

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 amount 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 frequently in this course, as we do in life all the time. So, let's dig into a debate that was relevant to many early modern revolutions: When and where did the Enlightenment begin?



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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 amount 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?

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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 about the origin and spread of Enlightenment ideas, and then answer the questions.

Robert Darnton (b. 1939)	Sebastian Conrad (b. 1966)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • D.Phil. (PhD) from Oxford University in 1964 • Awarded numerous prizes such as the MacArthur Prize Fellowship, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and the National Humanities Medal • Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and member of a number of historical and philosophical societies such as the American Philosophical Society and the British Academy • Visiting fellow, professor, and lecturer at a number of universities including colleges at Oxford University, the Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin, and Princeton • Member of various editorial and advisory committees for scholarly journals and publications • Professor at Princeton University and the Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and Director of the University Library, Harvard University • Author of numerous books, including <i>The Business of Enlightenment</i> and <i>George Washington's False Teeth</i>, as well as a large number of articles published in scholarly journals, including <i>The Journal of Modern History</i> and <i>Eighteenth-Century Studies</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PhD in 1999 from the Free University of Berlin, Germany. Awarded the Ernst Reuter Dissertation Award (for best dissertation at the university) • Elected member of the Academia Europaea and Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities • Visiting fellow at a number of universities such as the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris • Chair of Modern History at the Free University of Berlin, and, previous to this position, full professor of Modern History at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy • Member of various editorial and advisory committees for scholarly journals and publications • Author of the book, <i>What Is Global History?</i>, as well as a number of articles published in journals such as <i>The American Historical Review</i> and <i>The Journal of Contemporary History</i>
<p style="text-align: center;">Theory</p> <p>Darnton has studied the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment for decades and argues that it has a distinct beginning, middle, end, and location in terms of its origins. He argues that the Enlightenment began in eighteenth-century Paris and was mainly an elite, intellectual movement. He does state that it spread from many places around the world but almost all of these origins are located in Europe, apart from Philadelphia (US). He admits that the Parisian movement had its beginnings in English philosophy and continued to advance through other European thinkers. But he believes that the movement truly comes together in Paris among these eighteenth-century intellectual elites such as Voltaire. Eventually, these ideas spread to all corners of the world.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Theory</p> <p>Conrad does not deny that the Enlightenment came together in Europe. Most scholars would agree with this idea. But he does argue that it was a movement that had many influences from all over the world. This was not one unified movement but a collection of ideas that took on different shapes and forms in a variety of regions. Many of these “enlightened” thoughts already existed in regions such as Asia and the Islamic world. In fact, the Enlightenment itself took on ideas from many of these diverse places, in particular as increased contacts were being made with Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific Islands. Ideas were shared and adopted and as these ideas moved from place to place, “enlightened” notions of humanity took different forms.</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.