

Evaluating A Map as a Source

Map is not just a map alone! Maps can be published as a single document. A map can be published within a report, a journal article, a book or an atlas. Maps can also be published online as a scanned image or as an interactive map.

When you are deciding whether or not to use a map in your research or assignment, it is important to evaluate the audience, authorship, currency, format and content of the map. Depending on the type of map, you may need to assess the geographic, political, historical or cultural purpose (context) of the map.

While answering these questions, ensure that you look at the content and physical details of the map, and examine the textual information that is associated with the map.

Authority and Authorship:

- Determine who are creators of this map (individuals, government, organization, corporation etc.) [S3.P1]
- Who published, funded or commissioned the creation of this map? [S3.P1], [S4.P3]
 - Note: this is closely tied to the bias and purpose of the map, the audience of the map, and when the map was originally created
- What are the credentials of the creators or the publishers [S4.P3,P4]

Currency

- Examine the map and determine when it was created, published, and last updated. [S3.P1]
- What time period is depicted on this map? [S3.P1; S4,P3]

Original Audience and Format

- What format was this map originally published (e.g., atlas, newspaper, stand-alone map, inside a book) [S3.P1; S4P3]
- Determine what language(s) appear on this map [S3.P1]
- Describe the intended audience of this map when it was originally created [S3.P23]
- Is the map an original or reproduction or a facsimile ?

Content

- Describe what part of the world this map represents by determining following [S3P1, S3P2]:
 - What geographic area is depicted on this map?

- If it is a small geographic area, what region or city or neighbourhood is it located within?
- What colony, country, territory, state, empire or nation is in control of this geographic area during the time this map was published?
- Describe what geographic features (streets, water bodies, etc.) appear on this map? [S3P1, S3P2]
- Describe the major theme on the map and discuss any factual or statistical information visualized on the map [S3P2]

Context and Purpose

In order to understand the purpose of the map, it is important to understand the context in which the map was originally created.

- Describe the historical factors or events that were occurring during this time, that would be relevant to the creation of this map [S3P2]
- Describe other factors (e.g., economic conditions, health and social conditions, political situation) that would be relevant to the creation of this map [S3P2]
- Explain what you think is the purpose and the bias of the map in its original context (S4,P4)
- What themes in our course (or this week's lecture) are represented in this map ? [S4,P1]

Notes and Suggestions for educators:

1. Don't overwhelm your students with too many questions! Carefully select your questions, especially under the headings of Content and Context/Purpose. Ensure that the questions are appropriate to the learning objectives and content of the course or assignment.
2. Each question in this exercise is adapted from the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards. For example, [S3 PI2] is Standard 3, Performance Indicator #2. The complete *ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards For Higher Education* is available at: <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy>

Works Cited

ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards. Association of College & Research Libraries, 2011. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/visualliteracy>

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