Evaluating Primary and Secondary Sources

As historians constantly discover when looking at primary sources, different people have different accounts of what happened in the past. One question historians must constantly ask is "what makes one source more trustworthy than another?" A few things to remember:

1. Historians base their evidence on multiple primary and secondary documents and extensive research. Hollywood films have no standards when it comes to historical accuracy and tend to embellish, over exaggerate, or neglect historical elements purely for entertainment value
2. Human memory can be unreliable. Keep this in mind when students are researching autobiographies or recordings of someone recalling facts from a previous era
3. Audience shapes the stories we tell. For example, in 2016, a museum worker was using a video camera to record a 90 year old former steel worker who was involved in the 1959 steel strike in which he was arrested for disorderly conduct (at the time) and later escaped police custody. The steel worker might be hesitant to speak about all the events that happened to the museum worker, thus, not giving an accurate depiction to students and historians
4. History text books tend to overlook and/or neglect the experiences and contributions of indigenous peoples and people of color. These experiences are necessary to gain an understanding of the entire human condition
5. Posters created by the government, during times of war or national crisis, are often created for propaganda purposes
6. When looking for images for classroom use on websites such as Google images, images may be taken out of context and/or photoshopped from the original image, thus, giving an inaccurate view of history

Ask these questions when evaluating a primary or secondary source:

Author or Creator	Audience/Purpose
• Who created this source? • What was the person's role in the event? Was he/she a participant or an eyewitness? • When and where was the source created?	• Who is the intended audience? • Why was the source created? To inform? Persuade? Entertain? or Describe? • Does the purpose affect the reliability of the source?
Content/Reliability	**Point of View/Bias**
• What type of source is it? • What kind of information does the source contain? • Can the information be supported by other sources?	• What is the person's point of view or perspective? • Does the content seem objective or can or detect bias? • Is there evidence to support the person's claims?