

Which John Smith is Telling the Truth?

Historical Thinking Skills Assessed: Sourcing, Critical Reading

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Course: United States History

Level: Elementary/Middle

Task Question: Which of John Smith's accounts of his meeting with Powhatan is likely to be more accurate?

Learning Outcome:

Students will be able to evaluate the reliability of primary sources based on sourcing.

Standards Alignment:

[Common Core Standards for English Language Arts](#)

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| RI.5.6 | Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent. |
| RI.5.1 | Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information. |
| RI.5.9 | Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection and research. |

[National History Standards](#)

Era 1: Three Worlds Meet (Beginnings to 1620)

Standard 2: How early European exploration and colonization resulted in cultural and ecological interactions among previously unconnected peoples.

[College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies Standards](#)

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|---------------|--|
| D2.His.5.3-5 | Explain connections among historical contexts and people's perspectives at the time. |
| D2.His.6.3-5 | Describe how people's perspectives shaped the historical sources they created. |
| D2.His.13.3-5 | Use information about a historical source, including the maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose to judge the extent to which the source is useful for studying a particular topic. |

Materials:

- RS#01: John Smith – A Short Biography
- RS #02: Document A – *A True Relation* by John Smith (Excerpt)
- RS #03: Document B – *The General History* by John Smith (Excerpt)
- RS #04: Graphic Organizer – Which John Smith is Telling the Truth?
- RS#05: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric – Sourcing, Critical Reading

Background for the Teacher:

John Smith is famous as a leader of the Jamestown colony. He was also an explorer, cartographer, author, and a businessman who promoted the colonization of Virginia. He has been widely praised for his strong leadership, skills as a captain, and his work in documenting detailed information about the New World. Smith was a prolific self-promoter, and much of what we know about him is from his own

writings.

Born in England in 1580, Smith began his career at age 16 as a soldier and sailor aboard merchant ships. After fighting in several foreign wars and escaping slavery by the Turks, he returned to England in 1604-05 and began working with the Virginia Company. Smith was a member of the expedition to launch the first English colony in the New World at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. As the colonists struggled to survive the harsh winter, lack of fresh water, disease, and Native American attacks, Smith rose to leadership of the colony.

In this performance task, students will examine two accounts from John Smith that give conflicting information about a famous event – his encounter with the powerful Native American chief Powhatan and his eleven year old daughter, Pocahontas. (Many students are familiar with this event from the popular Walt Disney movie, *Pocahontas*, although the film is historically inaccurate.) Students will source the information in the documents, which provide clues about which account can be considered more reliable. With secondary students, teachers may also want to spend time talking about Smith's actual relationship with Pocahontas and her relative fame in America and Europe after Smith's original encounter with Powhatan.

Although many of the details of this encounter are uncertain, in part because of Smith's conflicting accounts, we do know that Smith and some fellow colonists were ambushed in December 1607. Smith was the only member of the party to survive. The Native Americans brought him before Powhatan, the powerful leader of a large confederacy of about 30 Algonquian-speaking Indian tribes that occupied the region between tidewater Virginia and southern Maryland, to decide his fate. During his four-week-long captivity, Powhatan questioned Smith extensively about the intentions of the colonists. He was also forced to participate in some sort of ceremony involving Pocahontas. Smith was always in fear for his life. Ultimately, Smith favorably impressed Powhatan. He was made a subordinate chief in the tribe and was released to return to Jamestown.

As the Jamestown colony dissolved into chaos, Smith's attempts to restore order through strict discipline helped to save the colony, but it caused many to dislike him. In 1608, Smith explored the Chesapeake Bay region, creating maps and records that were extremely valuable to future colonists. In 1609, he was accidentally burned and then went back to England. Smith would never return to Virginia, but he did conduct further voyages of exploration in the New England area. His strong personality offended many in England, however, and Smith was never permitted another leadership role in settling the New World. John Smith died at age 51 in 1631.

Source:

Historic Jamestown: Unearthing America's Birthplace. "Captain John Smith." Accessed November 13, 2013.. http://apva.org/rediscovery/page.php?page_id=25.

Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Powhatan." Accessed November 13, 2013. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/473423/Powhatan>

Procedure

Context Setting:

- Begin the task by asking students to share what they may already know about John Smith. *Who was John Smith, and what did he do? What did he look like?*
- Read RS#01: John Smith – A Short Biography aloud to the students. Compare their prior understandings to what they learned in the reading. *What did you learn about John Smith that you did not already know? What kind of a man was he?*

Document Analysis:

- Explain to students that they will be reading two primary source documents that have been adapted from their original form to make it easier for students to understand. Preview the documents, focusing on the difficult and archaic vocabulary terms.
- Divide the room into halves. Have half of the room read RS#02: Source A – *A True Relation*, and the other half read RS#03: Source B – *The General History*.
- After reading, ask the students to share their observations about the two different sources.
- Next, you may also have each student read the other source.
- Have a student read the title and author of each source aloud. Ask the class, “Is this the same event? If so, why do you think the accounts may be so different? Let’s do some further investigation to see if we can find out.”

Corroborating Evidence and Constructing Interpretations – Close Analysis:

- Direct the students to RS#04: Graphic Organizer – Which John Smith is Telling the Truth?
- Working in teams, have the students work through the documents and respond to the prompts. Remind the students to examine the sourcing information about each document very carefully.
- The teacher may want to do a read-aloud/think-aloud of the sourcing information at the bottom of each document. Teachers should help students understand the different original dates of each source.
- Before they begin, remind the students about John Smith’s original job. His job was to establish colonies in the New World for the Virginia Company.

Thoughtful Application:

- Individually, have students determine which source they believe to be more credible. They should be able to provide evidence to support their conclusions.
- Each student will write a short speech explaining “which” John Smith is telling the truth. In other words, which of John Smith’s accounts of his meeting with Powhatan is likely to be more accurate? Students should provide evidence from the sources to support their conclusions.
- Have students volunteer to read their speeches to the class. After hearing others share, ask the students to review their own choices. By a show of hands, determine how many students changed their opinions.
- Grade the speeches using RS#05: ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric – Sourcing, Critical Reading.
- Alternative methods for determining student understanding are to write an argumentative essay, conduct a Socratic seminar, or produce a political cartoon.

Thoughtful Application: Student Work Samples

Sample 1

Source A or B I say source A. Source A has the correct dates. In his biography it says he landed there in 1607. And the passage was written in 1608. It is closer to the real thing so everything is more true. The other passage was written in 1624. John Smith might have forgotten certain events and changed it up. So if you want to read something more true, A is your source.

Sample 2

SOURCE A
It's a source A because it was at 1608. He made a nice document to make people pay to live in his land. It's a primary source. The subtitle is called a true relation which probably means what actually happened. In source B it's just general history meaning what historians think.

Sample 3

John Smith:
True or Not?

Have you ever wondered about the true story of John Smith? Using 3 sources of information, I think I know which is true. Source A is true. Source A was written in 1608. Source B was written in 1624. The actual event took place in 1607.

It is not likely to lie about something, then 16 years later, tell the true story. In 16 years, you probably won't even remember the true story.

Also, maybe John Smith changed his story for money. He might want to write a book about it, and an interesting book would have heard about encounters. The more interesting story would sell more copies, therefore producing more money.

Sample 4

Hello. I believe that source B is the correct ^{Source} because John Smith wanted his new world to be popular and inviting. In 1608, he wrote something making Powhatan sound good because he needed people to come to the new world. He must have regretted not writing the truth, and decided to write the truth. Pocahontas saved his life. It's a true fact that she did. A true fact we believe. He wanted good for his new world, but he wanted to give the truth. He might of thought that if they knew Pocahontas then they would know that they are kind. John Smith wanted good for his business in the new world, but he wanted people to also know the truth of the tribes.

Resource Sheet #01

John Smith – A Short Biography

John Smith is best known for his explorations in the Chesapeake region, especially for his role as one of the leaders of the Jamestown Colony in Virginia. He was born in England in 1580. Smith left home at age 16 after his father's death and volunteered in France as a soldier. He continued as a soldier and also as a sailor for a merchant ship, eventually being promoted to Captain. He was later wounded in battle and captured by the Turks and sold into slavery.

According to Smith, a Turkish girl fell in love with him and sent him to her brother for military training. Smith then claimed to escape by murdering the brother and returning to England in the winter of 1604-05. Later, he began to work with the Virginia Company, which was planning to colonize Virginia for profit. Smith was a part of the famous expedition that landed in Jamestown in 1607.

Harsh conditions confronted the colonists, as they battled disease, food shortages, and Native Americans who raided their camps. Smith was named a leader and helped to defend the settlement from the Native Americans. In December 1607, Native Americans ambushed Smith and a group of colonists. According to Smith, the Native Americans killed everyone but him and then took him to see their chief, Powhatan. Historians disagree about what happened next, but Smith wrote that the chief was impressed with him and allowed him to live. He was questioned about the colony and took part in some sort of ceremony in which his life may have been threatened. He was released after several weeks in captivity.

Upon his return to Jamestown, Smith found the colony in turmoil, and he left to explore and map the Chesapeake Bay. Things got worse at Jamestown during his voyage, and he was eventually elected as their president in September 1608. He introduced a policy of strict rules, better defenses, and expanded farming. John Smith's leadership helped the colony survive. Smith went to England for treatment of an injury in 1609 and did not return to Jamestown. His independent nature made him unpopular with the Virginia Company, and its leaders refused to put Smith in another colonial leadership position. In 1614, he did lead a successful voyage to Massachusetts and Maine, naming the area "New England." Smith published several books, many of which promoted his importance in settling the New World, and he died in 1631.

Source: *Historic Jamestown: Unearthing America's Birthplace. "Captain John Smith."* Accessed November 13, 2013.. http://apva.org/rediscovery/page.php?page_id=25.

Resource Sheet #02

Document A – *A True Relation* by John Smith (Excerpt)

The next night I lodged [*stayed*] at a hunting town of Powhatams, and the next day arrived at Waranacomoco upon a river of Pamauncke, where the great king is resident [*lives*] . . . Arriving at Weramocomoco [? On or about 5 January 1608], their Emperor proudly lying upon a Bedstead a foot high, upon ten or twelves Mats , richly hung with many chains of great pearls about his neck , and covered with a great Covering of Rahaughcums. At head sat a woman, at his feet another; on each side sitting upon a mat uppon the ground, were ranged [*arranged*] his chief men on each side of the fire, ten in a rank [*row*], and behind them as many young women, each a great Chain of white Beads over their shoulders, their heads painted in red: and with such a grave [*serious*] and Magestic [*royal*] countenance [*facial expression*], as draw me into admiration to see such state in a naked Savage .

He kindly welcomed me with such good words , and great Platters of sundry Victuals [*food*], assuring me his friendship, and my liberty within four days....

. . . He asked me the cause of our coming....

. . . He desired me to . . . live with him upon his River, a Country called Capa Howasicke. He promised to give me Corn , Venison [*deer meat*], or what I wanted to feed us: Hatchets and Copper we should make him, and none should disturb us.

This request I promised to perform : and thus, having with all the kindness he could devise [*create*], sought to content [*satisfy*] me, he sent me home, with 4 men: one that usually carried my Gown and Knapsack after me, two other loaded with bread, and one to accompany me.

Resource: Smith, Captaine John. A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note as has Happened in Virginia Since the First Planting of that Colony, which is now resident in the South part thereof, till the last return from thence. London: 1608. Also modified from the resource adapted by the Stanford History Education Group's Reading Like a Historian curriculum.

Resource Sheet #03

Document B – *The General History* by John Smith (Excerpt)

How Powhatan entertained him.

How Pocahontas saved his life.

At last they brought him [Smith] to Meronocomoco, where was Powhatan their Emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim Courtiers [high-ranking men] stood wondering at him, as he had beene a monster. . . Before a fire upon a seat like a bedstead, he sat covered with a great robe, made of Rarowcun [raccoon] skinnes, and all the tayles [tails] hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench [woman] of 16 to 18 yeares, and along on each side the house, two rowes of men, and behind as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red. . .

. . . two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could laid hands on him [Smith], dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no entreaty [begging] could prevaile [succeed], got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperor was contented [satisfied] he should live to make him hatchets . . .

. . . Two days after, Powhatan having disguised himselfe in the most fearefullest manner he could, caused Capt. Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods...then Powhatan...came unto him and told him now they were friends, and presently he should go to James towne, to send him two great guns, and a grindstone, for which he would give him the Country of Capahowosick, and forever esteem him as his son *Nantaquoud*. So to James towne with 12 guides Powhatan sent him.

Source: Smith, Captaine John. *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*. London: I.D. and I.H., 1624. p. 48-49. Also modified from the resource adapted by the Stanford History Education Group's *Reading Like a Historian* curriculum.

Resource Sheet #04

Graphic Organizer – Which John Smith is Telling the Truth?

Part One: Source the Documents

	Document A: <i>A True Relation</i> by John Smith (Excerpt)	Document B: <i>The General History</i> by John Smith (Excerpt)
When was this account written?		
How many years after Smith met Powhatan in December 1607 was this source created?		
What was going on in Smith's life at the time the source was created?		
What do you think was Smith's purpose in creating this source?		
In one sentence, summarize the main idea of this source. What happened when Smith met Powhatan?		

Resource Sheet #04

Part Two: Critical Reading



Which John Smith is Telling the Truth



In what ways are these two descriptions about the same event different?

What are some words that the author uses that shows the event differently in the two descriptions?

Why might the same author offer such different descriptions about the same event?

Is there any evidence might provide clues as to which description would be considered more credible?

What motivations might the author have for changing his description?

ARCH Historical Thinking Skills Rubric – Elementary/Secondary

	Close-Reading Strategies	
Criteria	Sourcing	Critical Reading (Author's Craft)
4	- Identifies all authors and all original dates of primary and secondary sources. - Evaluates the reliability of sources based on the author's perspective and when and why they were written.	- Identifies the author's viewpoint and claims based on what is written and what the author leaves out. - Cites examples of how the author uses persuasive language and specific words and phrases to influence the reader.
3	- Identifies most authors and most original dates of primary and secondary sources. - Examines the reliability of sources based on the author's perspective and when and why they were written.	- Identifies the author's viewpoint and claims based on what is written. - Identifies at least one way the author attempts to influence the reader through persuasive language and specific words and phrases.
2	- Identifies some authors and some original dates of primary and secondary sources. - Attempts to evaluate the reliability of sources.	- Attempts to identify the author's viewpoint and claim. - Attempts to identify how the author tries to influence the reader.
1	- Identifies few authors and few original dates of primary and secondary sources. - Does not attempt to evaluate the reliability of sources.	Demonstrates little to no attempt to identify the author's viewpoint or claim.