

Becoming a Researcher

Reading Objects Teaching Pack 2: Diaries

Guidance

The purpose of this pack is to offer activities and resources to aid a teaching workshop to undergraduate or postgraduate researchers new to Special Collections. Activities begin with a detailed reading of specific diaries held in Special Collections and are designed to engage students in the content, context, handwriting and materiality of items. The aim of the session is to provide students with the questions and tools to rigorously read other diaries they may encounter during their research, and to critically distinguish these from other types of material.

In line with the Research Skill Development Framework used by the University of Leeds, the aim for this teaching session is to encourage an increased level of student confidence and autonomy when approaching primary materials, and to facilitate independent research.

The pack includes a lesson plan, suggestions for further reading and a handout for students.

Session overview

Students work in small groups, each group focusing on one diary as a case study. Progressing through 3 short activities with tailored questions, students gain experience of the skills needed to read letters rigorously.

Learning objectives:

At the end of the teaching session students should be able to:

- Critically examine diaries.
- Analyse diaries alongside other forms of discourse and compare and contrast them.
- Identify the questions that need to be asked of diaries as historical documents.
- Consider the physical properties of diaries and their importance.
- Understand the importance of provenance to primary materials.



Planning a Session: Teaching sessions using Special Collections material are generally held in the Brotherton Room. This can comfortably accommodate up to 20 students looking at material. Information on booking the Brotherton Room is available on the [Library Website](#).

Special Collections holds a wide variety of diaries. These can be found through Special Collections catalogue at: <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore>

Do a keyword search using 'diary' as your search term, then refine your search results by a number of filters including, collection, date and record type using the menu on the left hand side.

Selecting material: A list of diaries which have been successfully used in similar activities alongside contextual information is also available.

Lesson Plan:

Introduction	Talking to group	5 minutes
Activity 1: Content and Context	Small Group Discussion	10 minutes
Activity 2: Structure and Materials	Small Group Discussion	10 minutes
Activity 3: Comparing diary entries	Large Group Discussion	10 minutes
Activity 3: Reading diaries as historical documents	Small Group Discussion	10 minutes
Round up	Whole Group Discussion	5 minutes

Suggested reading in advance of visit:

Students can read [Special Collections Research Skills resources](#) in advance of their visit to Special Collections.

Introductions:

Powerpoint introductions to Special Collections for use in teaching sessions are available [here](#).



Activities

ACTIVITY 1: Content and Context

Students examine pre-selected diary entries and discuss the following questions:

1. What can you learn about the diarist from their diary entries? What are they describing (events / emotions / individuals?) and what kind of language are they using to describe it?
Can you guess anything about the writer's age or status?
2. What kind of a diary is this? Is it professional or private? Is it designed to be read? How might these questions affect the way that you read the diary?
3. How frequent are the diary entries? Are they all of a similar length? Does it matter whether diary entries are made regularly or if they are sporadic?

ACTIVITY 2: Structure and materials

Students examine the diary as a volume, and make a note of any interesting features of its structure and materials, e.g. condition of the volume, quality of paper, material pasted in, writing materials used or different purposes of the diary. Discuss the following questions:

1. Does the diary have material (e.g. newspaper cuttings) pasted in?
 - a. How does the incorporation of mixed media into the diary affect your reading of it?
 - b. Can you see the influence of the media in her diary entries?
2. What kind of a diary is it? Is it large or small? Is it portable? Are days sectioned off or is it blank? How would you describe the colour, texture, or quality of the paper?
 - a. Does this tell us anything about the intended use of the diary?
 - b. Can you guess anything about the writer from the type of diary they are using?
3. What can we understand about how the diary has been used over time?
 - a. Can we learn from this anything about the frequency of its use?
 - b. Have any additions been added to entries at a later date?
 - c. Has the diary been damaged or repaired?



ACTIVITY 3: Comparing diary entries

Different groups compare and contrast the separate diary entries they have been examining:

1. These entries are clearly very different in some ways, and it is easy to make generalised assumptions based on them. What kind of assumptions should we resist and what kind of questions do we need to ask to provide a rigorous analysis of these entries?
2. Can you find any similarities between the diaries?
 - a. How do they approach the same events?
 - b. Do the separate volumes have any other similarities?

ACTIVITY 2: Reading diaries as historical documents

Students examine other accounts of events depicted in the diary, ideally, both contemporary (e.g. newspaper articles) and modern (e.g. a secondary source).

1. How do these accounts differ from the diaries entries, and what can we learn events from each? Think about the differences in detail, but also the difference in tone of the accounts.
2. How does the format of the diary entry, the contemporary the secondary source affect your engagement with their subject? Do some of the formats seem more subjective than others? Are you more likely to trust an account published in a newspaper than one handwritten in a diary, or vice versa?
3. How can we read diaries alongside other historical documents to build up a picture of historical events? What are the advantages of using contemporary diaries? What are their limitations?



Further Reading

Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of texts from nineteenth- and twentieth- century history* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009)

Liz Stanley, 'Women have servants and men never eat: issues in reading gender, using the case study of mass-observation's 1937 day-diaries', *Women's History Review*, 4.1 (1995), 85-102.

External Links

- [The Great Diary Project](#) which offers some links to diary holdings across the country.



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Handout: Key Questions to ask

Content

- Is there a particular purpose for the diary, - is it purely personal, or is it the record of a public person designed to collect information for a future memoir, for example? Do you think that when the diary was written it was intended to be read by others?
- What does the diary record? Is it purely an engagement diary or does it include commentary on the events of the day? What is the tone of the diary – is it formal or informal?
- Is the diary kept regularly or sporadically? Is there a focus on important events or are routine, daily occurrences also mentioned?
- Are there gaps in the text? Are there points or events which you think should be named but aren't? Why do you think this is?

Context

- Who wrote the diary and when?
- Where do the events of the diary take place?
- Who donated the diary to the archive? Is it part of a wider collection?

Structure and Materials

- How would you describe the colour, texture, or quality of the paper? Does this tell us anything about its function?
- Has anything been pasted in to the diary, e.g. photographs, newspaper cuttings, event tickets or notices.
- What kind of a diary is it? Is it large or small? Is it portable? Are days sectioned off or is it blank?
- Has the diary been damaged or repaired? Can we learn from this anything about the frequency of its use? Have any additions been added to entries at a later date?



Handwriting

- Is the diary written in a particular script? For older diaries, does this tell us anything about the profession or education of the writer?
- Was the diary hurriedly written down? Was it meant for personal or public use?

