

# LESSON 3: WHO IS MARY LINCOLN?

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum

## INTRODUCTION

Mary Todd Lincoln is a complex historical figure and historians have varied widely in their portrayal of her throughout history. In the lesson “What do historians say about Mary?” students reviewed multiple historical interpretations of the First Lady. In this follow up lesson, students will read Mary’s own letters to gain a better understanding of her personality and character.

## PROCEDURE

1. Group students and distribute one Mary Lincoln original primary source to each group. Provide students with the “Primary Source Analysis Worksheet.”
2. Working in groups students should analyze their primary source and answer the questions on the worksheet. As students struggle to decipher the handwriting or text, they will begin to understand the difficulties faced by historians in conducting original research. After an interval of 10 minutes, provide students analyzing letters the transcriptions.
  - and the transcript. What are the pros and cons of each type of source material? What are the drawbacks to relying on either?
  - What do the primary sources reveal about Mary Lincoln over time? Your answer should consider not only the content of the sources but their appearance, the penmanship, the tone etc. Do these characteristics change over time, or with different recipients?
  - What don’t the sources reveal? What is missing? What questions do they raise?
  - What is the importance of reading a series of letters rather than a single letter by an individual?
  - Did your opinion or perception of Mary change as you analyzed these items?
  - How do these sources compare with the professional historians’ assessment of Mary (refer to lesson “What do historians say about Mary Todd Lincoln?”)
3. Upon completion of the analysis, the groups will present their findings to the rest of the class.
4. As a class, discuss the following:
  - How hard was it to decipher the handwritten letters? How might this impact historical research?
  - Was the task much easier using the transcript? Describe the differences between the original



## MATERIALS

- *Primary Sources from the “Mary Lincoln Kit” (and on this CD)*
  - #13 and #14 *Mary’s Lexington Home*
  - #2 and #3 *Store Accounts*
  - #20 *1861 Image of Mary Lincoln*
  - # 8 *Mary Lincoln to Ruth Harris, December 11, 1864*
  - # 9 *Mary Lincoln to Sally Orne, August 31, 1865*
  - #10 *Mary Lincoln’s Obituary*
- *“Primary Source Analysis Worksheet” (in this lesson plan)*

## Objectives

- *Use critical thinking skills to analyze a primary document.*
- *Link the information found in a primary source to the assertions made in a secondary source.*
- *Name two limitations presented by primary sources material in historical research.*
- *Gain an appreciation for the difficulty historians face in researching our past.*

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# PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

1. Circle the type of primary source

- |                 |                               |          |                |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|----------|----------------|
| Letter          | Speech or Address             | Telegram | Map or Chart   |
| Meeting Minutes | Political Cartoon             | Report   | Resolution     |
| Public Law      | Diary/Journal                 | Patent   | Public Record  |
| Executive Order | Newspaper or Magazine Article | Email    | Image or Photo |
| Other _____     |                               |          |                |

2. Does the source have any unique physical qualities?

- |            |             |             |
|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Letterhead | Handwritten | Seal        |
| Notations  | Watermark   | Other _____ |

3. Who is the author (or creator) of the source?

4. Is the source dated \_\_\_\_Yes \_\_\_\_No If yes, what is the date? If no, are there clues in the source to help you date it?

5. What is the author's (or creator's) title or position?

6. For what audience was the source created?

7. List three things that you think are important about this source.

- a.
- b.
- c.

8. Why do you think this source was created? Why was it saved?

9. What evidence in the source helps you know why it was created?

10. Does this author state opinions? \_\_\_\_Yes \_\_\_\_No If yes, give example of an opinion the author presented.

11. List two things the source tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.

- a.
- b.

12. Write a question that is left unanswered by the source.

