spirit stressing a need to seek salvation through a personal conversion experience
- **evolution:** In this case, the theory that living species slowly evolve or change into new species
- **fundamentalism:** In this case, strict religious beliefs stressing a literal interpretation of the Bible
- **Great Depression:** The time of economic collapse and high unemployment in the 1930s
- **Prohibition:** Name for the effort to ban the sale of alcoholic beverages, which was in effect in the 1920s
- **satirical:** A bitter kind of wit expressing sarcasm or ridicule.
- **secular:** Having to do with worldly concerns; not in any way religious or clerical
- **speakeasy:** An establishment where illegal alcoholic beverages could be purchased during Prohibition
- **speculation:** In this case, wildly optimistic buying of stocks, often on credit
- **“talkies”:** Name for the first movies with sound tracks (commercial talkies first appeared in the 1920s)
- **utility:** In this case, a business that provides certain services (water, electricity) to a large area
- **Victorian:** In this case, a term for stuffy or old-fashioned ideas, art, or taste (as if from the time of Queen Victoria)

Vocabulary: The Primary Sources

- **conducive:** Tending to promote or assist, or ease the way
- **disseminate:** Spread or distribute
- **dissension:** Sharp disagreement
- **hypocrite:** Someone who falsely tries to act or appear to be other than what they are
- **indiscriminate:** Unrestrained or not making careful distinctions
- **Ku Klux Klan:** A secret American society actively hostile to African Americans and other ethnic or religious groups
- **omnipresence:** State of being in all places at all times
- **paternalistic:** Managing others in the manner of a kindly but also at times intrusive father
- **phenomenon:** Any fact, object or event; often used to describe rare or unusual facts or events
- **proletariat:** Industrial wage workers
- **remuneration:** Pay or compensation for work

Vocabulary: The Secondary Sources

- **aberration:** A departure from the norm; something unsound or not normal
- **diversion:** Something that draws attention away from something else
- **distort:** To alter something or twist its meaning or appearance from what is normal or natural
- **maldistribution:** An undesirable or unfair distribution of something
- **predicament:** A very difficult or confusing situation
- **privation:** state of being deprived
- **mortgage:** A claim on property as security for a loan
- **substantiate:** Prove
- **tariff:** A tax or fee charged on imported goods

Part 1: The 1920s—Providing the Context

Note to the teacher: The next pages provide materials meant to help students better understand and evaluate the 1920s. The materials also seek to teach students the Five Habits of Historical Thinking.

This section includes the following:

- **PowerPoint presentation: The Five Habits of Historical Thinking**

This presentation illustrates five habits of thought or modes of analysis that guide historians as they construct their secondary accounts of a topic. These Five Habits are not about skills used in analyzing primary sources. (Those are dealt with more explicitly in a handout in the next section.) These Five Habits are meant to help students see history as a way of thinking, not as the memorizing of disparate facts and pre-digested conclusions. The PowerPoint uses several historical episodes as examples to illustrate the Five Habits. In two places, it pauses to ask students to do a simple activity applying one of the habits to some of their own life experiences.

If you have used this PowerPoint with other *Historian's Apprentice* units, you may not need to use it again here.

- **Handout: “The Five Habits of Historical Thinking”**

This handout supplements the PowerPoint presentation. It is meant as a reference for students to use as needed. If you have used other *Historian's Apprentice* units, your students may only need to review this handout quickly.

- **Warm-Up Activity**

A simple exercise designed to help you see what students know about the 1920s, what confuses them, or what ideas they may have absorbed about it from popular culture, friends and family, etc. The goal is to alert them to their need to gain a clearer idea of the past and be critical of what they think they already know.

- **Introductory essay: “The 1920s: How Good Were the Good Times?”**

The essay provides enough basic background information on the topic to enable students to assess primary sources and conflicting secondary source interpretations. At the end of the essay, students get some points to keep in mind about the nature of the sources they will examine and the conflicting secondary source interpretations they will debate.

- **PowerPoint presentation: *The 1920s: Golden Age or Age of Illusion?***

This PowerPoint presentation reviews the topic for the lesson and shows how the Five Habits of Historical Thinking can be applied to a clearer understanding of it. At two points, the presentation calls for a pause and prompts students to discuss some aspects of their prior knowledge of the topic. The proposed sequences suggest using this PowerPoint presentation *after* assigning the introductory essay, but you may prefer to reverse this order.

Warm-Up Activity

What Do You Know About the 1920s?

This lesson deals with the 1920s. Whenever you start to learn something about a time in history, it helps to think first of what you already know about it, or think you know. You probably have impressions, or you may have read or heard things about it already. Some of what you know may be accurate. You need to be ready to alter your fixed ideas about this time as you learn more about it. This is what any historian would do. To do this, study this photograph and take a few notes in response to the questions below it.



This photo shows a woman getting in a Ford sedan in 1923. What in the photo makes it clear that it is from the 1920s? What general feeling about that decade does this photo give you?

What impression do you have of the 1920s? Can you name key products, technologies, music styles, movies, or famous people from the 1920s? Do you think you would have enjoyed living in the 1920s? Why or why not?

Have you ever seen silent films or early “talkies” from the 1920s? If so, what were they? Do you think they give you a good idea of what the 1920s were really like? Why or why not?

The 1920s: How Good Were the Good Times?

Americans love to label their decades—there were the “Happy Days” of the 1950s, the “Sixties Youth Rebellion,” and the “Reagan Revolution” of the 1980s. These labels can be helpful, but usually they are also highly misleading. History rarely confines its ups and downs within even ten-year periods.

The 1920s are perhaps most often labeled in this misleading way. True, they do seem to be ten years set apart. Sandwiched between the end of World War I in late 1918 and the start of the Great Depression in late 1929, the 1920s appear to be a neatly self-contained decade. With a unique style of their own, they are known as the “Roaring Twenties.” Yet the ‘20s are actually a good case in point for why such labeling doesn’t work. The phrase “Roaring Twenties” has meant many things to many people. It disguises as much as it reveals.

If we pay attention mainly to social and cultural trends, we can actually see two very opposed tendencies in the decade.

With the end of the war years and the earnest age of Progressive reform, a more carefree time of looser social and cultural attitudes arrived. The nation turned dramatically against one Progressive reform, Prohibition. The speakeasy, where illegal alcoholic beverages flowed, became a symbol of the new era. In general, a more urban, “liberated,” and cosmopolitan outlook asserted itself against the more traditional “Victorian” attitudes of the past. It was a time for *The Jazz Singer* and other Hollywood “talkies,” bathtub gin and speakeasies, rebellious teens using movies and the automobile to escape their watchful parents, the flapper age of newly liberated women, a time of adventurous individualists and heroes—Henry Ford, Babe Ruth, Charles Lindbergh.

Critical writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald, H. L. Mencken, and Sinclair Lewis all poked fun in different ways at more conventional Main-Street American values. Mencken was famous for the satirical ridicule he directed during the Scopes trial at those who opposed the teaching of evolution in the schools.

However, that trial itself shows how contradictory the 1920s were, for the Scopes trial also gave voice to a widely shared religious fundamentalism that opposed

the secular, urban values of people like Mencken. As evangelist Billy Sunday declared, “If a minister believes and teaches evolution, he is a stinking skunk, a hypocrite, and a liar.”

Jim Crow segregation also remained solidly entrenched throughout the South and elsewhere. The revival of the Ku Klux Klan clearly revealed the strength of narrow-minded bigotry in these years. Support for Prohibition was as widespread as opposition to it. This was true even in the face of the gangsterism spawned by the illegal sale of liquor. Labor unions declined in strength during the decade. The 1920s began with a terrifying “Red Scare” in which radical immigrants were demonized and deported by the thousands. Fears of ethnic newcomers led to strict new limits on immigration, especially against southern and eastern Europeans. Hostile attitudes toward ethnic and racial mixing in society were by no means confined to rural backwoods conservatives. Many Progressives shared the same fears.

If we look at the economy and politics, we see similar opposing currents. Many have called the 1920s a decade of false prosperity and economic irresponsibility. The collapse of farm prices in the early 1920s left the agricultural sector troubled throughout the decade. Unions lost members, and many workers continued to struggle. The decade’s three Republican presidents praised the triumph of business and allowed large corporations to grow and merge with little supervision. These leaders seemed unconcerned about growing inequality. Some critics of the decade saw the rise of installment buying and easy credit as ways to trick consumers into spending more than they could afford. In 1928 and early 1929, a feverish spirit of speculation led first to soaring, overpriced stocks and then to the great crash in stock prices of October 1929. Seen this way, 1920s greed and glorification of selfishness met a just punishment in the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Nevertheless, the prosperity of the 1920s was deep and widespread. Henry Ford put the Model T within reach of the ordinary American budget. Ownership of automobiles soared from 26% of American families in 1920 to 60% ten years later. Transportation was revolutionized as roads, filling stations, and suburbs spread. The installment buying that some criticized

enabled millions to own their homes and pay for them more easily over time. As electric utilities spread, electric motors vastly increased the flexibility and productivity of factories. For consumers, electricity meant lighting, refrigerators, washing machines, radios, sewing machines, irons, stoves, and much more. In 1920, less than 35% of families had electric lighting; by 1929, nearly 70% did. Virtually no one had a radio in 1920; by 1929, 45% of all families did. Only 1% of American families had central heating in 1920, compared with 40% by 1930. Department stores and supermarkets appeared, made easy to get to in part by the spreading automobile culture. All this made life vastly more comfortable and fulfilling. For the first time in history, a mass consumer society emerged. It did not include everyone, by any means, but while the rich got richer, the vast middle of American society also grew in wealth and contentment.

Was this prosperity doomed to end in catastrophe because of some basic flaw? Given that the Depression did happen, it is easy in hindsight to see it this way. However, many historians and economists then and now point to other factors that deepened the Great Depression. Were the '20s a flawed age of excess, or did the Depression simply interrupt a long era of growth that resumed later and is in fact a lasting achievement of the 1920s? You will have to decide for yourself as you read more about the time we will probably always call "The Roaring Twenties."

Points to Keep in Mind

Historians' Questions

How historians interpret the 1920s depends in part on their own values, what they see as important and as trivial. They are also influenced by their knowledge of the decade that followed. It is hard not to assess the 1920s in light of the terrible economic collapse of the Depression-era 1930s.

Many historians see the 1920s as deeply flawed, saying the collapse of the Great Depression is the proof. They say income inequality, overproduction, and speculative greed led to false optimism and an inevitable collapse as spending could not keep pace with goods produced. Many also depict the 1920s as a time of frivolous selfishness as well as of renewed ethnic and racial bigotry and stifling social conformity.

Others say it is only an illustration of hindsight that leads historians to see the Great Depression as inevitable. They say it is wrong to blame the 1920s for what happened in the '30s. They point out that the prosperity of the 1920s extended to millions who could now afford cars, household appliances, central heating, and other things we today take for granted. Moreover, they say, the 1920s were a time of hope, respect for individual creativity, greater freedom for women, and more.

The Primary Source Evidence

For this lesson, you will study ten primary source documents on the 1920s. These will focus on economic, social, and cultural trends in that decade. Together, these sources will give you evidence to help you better understand and evaluate the 1920s. They will also enable you to make some informed judgments of your own about what two historians say about this decade.

Secondary Source Interpretations

After studying and discussing the primary sources, you will read two short passages from two books about the 1920s. The two historians who wrote these passages agree about most of the facts, but they make quite different overall judgments about how good a time the 1920s were. You will use your own background knowledge and your ideas about the primary sources as you think about and answer some questions about the views of these two historians.

Five Habits of Historical Thinking

History is not just a chronicle of one fact after another. It is a meaningful story, or an account of what happened and why. It is written to address questions or problems historians pose. This checklist describes key habits of thinking that historians adopt as they interpret primary sources and create their own accounts of the past.

History Is Not the Past Itself

When we learn history, we learn a story about the past, not the past itself. No matter how certain an account of the past seems, it is only one account, not the entire story. The “entire story” is gone. That is, the past itself no longer exists. Only some records of events remain, and they are never complete. Hence, it is important to see all judgments and conclusions about the past as tentative or uncertain. Avoid looking for hard-and-fast “lessons” from the past. The value of history is in a way the opposite of such a search for quick answers. That is, its value is in teaching us to live with uncertainty and see even our present as complex, unfinished, open-ended.

The Detective Model: Problem, Evidence, Interpretation

Historians can’t observe the past directly. They must use evidence, just as a detective tries to reconstruct a crime based on clues left behind. In the historian’s case, primary sources are the evidence—letters, official documents, maps, photos, newspaper articles, artifacts, and all other traces from past times. Like a detective, a historian defines a very specific problem to solve, one for which evidence does exist. Asking clear, meaningful questions is a key to writing good history. Evidence is always incomplete. It’s not always easy to separate fact from opinion in it, or to tell what is important from what is not. Historians try to do this, but they must stay cautious about their conclusions and open to other interpretations of the same evidence.

Time, Change, and Continuity

History is about the flow of events over time, yet it is not just one fact after another. It seeks to understand this flow of events as a pattern. In that pattern, some things change while others hold steady over time. You need to see history as a dynamic interplay of both change and continuity together. Only by doing this can you see how the past has evolved into the present—and why the present carries with it many traces or links to the past.

Cause and Effect

Along with seeing patterns of change and continuity over time, historians seek to explain that change. In doing this, they know that no single factor causes change. Many factors interact. Unique, remarkable and creative individual actions and plans are one factor, but individual plans have unintended outcomes, and these shape events in unexpected ways. Moreover, individuals do not always act rationally or with full knowledge of what they are doing. Finally, geography, technology, economics, cultural traditions, and ideas all affect what groups and individuals do.

As They Saw It: Grasping Past Points of View

Above all, thinking like a historian means trying hard to see how people in the past thought and felt. This is not easy. As one historian put it, the past is “another country” in which people felt and thought differently, often very differently from the way we do now. Avoiding “present-mindedness” is therefore a key task for historians. Also, since the past includes various groups in conflict, historians must learn to empathize with many diverse cultures and subgroups to see how they differ and what they share in common.

Part 2: Analyzing the Primary Sources

Note to the teacher: The next pages provide the primary sources for this lesson. It is suggested that you give these to students after they read the background essay, review the “Five Habits of Historical Thinking” handout, and watch and discuss the PowerPoint presentation for the lesson.

This section includes the following:

- **Handout: “Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist”**

Give copies of this handout to students and ask them to refer to it when analyzing any primary source.

- **Ten Primary Source Documents**

The Documents are as follows:

- Document 1. Passage from Frederick Lewis Allen’s *Only Yesterday*
- Document 2. A motion picture poster for the 1922 film *Saturday Night*
- Document 3. Charles Lindbergh in his airplane
- Document 4. A book passage on automobiles and installment buying
- Document 5. Photo of a 1921 Fordson tractor
- Document 6. Malcolm X on the KKK in the 1920s
- Document 7. A 1925 article critical of installment buying
- Document 8. Margaret Sanger on the need for population control
- Document 9. Labor and Capital Productivity Growth in the 1920s
- Document 10. An article about children and the movies

- **Ten “Source Analysis” Worksheets for Analyzing the Primary Sources**

Each worksheet asks students to take notes on one source. The prompts along the side match the five categories in the “Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist.” Not every category is used in each worksheet, only those that seem most relevant to a full analysis of that source.

You may want students to analyze all of the sources. However, if time does not allow this, use those that seem most useful for your own instructional purposes.

Students can use the notes on the “Source Analysis” worksheets in discussions, as help in analyzing the two secondary sources in the next part of this lesson, and in follow-up debates, DBQs, and other activities.

Interpreting Primary Sources Checklist

Primary sources are the evidence historians use to reach conclusions and write their accounts of the past. Sources rarely have one obvious, easily grasped meaning. To interpret them fully, historians use several strategies. This checklist describes some of the most important of those strategies. Read the checklist through and use it to guide you whenever you need to analyze and interpret a primary source.

Sourcing

Think about a primary source's author or creator, how and why the primary source document was created, and where it appeared. Also, think about the audience it was intended for and what its purpose was. You may not always find much information about these things, but whatever you can learn will help you better understand the source. In particular, it may suggest the source's point of view or bias, since the author's background and intended audience often shape his or her ideas and way of expressing them.

Contextualizing

"Context" refers to the time and place of which the primary source is a part. In history, facts do not exist separately from one another. They get their meaning from the way they fit into a broader pattern. The more you know about that broader pattern, or context, the more you will be able to understand about the source and its significance.

Interpreting Meanings

It is rare for a source's full meaning to be completely obvious. You must read a written source closely, paying attention to its language and tone as well as to what it implies or merely hints at. With a visual source, all kinds of meaning may be suggested by the way it is designed, and by such things as shading, camera angle, use of emotional symbols or scenes, etc. The more you pay attention to all the details, the more you can learn from a source.

Point of View

Every source is written or created by someone with a purpose, an intended audience, and a point of view or bias. Even a dry table of numbers was created for some reason, to stress some things and not others, to make a point of some sort. At times, you can tell a point of view simply by sourcing the document. Knowing an author was a Democrat or a Republican, for example, will alert you to a likely point of view. In the end, however, only a close reading of the text will make you aware of point of view. Keep in mind that even a heavily biased source can still give you useful evidence of what some people in a past time thought. However, you need to take the bias into account in judging how reliable the source's own claims really are.

Corroborating Sources

No one source tells the whole story. Moreover, no one source is completely reliable. To make reasonable judgments about an event in the past, you must compare sources to find points of agreement and disagreement. Even when there are big differences, both sources may be useful. However, the differences will also tell you something, and they may be important in helping you understand each source.

The Primary Sources for the Lesson

Document 1

Information on the source: A short passage on the 1920s from Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday*, written in 1931. In this passage, he describes the youthful spirit of rebellion that many in the '20s felt was widespread.

Meanwhile innumerable families were torn with dissension over cigarettes and gin and all-night automobile rides. Fathers and mothers lay awake asking themselves whether their children were not utterly lost; sons and daughters evaded questions, lied miserably or unhappily, or flared up to reply rudely that at least they were not dirty-minded hypocrites, that they saw no harm in what they were doing and proposed to go right on doing it. From those liberal clergymen and teachers who prided themselves on keeping step with all that was new came a chorus of reassurance: these young people were at least franker and more honest than their elders had been; having

experimented for themselves, would they not find out which standards were outworn and which represented the accumulated moral wisdom of the race? Hearing such hopeful words, many good people took heart again. Perhaps this flare-up of youthful passion was a flash in the pan, after all. Perhaps in another year or two the boys and girls would come to their senses and everything would be all right again.

They were wrong, however. For the revolt of the younger generation was only the beginning of a revolution in manners and morals that was already beginning to affect men and women of every age in every part of the country.



Document 2

Information on the source: A motion picture poster for the 1922 film *Saturday Night* shows a flirtatious young woman and an older man seated at a nightclub table with a worried-looking young man in a cap.

Document 3

Information on the source: Charles Lindbergh in his airplane in St. Louis, Missouri. Lindbergh's 1927 flight across the Atlantic made him perhaps the greatest hero of his age.



Document 4

Information on the source: This is a passage from the book *Midas Gold: A Study of Incomes, "Overselling," and Time-Payments as a Broadener of Markets* (Butterick Publishing Company, 1925). The passage is in "Part Four, THE AUTOMOBILE as an Economic Factor Its Present and Future Market As Shown by Recent Trade and Newspaper Articles."

The articles from which we quote on the following pages contain much of interest to a student of the time-payment sales problem.

It is worthy of note that the automobile has been "absorbed in the family budget as an economic necessity"—without serious disturbance to the standard of living or the saving habits of the America family. This is of course due to the greatly increased family buying power.

If "almost every normal family wants one automobile and will if necessary sacrifice a good deal to get it," then why shouldn't the same normal family, once in possession of the coveted car, continue to make "sacrifices" to acquire other expensive necessities, hitherto regarded as luxuries.

Of particular significance is the fact that "during the past eight years the life of the average automobile has advanced from five years to seven and a half, or an increase of 50%."

If a family purchase a car on the time-payment plan, they have a fixed sum to pay each month for about a year. Then the car is theirs—to enjoy for five to seven years.

What is then to become of that monthly surplus which they have been accustomed to set aside is a question which it seems to us should provide much thought for the manufacturer of an expensive utility product.

Moreover as the motor car business settles down to an average of about 3,000,000 cars a year—a half billion to a billion dollars now being spent for automobiles will be released for other forms of spending.

What an opportunity this offers for the utility manufacturer who has made his time-payment plan as attractive as that of the automobile.

Document 5

Information on the source: Farmers did not do well in the 1920s. Yet farm productivity went up, in part due to the introduction of tractors like this 1921 model. In fact, this growth in productivity only added to the problems of many farmers.



Document 6

Information on the source: This is a passage from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Malcolm was born in the 1920s. His father, Earl Little, was a minister who followed the teachings of African nationalist Marcus Garvey, who wanted African Americans to return to their ancestral African homeland. Here, Malcolm retells a story he heard when growing up about his mother's encounter with the KKK in Nebraska.

When my mother was pregnant with me, she told me later, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our home in Omaha, Nebraska, one night. Surrounding the house, brandishing their shotguns and rifles, they shouted for my father to come out. My mother went to the front door and opened it. Standing where they could see her pregnant condition, she told them that she was alone with her three small children, and that my father was away, preaching, in Milwaukee. The Klansmen shouted threats and warnings at her that we had better get out of town because "the good Christian white people" were not going to stand for my father's "spreading trouble" among the "good" Negroes of Omaha with the "back to Africa" preachings of Marcus Garvey.

Document 7

Information on the source: “Sales Resistance Stiffens” was an article by J. R. Sprague in the February 1925, edition of *American Mercury* magazine. In this article, Sprague claimed that “the most extreme efforts are necessary to force merchandise on an apathetic public.” He discusses a Texas manufacturer who hired investigators to find out how his employees managed their household finances. This passage is from the account of that investigation.

The star exhibit was a young mechanic whose family consisted of a wife and two small children. This young mechanic was receiving wages of six dollars a day. It was very fair remuneration, considering conditions in the community, but he was constantly in hot water. The investigation developed the following facts: The young man had engaged himself to pay thirty dollars a month in installments on a second-hand automobile. To one of the local furniture dealers he was obligated for a like amount each month in payment of a set of parlor furniture of plush and fumed oak. Beside these obligations he had taken it on himself to buy from

other installment houses a piano, a gold watch, a baby carriage, a diamond ring for his wife, and various other articles. Had he met all of his installments, which manifestly he could not, his monthly payments would have amounted to more than his wages . . .

Salesmanship has been raised to the status of an art, almost to that of war. Go-getters and flying squadrons hound the shop-keepers into buying more. The shop-keepers in their turn, hound the people of their communities. If a man cannot pay cash, then he must be made to buy at a dollar down and a dollar a week.

Document 8

Information on the source: Strict limits on immigration were set in the 1920s. Many worried about how the nation could absorb the millions of southern and eastern European immigrants who had arrived in the decades before World War I. Fears about supposedly inferior groups of newcomers were widespread, and such fears were also directed at African Americans as well. Traditional and conservative rural citizens were not the only ones to express such fears. Margaret Sanger was a Progressive reformer and birth-control advocate. She also believed in eugenics—limiting reproduction by those thought to have inheritable undesirable traits. She rarely named particular ethnic groups as needing to limit themselves this way (or be limited). However, she often quoted those who did. This brief passage from her 1922 book *The Pivot of Civilization* suggests the nature of her fears.

Nineteenth century economics had no method of studying the interrelation of the biological factors with the industrial. Overcrowding, overwork, the progressive destruction of responsibility by the machine discipline, as is now perfectly obvious, had the most disastrous consequences upon human character and human habits. Paternalistic philanthropies and sentimental charities, which sprang up like mushrooms, only tended to increase the evils of indiscriminate breeding. From the physiological and psychological point of view, the factory system has been nothing less than catastrophic.

Dr. Austin Freeman has recently pointed out some of the physiological, psychological, and racial effects

of machinery upon the proletariat, the breeders of the world. Speaking for Great Britain, Dr. Freeman suggests that the omnipresence of machinery tends toward the production of large but inferior populations. Evidences of biological and racial degeneracy are apparent to this observer. “Compared with the African negro,” he writes, “the British sub-man is in several respects markedly inferior. He tends to be dull; he is usually quite helpless and unhandy; he has, as a rule, no skill or knowledge of handicraft, or indeed knowledge of any kind . . . Over-population is a phenomenon connected with the survival of the unfit, and it is mechanism which has created conditions favorable to the survival of the unfit and the elimination of the fit.”

Document 9

Information on the source: This graph is adapted from Warren D. Devine, Jr., “From Shafts to Wires: Historical Perspectives on Electrification.” [*The Journal of Economic History*, 43 (1983): 347–372.] These two measures of productivity show annual percentage changes of output produced per unit inputs of either labor or capital. In other words, they show changes in the value of output produced annually by each worker or by each given unit of capital expenditure.

Average Annual Rates of Labor Productivity and Capital Productivity Growth

Period	Average Annual Labor Productivity Growth	Average Annual Capital Productivity Growth
1899–1909	1.30%	1.62%
1909–1919	1.14%	1.95%
1919–1929	5.44%	4.21%
1929–1937	1.95%	2.38%

Document 10

Information on the source: This is part of an article titled, “Should Children Go to the Movies?” The article appeared in the June 1925 issue of *The Playground*, a publication of the Playground and Recreation Association of America.

To get the most benefit out of play it should be in the open air. Here the little children can romp, sing or yell with freedom of motion and absence from restraint. Children who have the movie habit and whose parents indulge them in it are deprived of such wholesome and healthful play.

A conservative estimate of the number of children attending movies was made in one of our large cities, and it was found that over ninety per cent of the school children between the ages of seven and fourteen attend the movies regularly.

There is no ventilation worthy of the name, and the same air, too often contaminated with offensive odors from persons or garments of “the great unwashed,” is breathed over and over again by successive audiences. Patrons attending cheap theaters are not very particular about coughing, sneezing and expectorating, and they freely distribute and disseminate various kinds of disease germs. Surely no one can claim that such air and such surroundings are conducive to health in children.

Children generally attend the movies in the afternoon, when they should be out playing in the open and breathing fresh air . . .

Motion pictures may exert a bad effect on the immature nervous system of the child. The brain in young children is very immature, and it and the nerves should be very carefully protected. Children who night after night gaze open-mouthed at exciting episodes and thrilling escapes become peevish and irritable. They have restless nights and nightmares.

It is impossible to entirely separate the moral from the health phase of this problem. A prominent judge in an address on delinquency in children said, “I believe the source of much delinquency in children to be the movies. The story of the picture may be ever so moral, but the moral escapes the child. He remembers that a boy stole an apple from a fruit-stand, that a policeman chased him, that the policeman fell down, permitting the boy to escape. Then he goes ahead and imitates the little thief in the movies.”

Again the movies create an appetite and craving for excitement which is as unnecessary as it is unnatural. It takes them away from play and the initiative of play.

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 1

A short passage on the 1920s from Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday*, written in 1931.

Sourcing

Allen's book is about the 1920s. It was published in 1931. Does this mean it is a primary source or a secondary source, or could it be both?

Contextualizing

Lewis mentions cars, cigarettes, and gin as contributing to the trend he describes. Why were these items especially on the minds of people in the 1920s?

Interpreting meanings

Lewis speaks in this passage of "liberal clergymen and teachers who prided themselves on keeping step with all that was new." What does this suggest to you about the social changes taking place in the 1920s?

Lewis says, "the revolt of the younger generation was only the beginning . . ." Do you think the term "revolt" fits with his description of the behavior of young people? Do you agree with him this revolt was only beginning? If so, why do you think it became so noticeable in the 1920s?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 2

A poster for the 1922 Cecil B. DeMille film *Saturday Night*.

Contextualizing

Why might a movie poster be a good source to help understand cultural trends and changes in the 1920s?

Interpreting meanings

Notice the way the young woman is dressed, her mannerisms, the nightclub location, etc. What do all these features suggest about changes in the role of women in America in the 1920s?

The two mismatched couples in this film comedy realize they must change partners and stay within their own social classes in order to be happy. What does this suggest, if anything, about social attitudes in the 1920s?

Corroborating sources

Does this source back up any of the description in the passage from *Only Yesterday* (Document 1)? Why or why not?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 3

Charles Lindbergh in his airplane in St. Louis, Missouri.

Contextualizing

Charles Lindbergh may have been the most popular figure of all in America in the 1920s. What did he do to gain this fame? Why do you think his accomplishment was seen as so heroic and important then?

Historians say that lone individuals accomplishing heroic feats were a major theme in popular culture in the '20s. Why do you think this might have been?

Interpreting meanings

Photos often seem to be simple windows onto a real scene; that is, they seem to show us things as they really were. Yet photos almost always also show us points of view about reality. For example, notice Lindbergh's setting, the angle of the camera, his expression, the cropped close-in shot, etc. How do all these features help to build up a distinct idea about Lindbergh, what he was like, etc.? Take some notes on the image and discuss the idea that this photo is not just a picture of Charles Lindbergh, but a message about him.

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 4

A passage from the 1925 book *Midas Gold*, Part 4, in which the automobile and installment buying are dealt with.

Interpreting meanings

This article is mainly about the effect of time-payment plans on families and the economy in general. Time-payment plans are also known as “installment buying.”

Explain what this was.

Contextualizing

This article praises the spread of installment buying, from automobiles to other durable goods. Why do you think the article uses the case of automobiles to paint a very positive picture of the role of installment buying in the 1920s?

Point of view

Why is the author so enthusiastic about installment buying? Why does the author believe that auto installment payments will not prevent people from using this method for other forms of spending?

Sourcing

The Butterick Publishing Company published magazines directed at female homemakers to help them become more effective consumers. Does knowing this help you better understand the point of view of this article? Why or why not?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 5

A photo of a 1921 Fordson tractor being demonstrated in a field.

Interpreting meanings

This photo shows a demonstration of a Fordson tractor sold by Parkway Motor Company of Washington, D.C. How does the photo help to promote this tractor and make it seem appealing to farmers?

Contextualizing

In 1921, when this tractor was being sold, farmers were facing declining prices after several years of very high prices for farm products. Can you explain why prices had been high just before 1921, yet were falling rapidly by that year?

Tractors such as this began to be used by many farmers in the 1920s. However, the greater productivity they allowed for actually added to problems many farmers faced in the decade. Can you explain why?

Corroborating sources

Do any of the other sources for this lesson add to your understanding of the significance or meaning of this source? List them and explain your choices.

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 6

A passage about the KKK of the 1920s, from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Sourcing

What do you know about Malcolm X? Alex Haley wrote the autobiography based on conversations with Malcolm in 1964–65. Does this affect the reliability of this passage as a primary source for the 1920s?

Contextualizing

What do you know about the Ku Klux Klan and its revival in the 1920s? How does Malcolm's account help to illustrate the KKK's nature and its purposes?

Why is it significant to an understanding of the Klan in the 1920s that this incident took place in Omaha, Nebraska?

Point of view

Malcolm X's memories of the Klan suggest his point of view about the 1920s might have been very different from that of, say, Frederick Lewis Allen (Document 1) or the Butterick Publishing Company (Document 4). How might his views have been different? Do you think Malcolm's point of view was widely shared by other African Americans in the 1920s? Why or why not?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 7

A 1925 *American Mercury* article critical of the problems caused by installment buying.

Sourcing

The social critic H. L. Mencken played a key role in founding and running *American Mercury* magazine. What do you know about Mencken and his views? Does knowing something about him and *American Mercury* help you better assess this passage as primary source evidence?

Interpreting meanings

The author of this article says, "Salesmanship has been raised to the status of an art, almost to that of war." Use the rest of the passage to explain what he means.

Point of view

What are this author's feelings about installment buying? Do you think he backs up his views with solid facts, or emotional appeals? Explain your answer.

Corroborating sources

Compare and contrast this article's views with those of Document 4. Why do you think such different views about installment buying existed at the same time?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 8

A passage from Margaret Sanger's 1922 book *The Pivot of Civilization*. The passage is on the need to limit the growth of certain segments of the population.

Sourcing

What else do you know about Margaret Sanger and her views? Do you think it is correct to call her a "Progressive reformer"? Why or why not?

Contextualizing

Very strict new immigration laws were passed in the early 1920s. How were these laws a response to the huge wave of immigration in the late 1800s and first two decades of the 1900s? Do you think Sanger's views reflect the fears that led to such immigration restrictions?

Interpreting meanings

Sanger says that "the omnipresence of machinery tends toward the production of large but inferior populations." Why do you think she sees industrial machinery as so important in generating large and inferior populations? What do you think she means by "inferior" in this passage?

When Sanger talks about "evidences of biological and racial degeneracy," do you think she means the ethnic and racial minorities in the U.S.? Why or why not?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 9

A table showing the growth of labor productivity and capital productivity in the 1920s.

Interpreting meanings

Briefly explain your understanding of “labor productivity” and “capital productivity,” as measured by this table.

According to this table, what helped make the 1920s such a unique decade?

Contextualizing

Two key factors causing productivity in the 1920s to soar were the spread of Henry Ford’s assembly line and the rapid spread of electricity to homes and factories. Explain how these two things might increase overall productivity so rapidly.

Point of view

Can a graph or table of numbers like this actually express a point of view? What other facts or statistics about the 1920s would you need in order to have a more complete picture of the decade’s overall economic strengths and weaknesses?

Source Analysis: Primary Source Document 10

Part of a 1925 article from *The Playground*, titled “Should Children Go to the Movies?”

Sourcing

Note the source for this passage:

The Playground, a publication of The Playground and Recreation Association of America. How does this help you to understand and assess its views?

Interpreting Meanings

The article sees both a health and a moral problem in children going to the movies. In your own words, sum up the article’s fears about both problems.

From this article, do you think the author and *The Playground* magazine should be seen as progressive reformers or backward-looking conservatives? Why?

Contextualizing

Do the article’s fears seem silly to you? If so, what trends and forces in American life in the 1920s might have made these fears seem more serious to people then?

Corroborating Sources

Compare this source with the passage from Allen’s book *Only Yesterday*. Do the two sources contradict each other or back each other up in some way?

Part 3: Analyzing the Secondary Sources

Note to the teacher: This next section includes passages from two secondary source accounts of the 1920s, along with two activities on these sources. We suggest you first discuss the brief comment “Analyzing Secondary Sources” just above the first of the two secondary sources. Discuss the four criteria the first activity asks students to use in analyzing each secondary source. These criteria focus students on the nature of historical accounts as 1) problem-centered, 2) based on evidence, 3) influenced by point of view and not purely neutral, and 4) tentative or aware of alternative explanations.

Specifically, this section includes the following:

- **Two secondary source passages**

Give copies of these passages to students to read, either in class or as homework. The two passages are from *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933*, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), and *Modern Times: The World From the Twenties to the Eighties*, by Paul Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).

- **Two student activities**

Activity 1

Students analyze the two passage taking notes on the following questions:

- How clearly does the account focus on a problem or question?
- Does it reveal a position or express a point of view?
- How well does it base its case on primary source evidence?
- How aware is it of alternative explanations or points of view?

Activity 2

In pairs, students select two of the primary sources for the lesson that best support each author’s claims in the secondary source passages. Students discuss their choices with the class.

The Secondary Sources for the Lesson

Analyzing Secondary Sources

Historians write secondary source accounts of the past after studying primary source documents like the ones you have studied on the 1920s. However, they normally select documents from among a great many others, and they stress some aspects of the story but not others. In doing this, historians are guided by the questions they ask about the topic. Their selection of sources and their focus are also influenced by their own aims, bias, or point of view. No account of the past is perfectly neutral. In reading a secondary source, you should pay to what it includes, what it leaves out, what conclusions it reaches, and how aware it is of alternative interpretations.

* * * *

Secondary Source 1

Information on the source: The passage in the box below is an excerpt from *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933*, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 67 (2002 edition). In this passage, Schlesinger sets the scene for talking about the Great Depression by describing the flaws of 1920s American society he sees as leading to that collapse.

The stock market boom in its early phases was by no means artificial. For a time it reflected solid industrial expansion. The automobile industry, in particular, had energized basic sectors of the economy—steel, machine tools, petroleum, rubber, roads and public construction—and had encouraged innovation and research. But the very excess profits which were stimulating the boom were at the same time shortening its life. For the diversion of the gains of efficiency into profits was bound to result in a falling off of the capacity of the people as a whole to buy. The Mellon [secretary of the Treasury] tax policy, placing its emphasis on relief for millionaires rather than for consumers, made the maldistribution of income and oversaving even worse. By 1929, the 2.3 per cent of the population with incomes over \$10,000 were responsible for two-thirds of the 15 billion dollars of savings. The 60,000 families in the nation with the highest incomes saved almost as much as the bottom 25 million. The mass of the population simply lacked the increase in purchasing power to enable them to absorb the increase in goods.

The rural depression further distorted the structure of demand. The farmers had lost their foreign markets after the war; and the resulting sag in agricultural income built a basic imbalance into the economy. But the Republican administration could not get so excited over the predicament of farmers as over the predicament of business. “Farmers have never made much money,” Coolidge remarked philosophically to the chairman of the Farm Labor Board. “I don’t believe we can do much about it.” The farmers, many of them living in privation, most of them under the shadow of mortgages, were less philosophical. But when they devised measures to do for them what the protective tariff did for manufacturers, they found no sympathy in Washington. As a result, the agricultural half of the economy could not do its share in maintaining demand.

As for city people, whose wages failed to keep pace with productivity, they found no more support in Washington than the farmers. While businessmen talked a good deal in public about the American faith in high wages, in practice they let the percentage rise in wages lag behind the rise of output and profit.

The Secondary Sources for the Lesson

Secondary Source 2

Information on the source: The passage in the box below is an excerpt from *Modern Times: The World From the Twenties to the Eighties*, by Paul Johnson (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), pp. 222–223. In a similar passage on the '20s in another book, Johnson says the prosperity “was not permanent—what prosperity ever is? But it is foolish and unhistorical to judge it insubstantial because of what we now know followed later.”

Edmund Wilson saw the Twenties as an aberration in the basic seriousness of the American conscience: “the fireworks of the Twenties were in the nature of a drunken fiesta.” In *The Epic of America*, published in 1931, James Truslow Adams summed it up: “Having surrendered idealism for the sake of prosperity, the ‘practical men’ bankrupted us on both of them. There were indeed some intellectuals who felt the whole attempt to spread general prosperity was misconceived and certain to invoke destruction. Michael Rostovtzeff, then finishing his monumental history of the economy of antiquity, asked: ‘Is it possible to extend a higher civilization to the lower classes without debasing its standard and diluting its quality to the vanishing point? Is not every civilization bound to decay as soon as it begins to penetrate the masses?’

But the view that the 1920s was a drunken spree destructive of civilized values can be substantiated only by the systematic distortion or denial of the historical record.

The prosperity was very widespread and very solid. It was not universal: in the farming community particularly it was patchy, and it largely excluded certain older industrial communities, such as the textile trade of New England. But it was more widely distributed than had been possible in any community of this size before, and it involved the acquisition, by tens of millions, of the elements of economic security which had hitherto been denied them throughout the whole of human history. The growth was spectacular. . . . For the first time, many millions of working people acquired insurance (life and industrial insurance policies passed the 100 million mark in the 1920s), savings, which quadrupled during the decade, and a stake in industry. Thus an analysis of those buying fifty shares or more in one of the biggest public utility stock issues of the 1920s shows that the largest groups were (in order): housekeepers, clerks, factory workers, merchants, chauffeurs and drivers, electricians, mechanics, and foremen.

The Secondary Sources: Activity 1

In this exercise, you read two short passages from much longer books dealing with the 1920s. For each secondary source, take notes on the following four questions (you may want to underline phrases or sentences in the passages that you think back up your notes):

1. How clearly does this account focus on a problem or question. What do you think that problem or question is? Sum it up in your own words here.

The Age of Roosevelt, Schlesinger

Modern Times, Johnson

2. Does the secondary source take a position or express a point of view about how successful a decade the 1920s were? If so, briefly state that point of view or quote an example of it.

The Age of Roosevelt, Schlesinger

Modern Times, Johnson

3. How well does the secondary source seem to base its case on primary source evidence? Take notes about any specific examples, if you can identify them.

The Age of Roosevelt, Schlesinger

Modern Times, Johnson

4. Does the secondary source seem aware of alternative explanations or points of view about this topic? Underline points in the passage where you see this.

The Age of Roosevelt, Schlesinger

Modern Times, Johnson

In pairs, discuss your notes for this activity.

The Secondary Sources: Activity 2

This activity is based on the passages from *The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933*, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and *Modern Times: The World From the Twenties to the Eighties*, by Paul Johnson. From the primary sources for this lesson, choose two that you think best support each author's point of view about the 1920s. With the rest of the class, discuss the two secondary source passages and defend the choice of sources you have made.

1. From this lesson, choose two primary sources that best back up Schlesinger's interpretation of the 1920s. List those sources here and briefly explain why you chose them.
2. From this lesson, choose two primary sources that best back up Johnson's interpretation of the 1920s. List those sources here and briefly explain why you chose them.
3. Does your textbook include a passage describing or summing up the successes and/or failures of the 1920s? If so, with which of the two secondary sources (Schlesinger or Johnson) does it seem to agree most? What one or two primary sources from this lesson would you add to this textbook passage to improve it?

Discuss your choices with the rest of the class.

Part 4: Follow-Up Options

Note to the teacher: At this point, students have completed the key tasks of *The Historian's Apprentice* program. They have examined their own prior understandings and acquired background knowledge on the topic. They have analyzed and debated a set of primary sources. They have considered secondary source accounts of the topic. This section includes two suggested follow-up activities. Neither of these is a required part of the lesson. They do not have to be undertaken right away. However, we do strongly recommend that you find some way to do what these options provide for. They give students a way to write or debate in order to express their ideas and arrive at their own interpretations of the topic.

Two suggested follow-up activities are included here:

- **Document-Based Questions**

Four document-based questions are provided. Choose one and follow the guidelines provided for writing a typical DBQ essay.

- **A Structured Debate**

The aim of this debate format is not so much to teach students to win a debate, but to learn to listen and learn, as well as speak up and defend a position. The goal is a more interactive and more civil debating process.

Document-Based Questions

Document-based questions (DBQs) are essay questions you must answer by using your own background knowledge and a set of primary sources on that topic. Below are four DBQs on the 1920s. Use the sources for this lesson and everything you have learned from it to write a short essay answer to one of these questions:

Suggested DBQs

Some say the decade of the 1920s was a conservative age of big business during which the spirit of Progressive reform was dead. To what extent are they right?

“The 1920s has been called a ‘drunken fiesta,’ a time whose phoney prosperity was revealed by the Great Depression to be a house of cards. That’s what it was.” Assess the validity of this statement (that is, explain why you do or do not agree with it).

The 1920s have often been labeled “The Roaring Twenties.” Explain what you think the phrase means, and why you think it is or is not an acceptable slogan to sum up the nature of that decade.

“There wasn’t just one 1920s. There were many and often very different ones, for many different groups and individuals.” Assess the validity of this statement (that is, explain why you do or do not agree with it).

Suggested Guidelines for Writing a DBQ Essay

- **Planning and thinking through the essay**

Consider the question carefully. Think about how to answer it so as to address each part of it. Do not ignore any detail in the question. Pay attention to the question’s form (cause-and-effect, compare-and-contrast, assess the validity, etc.). This form will often give you clues as to how best to organize each part of your essay.

- **Thesis statement and introductory paragraph**

The thesis statement is a clear statement of what you hope to prove in your essay. It must address *all* parts of the DBQ, it must make a claim you can back up with the sources, and it should be specific enough to help you organize the rest of your essay.

- **Using evidence effectively**

Use the notes on your “Source Analysis” activity sheets to organize your thoughts about these primary sources. In citing a source, use it to support key points or illustrate major themes. Do not simply list a source in order to get it into the essay somehow. If any sources do *not* support your thesis, you should still try to use them. Your essay may be more convincing if you qualify your thesis so as to account for these other sources.

- **Linking ideas explicitly**

After your introduction, your internal paragraphs should make your argument in a logical or clear way. Each paragraph should be built around one key supporting idea and details that back up that idea. Use transition phrase such as “before,” “next,” “then,” or “on the one hand...but on the other hand,” to help readers follow the thread of your argument.

- **Wrapping it up**

Don’t add new details about sources in your final paragraph. State a conclusion that refers back to your thesis statement by showing how the evidence has backed it up. If possible, look for nice turns of phrase to end on a dramatic note.

A Structured Debate

Small-group activity: Using a version of the Structured Academic Controversy model, debate alternate interpretations of this lesson's topic. The goal of this method is not so much to win a debate as to learn to collaborate in clarifying your interpretations to one another. In doing this, your goal should be to see that it is possible for reasonable people to hold differing views, even when finding the "one right answer" is not possible.

Use all their notes from previous activities in this lesson. Here are the rules for this debate:

1. Organize a team of four or six students. Choose a debate topic based on the lesson *The 1920s: Golden Age or Age of Illusion?*

(You may wish to use one of the DBQs suggested for the Document-Based Questions activity for this lesson, or you may want to define the debate topic in a different way.)
2. Split your team into two sub-groups. Each sub-group should study the materials for this lesson and rehearse its case. One sub-group then present its case to the other. That other sub-group must repeat the case back to the first sub-group's satisfaction.
3. The two sub-groups then switch roles and repeat step 2
4. Your team either reaches a consensus which it explains to the entire class, or it explains where the key differences between the sub-groups lie

Answers to “Source Analysis” Activities

Source Analysis: Document 1

Sourcing: It could be both in that it is an account of the 1920s after they ended, but it is by someone who lived through the era and is in part recalling his own experiences of it.

Contextualizing: Cars became mass consumption items, Prohibition made alcohol a big issue, etc.

Interpreting meanings: It could suggest how widely the more liberal spirit of the age was spreading.

Answers will vary and should be discussed.

Source Analysis: Document 2

Contextualizing: Movies became enormously popular in the ‘20s, etc.

Interpreting meanings: Students should notice the drastic departure in all these ways from more conventional, Victorian mannerisms of the previous decades.

It could indicate that social and class attitudes and divisions remained strong even as styles changed.

Corroborating sources: Answers will vary, but this does seem to back up Allen’s claim of a “revolution in manners and morals.”

Source Analysis: Document 3

Contextualizing: First to fly across the Atlantic, in 1927.

Answers were vary and should be discussed.

Interpreting Meanings: The setting is the plane; Lindbergh appears ready to take off; his determined, calm expression; the camera looking up slightly from below; and the close-cropping all add to a picture of Lindbergh as larger than life and master of his fate, etc.

Source Analysis: Document 4

Interpreting meanings: Purchasing a product in small partial payments at regular intervals instead of the entire amount at once.

Contextualizing: Perhaps because installment buying helped support a dramatic increase in the share of American families owning cars, the car had become a central symbol of the prosperity of the age, and so on.

Point of view: The author says installment buying enables families to own large expensive items even on a small monthly budget; also that the durability of new cars means people can pay them off before they need to replace them and will then have income they can use to buy other goods.

Sourcing: The magazine may have a self-interested stake in promoting more consumption and this could explain its enthusiasm.

Source Analysis: Document 5

Interpreting meanings: The large signs, the young lady driving it with ease and, seemingly, in clean close and comfort, etc.

Contextualizing: High, prewar farm prices were pushed up even more by huge European demand during World War I. After the war, U.S. farm production remained high, but demand from Europe dropped as its nations began producing their own food.

The tractor helped push production even higher. Demand did not keep up with these huge and growing supplies, hence prices fell.

Corroborating sources: Documents 4, 7, and 9 are especially relevant.

Source Analysis: Document 6

Sourcing: It could require caution about details in that it is recalled secondhand and from a great distance in time. Some may note that it fits, however, with what we know about Klan at that time.

Contextualizing: The Klan revived and grew in strength in these years. It often engaged in such intimidation, especially of politically active blacks.

The KKK of the '20s had spread outside of the deep South. In fact, it was very strong in the Midwest, where it condemned Catholics, Jews, and other groups, in addition to African Americans.

Point of view: Answers will vary but should point out that Documents 1 and 4 seem to be focused more on comfortable, middle-class white families.

Source Analysis: Document 7

Sourcing: Mencken was a bitter critic of 1920s conformity, etc. This could explain the presence in the American Mercury of an article critical of ordinary American consumers' behavior.

Interpreting meanings: Answers may vary but should focus on how the high-pressure sales tactics and the faulty consumer reasoning about getting into debt are depicted.

Point of view: Clearly the author is very critical, but answers will vary as to how well the case is made.

Corroborating sources: Answers will vary and should be discussed.

Source Analysis: Document 8

Sourcing: Sanger was a birth-control advocate who saw herself as a socialist, so she clearly falls in the Progressive reformer category, though answers here may vary and should be discussed.

Contextualizing: The immigration laws drastically limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe, the groups arousing the most concern about ethnic mixing, etc. Answers as to the second part of this question will vary and should be discussed.

Interpreting meanings: Answers will vary, because Sanger is not altogether clear, but she seems to feel that industrial, factory-machine culture simplifies work and allows too many "inferior," "dull" people to survive, reproduce, and overpopulate.

Answers will vary and should be discussed.

Source Analysis: Document 9

Interpreting meanings: These are measures of output per unit of input, such as output per labor-hour, or output per unit of capital services.

Both forms of productivity increased in the 1920s annual at rates well above the previous two decades and the one that followed.

Contextualization: These two things brought down costs for business and made manufacturing more efficient and flexible. Transportation costs came down, owners could be more flexible about locating business, arranging electric machinery in their plants, bringing down energy costs, etc.

Point of view: Answers will vary but might include discussion of average income, income inequality, prices, poverty measures, etc.

Source Analysis: Document 10

Sourcing: It suggests the magazine may have a stake in promoting outdoor play, etc.

Interpreting meanings: Interpretations will vary and should be discussed.

They are progressive in their goal of reforming society to improve children's health and moral well-being, though they might be seen as conservative in opposing a less inhibited popular culture.

Contextualization: Answers will vary and should be discussed.

Corroborating sources: Answers will vary. Some may see Allen's account of a youth revolt as helping to explain the strong concerns about children in this source.

Evaluating Secondary Sources: Activity 1

These are not definitive answers to the questions. They are suggested points to look for in student responses.

1. How clearly does this account focus on a problem or question. What do you think that problem or question is? Sum it up in your own words here?

Schlesinger basically seeks to understand how the economic and social trends of the 1920s could have created the conditions that triggered the collapse and long decade of economic stagnation of the 1930s.

Johnson seeks to defend the 1920s against its detractors, whom he feels can only make the case for it as a decade of excess “by the systematic distortion or denial of the historical record.”

2. Does the secondary source take a position or express a point of view about the outcome of the 1920s? If so, briefly state that point of view or quote an example of it.

Schlesinger sums up the thesis he wants to support in this passage with his claim that “the very excess profits [of the 1920s economic system] which were stimulating the boom were at the same time shortening its life.”

Johnson seeks to refute the idea that the 1920s were deeply flawed either culturally or economically, claiming basically that “the prosperity was very widespread and very solid.”

3. How well does the secondary source seem to base its case on primary source evidence? Take notes about any specific examples, if you can identify them.

Neither *Schlesinger* or *Johnson* cite specific sources for the many economic and social statistics and indicators they discuss. However, these are clearly based on documents the authors reference elsewhere.

Schlesinger quotes Coolidge at one point, and *Johnson* quotes several writers making claims about the 1920s that he seeks to refute.

4. Does the secondary source seem aware of alternative explanations or points of view about this topic? Underline points in the passage where you see this.

Schlesinger does not refer directly to alternative views of other historians but focuses instead on his own claims about the flawed nature of 1920s prosperity.

Johnson does sum up the case against the 1920s by quoting several harsh judgments about the decade by other intellectuals, judgments he then seeks to challenge and disprove.

