

CLAIM TESTING – AUTHORITY

Purpose

In this activity, you'll become more familiar with the nuances (slight differences) of authority. This is a challenging but worthy claim tester because authority can either be earned or granted—and is deeply connected to our personal biases. The reasons we choose to believe people are varied, and it's not always because someone has authority on the topic at hand. Understanding how and why we decide what to believe is a critical skill not just in history, but in our everyday assessment of claims. You will dig into the specifics of authority and understand how to identify, assess, and use authority when evaluating and making claims.

Practices

Reading, sourcing

At this point, you've had multiple opportunities to practice your reading skills for a variety of media (articles, videos, and graphic biographies). However, in this activity, you will be pushed to think about what and how you read. As historians and critical thinkers, you should be curious about where you are getting your information, and you should be equipped with the skills to evaluate a source's claims. This lends itself to the historical thinking practice of sourcing—which is necessary in all subjects and in life. You need to develop your claim testing skills so that you can make, evaluate, defend, and refute claims as well as the claims of others.

Process

In the last activity on claim testing, you had the opportunity to discuss and explore the practice. In this series of activities, you will do a deep dive into claim testers so that you feel comfortable applying each when you read, write, do research, and speak.

Think about the following scenario:

Leading up to the November 6, 2018 midterm elections, Taylor Swift, a famous musician, took to social media to promote voter registration. After her post, Vote.org saw 155,940 unique visitors within 24 hours (up from the average daily number of 14,078). Further, over 2,100 new voters registered in Tennessee the day after her post, which nearly matches the typical monthly number of registrations (about 2,800). Her short post on social media had a real impact on the number of registered voters—and likely, actual voter turnout—in both Tennessee and the nation.

Now, take out the Claim Testing – Authority worksheet, and respond to the questions in Part 1. Be ready to discuss your answers with the class.

Authority comes in all shapes and sizes, and it often helps us decide not only what to believe—but whom to believe. Some authority is earned based on merit, such as licensure or education (doctors, teachers, estheticians, electricians, lawyers, and so on); some is given due to popularity. Our biases are deeply embedded in whom we believe. We may be biased based on our religious beliefs, where we grew up, or what our family believes. We can also be biased based on the popularity (or lack of popularity) of a claim or the person making the claim.

So, what do we do when two authorities disagree? There are long-standing debates among historians, scientists, and other scholars about what really happened in the past, and we'll encounter those disagreements frequently in this course, as we do in life all the time. Let's dig into a historical debate about early humans to see if we can start to figure out what to do when authorities disagree. Your teacher will collect your completed worksheets at the end of the activity and provide feedback to help you refine your claim testing skills.



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Part 1

Directions: Review the scenario and answer the following questions.

Leading up to the November 6, 2018 midterm elections, Taylor Swift, a famous musician, took to social media to promote voter registration. After her post, Vote.org saw 155,940 unique visitors within 24 hours (up from the average daily number of 14,078). Further, over 2,100 new voters registered in Tennessee the day after her post, which nearly matches the typical monthly number of registrations (about 2,800). Her short post on social media had a real impact on the number of registered voters—and likely, actual voter turnout—in both Tennessee and the nation

1. Based on this scenario and what you know about Taylor Swift, what does she know about voting and politics? Is she an expert on the topic?

2. There are different types of authority. Some authority is earned because a person has studied that topic and been deemed an expert in the field—this includes teachers, lawyers, doctors, and a lot of other people. Some authority is given, or ascribed, often through popularity. What type of authority does Taylor Swift have related to voting and elections?

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3. Why do you think her post on social media caused the reaction and increase in voter registration?

4. What do you know about the reliability of vote.org? Does it seem like a credible source? How could you find out?

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Part 2

Directions: Read about each of the scholars below and their theories, and then answer the questions.

| Chris Stringer | Milford Wolpoff |
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| <p style="text-align: center;">Credentials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research leader in human origins at the National History Museum • PhD in anatomical science from Bristol University • Fellow of the Royal Society • Honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London • Winner of the Frink Medal in 2008 (for significant contribution to the field of zoology) • Winner of the Rivers Memorial Medal from the Royal Anthropological Institute (for significant contribution to the field of anthropology) • Publications: 250+ papers, 13 books <p style="text-align: center;">Theory</p> <p>Stringer is one of the leading researchers who promotes the “Out of Africa” or recent African origin hypothesis, which states that humans originated in Africa about 100,000 years ago and replaced less-advanced humans (the Neanderthals). He claims that already evolved humans first migrated throughout Africa, and then beyond Africa within the last 50,000 to 100,000 years. The “Out of Africa” theory claims that any former human-like beings were completely replaced by the evolved <i>Homo sapiens</i> from Africa.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Credentials</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan • PhD in physical anthropology and minors in zoology and archaeology from the University of Illinois • Recipient of more than 50 grants from the National Science Foundation and the National Academy of Sciences • Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science • Fellow of the American Anthropological Association • Darwin Lifetime Achievement Award – 2011 • Publications: 200+ papers, 8 books <p style="text-align: center;">Theory</p> <p>Wolpoff is a key proponent of the multiregional evolution hypothesis, which claims that after originating in Africa, humans evolved in various regions around the globe. The theory states that when different traits were advantageous—no matter where they originated—they would spread globally. Contrary to the “Out of Africa” theory, this hypothesis claims that many different species of humans evolved throughout the world and interbred.</p> |

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1. Is one of these people more credible in their field than the other? Why or why not?

2. Which qualifications are most important based on the proposed theories of each person?

3. Why is it hard to choose between the theories highlighted above?

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4. What more would you need to know to determine whom to believe?

5. Which other claim testers would be helpful to use in determining what to believe?

6. How can two authorities on this topic have such different views of the same event? In other words, what does it mean to have a competing narrative in history class?

7. Based on the information provided, write a claim about which authority you choose to believe and why.