

Topic 2: Impressions of war

Work Sheet 2B: You Be the Detective! Interrogating Sources

Sometimes when we investigate what happened in the past, we may find different versions of the same event. Historians use these versions to try and reconstruct, as accurately as possible, what happened in the past. Historians work like detectives. They must examine the different versions, find out why they are different and try to reach a conclusion about what happened or why it happened. These different versions of the past are called 'conflicting evidence'.

There are many reasons why people's accounts of a particular event may be different. Let us consider some of the most important reasons.

Perspective

Everyone sees the world around them through different eyes. How we make sense of it depends on our family background, whether we are male or female, our education, the country to which we belong, the language we speak and the experiences we have. This is called our 'perspective' and it helps to shape our attitudes and points of view. For example, the fact that we are Australians means that we will have a different perspective on the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 from someone who is Turkish.

Motive

Most people have reasons for why they do and say things. Our reasons for the way we act and speak are called 'motives'. For example, if we tell a lie, we might be trying to avoid getting into trouble.

Fact or opinion

A fact is something that just about everybody can agree on. For example, it is a fact that World War I occurred between 1914 and 1918. However, people have different opinions or ideas about who started it, and about the importance of different people and events within the war. Historians today are still arguing about these issues.

Bias

Another word for bias is 'prejudice'. It means we make a judgement about something before we have considered all the evidence or other points of view. This judgement may be based on our perspective – such as our

nationality, our position in society or our experiences. For example, some people are biased or prejudiced against people of different social or racial groups. In the same way, we may dislike someone and are prepared to think the worst of them and blame them for things they may not have done.

Historians then, like detectives, 'interrogate' the information they have, to find out the perspective of the person who produced it, what their motives were and whether their account is based on fact or opinion. They must also decide whether there is any evidence of bias in their account. When they have done all of these things, they are in a better position to reach a *balanced* conclusion. That is, a conclusion that is based on an examination of *all* the evidence. However, sometimes, there may not be enough evidence to reach a clear conclusion. Historians must be careful to present all the evidence so that people who are reading their accounts, or watching a television documentary, for example, are able to make up their own minds about the events.

In this activity, you have to be the detective/historian. Investigate the incident described below and see what conclusion you can reach from the information provided in the sources.

The scene

The school playground at lunch time. There is a great commotion near the bubblers and two students, student A and student B are fighting. They are surrounded by a crowd of students. Student A has just knocked student B to the ground when the teacher on playground duty arrives and breaks up the fight. The two students are told to report straight away to the Assistant Principal's office. It is the Assistant Principal's job to find out who started the fight.

Imagine you are the Assistant Principal. Before you read any further, form into small groups and brainstorm what you think he or she should do to find out exactly how the fight started.

The statements of five people in relation to this incident are given below. Read their statements. See if you can identify the perspective and motives of each person and make a note of them in the table on the next page. Look for examples of fact and opinion and see if you can find any evidence of bias. These are the problems of evidence the Assistant Principal will have to deal with in reaching a conclusion about who might have started the fight.

Source 1

Student A

'I was sitting with my friends and eating my lunch when B came up to me. He called me a rude name and knocked my lunch box to the ground. I bent over to pick it up and he punched me in the head. He told me to get up and fight, so I did.'

Source 2

Student B

'I was with my friends walking past where A was sitting having his lunch. As I was walking past, he stuck his foot out and tripped me. I fell over his leg and when I fell, his lunch box fell off his lap onto the ground. I got up and said, "Why did you do that?" But he just called me a rude name and started punching me.'

Source 3

Friend of Student A

'We were sitting in the playground having our lunch and minding our own business when B came over with his friends. He swore at A and picked up his lunch and threw it on the ground. He's always hated A and he was just looking for a fight. A was only defending himself.'

Source 4

Friend of Student B

'We had just had our lunch and were going down to the oval for a game of touch footy. We were walking past a group of kids who were sitting and eating their lunch when one of them, A, stuck his foot out. B fell over it. A stood up and called B a _____. Then A put up his fists and said, "If you want a fight, you've got one!" So they started punching each other.'

Source 5

A teacher on playground duty

'I was on playground duty in the canteen area when I heard a lot of shouting over near the bubblers. I went over to investigate. A large group of students had gathered around students A and B who were fighting. B was on the ground and he had blood on his shirt. It seems pretty clear to me that Student A started the fight. This isn't the first time he's been in trouble. I had to put him on detention last week for coming late to class and using bad language.'

Problems of evidence

In your discussion of the problems of evidence in each of these statements, you might also like to consider the following:

- Read each statement carefully and decide if each person witnessed all the events described. Is this important?
- What facts, as distinguished from opinions, can be established from each person's statement?
- Suggest reasons why the accounts of Students A and B are different. (Motive)
- Why are the accounts of the friends of A and B different? (Motive)
- The friend of Student A gives two opinions in their account. What are they? Do they help to prove that Student B started the fight?
- What evidence does the teacher use to state that A started the fight? Do you accept this evidence?
- What questions would you like to ask any of the witnesses to this event?

Evidence	Perspective	Motive	Fact/s	Opinion/s	Bias
Student A					
Student B					
Friend of Student A					
Friend of Student B					
Teacher on playground duty					

As the Assistant Principal, you have interviewed the five people and have a copy of their statements. Now you have to reach your conclusion about this incident. It is your responsibility to be as *objective* as possible. That means you must consider all the evidence without any bias of your own.

You have three choices to make:

- Student A started the fight. Choose the evidence that supports this conclusion.

- Student B started the fight. Choose the evidence that supports this conclusion.
- There is not enough evidence to say who started the fight. Give reasons to support this conclusion.

Now that you have reached your conclusion, you have to write an incident report. It should contain a *factual description* of the events and the conclusion that you have reached, using evidence or reasons to support it. Use the 'Incident Report' form to write your report.

Incident Report

School _____ Date _____ Time of incident _____

Signed _____ (Assistant Principal)