



Found History

Grades 6-12

Duration

1 hour

Location

Becoming Los Angeles Hall

Supplies

- Worksheet
- Pencil
- Clipboard (optional)
- Presentation materials

Standards

CCSS ELA

RI.1, R.2, R.6, R.7, R.9

SL.1.a.c, SL.2

RH.5

CA CONTENT

History -Analysis Skills:

Historical Research, Evidence, and Point of View 2

Vocabulary

Bias

Found Text

Concepts

- Poetry can be created using found text
- History has inherent bias because it is authored by humans
- Bias can take multiple forms, including word choice, inclusion of subject matter, cultural bias, time period bias, associative bias, etc.

Objectives

- Students will build a poem using found-text fragments and discuss its “slant” or “take” on the exhibit
- Students will discuss historical authorship bias and subjectivity

Outline

1. Educator will introduce students to concept of bias and lead them through an example poem-build
2. Students will free-explore the BLA exhibit and collect fragments of text from exhibit signs and artifacts that interest them.
3. Students will build a poem from the fragments using examples as a guide.
4. In a group discussion, students can voluntarily share their poems and discuss the differences in how they interpreted the exhibit.

Introduction (5-10 min)

Inside the *Becoming Los Angeles* exhibit, lead students to the Mission displays, the L.A. Aqueduct display, or the Mexican-American War display. Using the chosen display, introduce the concept of *bias*. Explain that bias can be language choice, associations between events and people, explaining events through the eyes of one culture, explaining events through the eyes of present-day, or even what is included in a book or exhibit in the first place (or what is left out of it).

Look at the language of the display. What kind of effect does it have? What are the important words? What if those words were different?

Point out that there are multiple sides to the information they can see in the display. Are multiple sides represented here? Which ones might be left out, and why?

Who is the intended audience or who is represented by the display?

What is “authorship?” Can you be an author of history? How? Is it possible for an author to be objective? Why or why not?

Why does it matter who tells a story or a history? How might that affect what you—the students—ultimately learn?

Group Example (5-10 min)

Pass out strips of paper and explain to students that they will be exploring the idea of bias using a technique called “found text,” and that you’ll do an example together first. Ask students to look around this section of the hall to find a text fragment or phrase that they like or that makes them think. Build one or two examples in front of them, showing them how to cut phrases in interesting ways by violating normal structures or cutting the sentences too short. **It is important to note that the phrases don’t have to make sense—they should just be interesting or “sound cool” to the students.** Once the students have found their phrase, ask them to write it in big letters on their paper strip and post it on the wall underneath your examples. You may end up with some nonsensical or even borderline inappropriate phrases, but as long as it came from the text of the exhibit, feel free to use it.

Next, show students how to build a found text piece by putting some of the pieces together. Add or cut single words as necessary to help it fit. When the piece is done, read it out loud and ask students what they hear or observe. Does the poem make sense? What kind of ideas or themes does it present? Does it give the same impression as the exhibit? Does it have a bias? Why or why not? If so, what kind?

Exhibit Exploration (15 min)

Ask students to wander the entire exhibit, collecting as many phrases as they can in 15 minutes. Remind them not to try to fit the phrases together beforehand, but just to pick whatever attracts them. Quantity is more important for this step, and they can always cut more as they build. Students can focus on a single area or try to view the whole exhibit, but they should have at least 15 phrases by the time they’re done.

Poem Build (10-15min)

Once the students have collected poem/prose fragments, regroup and show them an example piece or two. Ask them to build their own pieces by fitting together some of the phrases they found. The piece can be short and does not have to include all of the phrases. They can add words like “and, the, except” if necessary, but they should limit that as much as possible. The pieces can be nonsensical, and students do not have to use all of the phrases they collected, but they should have a finished product to discuss.

Discussion (10-15 min)

Ask students to volunteer to share their piece. Ask the group what they think these pieces are saying. Does the poem/prose piece have a theme? Does it present the exhibit in the certain way? Perhaps one student has a feminist take while another student’s lines are in chronological order. Bring the discussion back to the idea of bias. Are their works “biased”? Did they all see the exhibit in the same way or in a different way? If they had only heard one or two of the pieces, what might they think of the exhibit? What did hearing all the pieces do for their perception? How might this phenomenon affect the way historical texts are written or read?

SUGGESTIONS FOR COLLECTING PHRASES

When collecting, look for a variety of phrases:

Complex or unusual nouns: (“The grandson of slaves”; “Radium Sulphur Springs“)

Complex or unusual verbs: (“became the planet Mars”; “and tenders the mark and brand in the margin”)

Prepositional phrases: (“like this City of Angels;” “on a kitchen table in New York in as little as seven days”)

Try to cut already-interesting sentences open by splitting prepositions from their objects, cutting out prepositional phrases, or splitting adjectives from their nouns:

...Death Valley stood in (for Egypt)

...an elegant refuge in the heart (of Los Angeles)

...the tick-tick-tick of the Rain Bird (sprinkler system)

Pull from artifacts themselves, and not just from exhibit text:

“...and tenders the mark and brand in the margin (as the brand assumed by him and upon examination of the record)”

-from a record of Ranchers’ brands and counterbrands

...”Oh! How it sparkles; oh! how it foams. It chases a microbe wherever it roams...”

-from an early 20th century advertisement for Radium Sulphur Springs

“Days of Thrills and Laughter”

-the name of a movie made in early Hollywood

Sample Line List

at the time Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo arrived
Unknown Date
hot tar between rows
residents used to produce desirable objects
before being hollowed out into finished
years when wild crops failed
landscapes that once resembled well-kept parks
made up a racially mixed community
locked young women away separately
performed in secret
work acquiring souls...and new subjects...
like this City of Angels
the American people were erupting
The grandson of slaves
spread non-native grasses in their dung
burned more easily and more frequently
Now on this day comes Teresa Palomarez
and tenders the mark and brand in the margin
Women's work began
She died at age 112
Under American law he lost the right to own land
caused the Mexican Congress to elevate
The United States prevailed
Plan de la ciudad de Los Angeles
more easily bought, sold, and subdivided
fly to new locations in swarms
this devastator locust
disaster completed the damage
an elegant refuge in the heart
settled with knives, guns, or iron knuckles

This wooden pipe
essentially viewed as nonpersons
shipped around Cape Horn
crossfire between rival Chinese groups
Calle de los Negros
Key to Los Angeles County Jail
Poundcake Hill
Orange Empire Trolley Trip
There it is! Take it!
Deadman's Island was deemed a navigational hazard
Pleasure parks, exotic animals, sports and other
Oh! How it sparkles; oh! how it foams. It chases a
microbe wherever it roams
Radium Sulphur Springs
on a kitchen table in New York in as little as seven
days
City residents limped through
Death Valley stood in
became the planet Mars
Days of Thrills and Laughter
this rickety plane
hundreds of thousands of curious spectators
Todd Shipyards
Renegade skateboarding in L.A. swimming pools left
dry
the tick-tick-tick of the Rain Bird
early accelerometers

CENTOS:

1.

at the time Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo arrived
—this devastator locust—
the American people were erupting
before being hollowed out into finished
hot tar between rows.
Performed in secret
the tick-tick-tick of the Rain Bird
became the planet Mars:
an elegant refuge in the heart.
Now on this day comes Teresa Palomarez
shipped around Cape Horn.
She died at age 112
on a kitchen table in New York in as little as
seven days.
Deadman's Island was deemed a navigational hazard
like this City of Angels.
There it is! Take it. [The]
Key to Los Angeles County Jail.

2.

Poundcake Hill
settled with knives, guns, or iron knuckles
burned more easily and more frequently [than]
this rickety plane.
In years when wild crops failed,
hundreds of thousands of curious spectators
locked young women away separately
in the margin.
Women's work began
to produce desirable objects
The United States prevailed
and tender[ed] the mark and brand
Oh! How it sparkles; oh! how it foams.
Days of Thrills and Laughter.