

## Writing a Diary: Observations from an Assistant

**Activity Type:** Hands-On Activity

**Grade Level:** 6–8

### A RIF Guide for Educators

**Objective:** Students will assume the role of an assistant to the Wright brothers and draft a diary of their observations.

**Content Connections:** Literacy, History, Science

**Standards:**

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6–8.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6–8.2:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6–8.9:** Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

**Summary:** In this Hands-on Activity, students assume the role of an assistant to the Wright brothers for the purpose of drafting a diary from the perspective of this assistant. To inform the diaries they write, students will read and take notes on the 1903 diary of Orville Wright, which uses a mostly narrative style to describe the Wright brothers' efforts from September to December of that year.

### Before the Activity

**Explore the Wilbur and Orville Wright Papers Teacher Page:**

The [Teachers Page to The Wilbur and Orville Wright Papers at the Library of Congress](#) provides standards alignment information, links to the [Collection Highlights](#) page, the collection [Finding Aid](#), and a list of additional [Related Resources](#).

**Explore the following online resources:**

This activity requires students learn to read and understand primary documents. There are a number of great online tutorials available for students and educators to refine their primary source reading skills. Here is a short selection:

- [How to Read a Primary Source \(The University of Iowa\)](#): This short webpage is largely directed to students and provides a number of useful tips for examining primary sources.
- [Four Read: Learning to Read Primary Documents \(Teaching History National History Education Clearinghouse\)](#): This teacher-directed web tutorial explains a number of reading strategies that students might use when evaluating primary sources.
- [Using Primary Sources \(Library of Congress\)](#): This teacher-directed website covers a number of useful tips encouraging student analysis of primary sources.
- [Guide to Reading Primary Sources \(Office of Learning Resources\)](#): This short guide provides students will a workable definition of primary sources and some useful tips on exploring primary sources.

**Explore the Readings:** Students will be using the following readings and documents to complete this project.

**Books:**

- Russell Freedman, *The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane* (New York: Holiday House, 1991).
  - In this work of history, Freedman explores the lives and interests of the Wright brothers from an early age through the beginnings of the age of flight. Students will be reading the final few chapters from the book, which detail how the successes at Kitty Hawk triggered new developments and new achievements in flight.

**Archival Sources:**

- [Orville Wright's 1903 Diary](#)
  - In this diary, Orville records the flight experiments he and his brother conducted between September and December of 1903.

**Additional Online Resources:**

- [Wright Brothers Aeroplane Company: A Virtual Museum of Pioneer Aviation](#)
  - This is a virtual museum that provides online exhibits on the early years of aviation, particularly the work of the Wright brothers.
- [Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum: The Wright Brothers and The Invention of the Aerial Age](#)
  - This is a webpage intended to explore the work of the Wright brothers and to enhance the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Wright Brothers exhibit.
- [National Park Service: 1903-The First Flight](#)
  - This is a National Park Service website that provides useful historical information for those visiting the Wright Brothers National Memorial in North Carolina.

## During the Activity

**Warming Up:**

Direct students to complete the Warming Up activity. Once the students have reviewed their partner's diaries, have them make a formal report to the class. Students should aim to address the questions identified on the Student Edition in their presentation.

**Student responses:**

- Answers may vary, but students will likely observe that their partner described the event using first-person narration with the partner at the center of the action. Students will also note that their partner clearly explained his or her feelings of the event and the event's direct impact. Students may note that the goal was to record events to help others understand them and so that they themselves can remember the events.
- Answers may vary, but students will likely note that they learned how their partner felt about the events and the events' impact in the way an outside observer may not understand.
- Answers may vary, but students may mention that historical diaries help future generations understand everyday life as it was lived rather than reading observations or analysis of historical events from people who did not live through them.

**Getting Started:**

Have students read the excerpt in the Getting Started section of the Student Edition. After students read, lead the class in a brief discussion using the prompts included in that section. These are: What did Mr. Daniels think at the time and later? Were he to have written a diary, what might he have said about his sudden and brief brush with death?

Encourage students to think about how a historical actor’s perspective might change their interpretation and the significance of an event.

**Student responses:**

Answers may vary, but students should be able to elaborate on the importance of perspective. They may also elaborate on how events described in first-person accounts are distinct from those described later in secondary sources. Consider encouraging students to think in this way if they do not reach these conclusions on their own.

**As students get started, direct them to the following LOC tools:**

- [Searching the Library of Congress](#): This tutorial will walk students through the process of searching the Library of Congress’s many sources.
- [Primary Source Analysis Tool](#): This tutorial will introduce students to primary sources and provide them with tools for reading and analyzing them.

**Readings:**

Students may read the suggested readings on their own or in pairs of small groups. For students who may need support understanding the readings’ key ideas, use the suggested comprehension questions below.

**Books:**

- Russell Freedman, *The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane* (New York: Holiday House, 1991).
  - How did Wilbur and Orville feel about the experiments they carried out with their glider in 1901? *They were not particularly encouraged by these experiments.*
  - Why did the Wright brothers decide to make the tail of the glider movable? *They believed this would make turning the glider easier.*
  - What innovative design did the Wrights use to prevent the torque of the propeller from twisting the plane when it flew? *They added two propellers turning in opposite directions.*

**Archival Sources:**

- [Orville Wright’s 1903 Diary](#)
  - Find the following dates and draft short summaries of Orville’s entries: September 23: *Orville left his home in Dayton for North Carolina.* October 9: *The wind was gradually increasing during the day as a storm came in. They had to make repairs to their roof during this storm.* October 28: *It was cold and uncomfortable, so the crew spent the day making repairs to their cabin.*

**Activity: Drafting a Diary:**

Students will be working independently to complete this activity, and will need relatively little educator interaction. However, there are ways educators can help encourage and support student work. Here are a couple tips:

- Help students read the diary and identify one or two important events. Students will be able to model their efforts on this demonstrated example.
- Walk students through the tips on reading primary sources. Show them how taking their time, reading out loud, and paying attention to abbreviations can be effective. Consider introducing students to one or more of the online primary source resources identified above.

**Aging Paper:** Based on time considerations and the resources available in class, come to a determination about what method you would like to use for aging the diary pages. If there is sufficient time and classroom resources, consider showing students how to age their diary papers. If there is limited time, but access to a color printer, consider using the faux aged paper printout. If time and resources are scarce, consider having students write their diaries on standard paper.

For other ideas on how to age paper for this project see the article and instructions available at [this link](#). Please note that some of the suggestions require the use of appliances and other tools that require adult supervision. Carefully read each suggestion and select them as appropriate for students.

## After the Activity

**Elaborate:** Consider having students share the documents they have produced: diaries and completed graphic organizers. Students can then draft an analysis of these documents. The analysis can be an attempt at using these sources to draft a secondary account of the assistant's story. Alternatively, instruct students to draft a short report identifying how the student created the assistant's diary. What elements from Orville's diary informed their diary entries? What role in the experiments did the student give their assistant? What effect did these decisions have on the diary they ultimately created?

**Reflect:** Consider the following reflection prompts to use for a class discussion:

- What information does one learn from a diary entry that one would not learn from reading a secondary report about the same event?
- What famous person's diaries would you like to read and why?
- Have you ever kept a diary? What did you use your diary for? Are there any life events that you wished you had recorded in a diary? What might people think of you if they discovered your diary 100 years from now?