

Discover

Expert Learners

A MODEL FOR TEACHING “EXPERT ANNOTATIONS’ ON PRIMARY
SOURCE HISTORIAL DOCUMENTS

Guided Exploration

[Download Activity](#)

INTRODUCTION TO EXPERT ANNOTATIONS

DIRECTIONS - FOR INSTRUCTORS

Point out the title on the annotated "Liberty Tree" PDF. Students will see a **tree drawn** above the word "Tree." Clearly, that is a literal depiction.

ASK YOUR STUDENTS

Turn students' attention to the highlighted word in the title: "**Liberty**." Why did the Expert Annotator highlight that word?

Draw your pointer from the highlighted word to the arrow, which leads to a yellow note. Read aloud the first sentence of the note: "Liberty = the right or agency to act, believe, and express oneself without external (or internal?) constraints, punishment, or situations of oppression."

REALIZATION FOR STUDENTS

Oh, the Expert Annotator was defining the word, "Liberty."

ASK YOUR STUDENTS

Why would the Expert Reader need to define the word before reading the document?

EXPLAIN TO YOUR STUDENTS

A word in the title often suggests it will be a primary topic of the text. **The Expert Annotator wanted to be sure they would understand what the purpose, message, and argument of the text is so they needed to define the word first even though they already knew what it meant to them, or in everyday use.** While they were defining it, they realized they actually had a question about the definition itself and wanted to ask, *Is liberty something that must be given to other people, or is it something that happens on the inside?*

READ ALOUD TO YOUR STUDENTS

Read the **second sentence** on the yellow annotation tab aloud, which is an Expert Annotator's question: "**Must be balanced with the right and obligation to respect and uphold the liberty of others?!**"

EXPLAIN TO YOUR STUDENTS

Because the Expert Annotator defined the word "liberty" before starting to read the text, they went into the activity already having developed this big question to explore while reading.

"Liberty" = right & agency to act, believe, and express oneself w/out external (or internal?) constraints, punishment, or situations of oppression. Must be balanced w/ the right & obligation to respect & uphold the liberty of others?!

Liberty Tree



what happens on trees?
Fruit hangs, leaves dry, they fall, trunks and roots hold, grow, mold, stay firm; they need sunlight; trees in forest communicate like a network. What "hangs" on trees?

Like Apollo riding a golden chariot across the sky to bring the sun
In a chariot of light from the regions of day,
The Goddess of Liberty came;

Ten thousand celestials directed the way
And hither conducted the dame;
A fair budding branch from the gardens above,
Where millions with millions agree,
She brought in her hand as a pledge of her love,
And the plant she named Liberty Tree.

This reminds me of Sky Woman, an Indigenous figure in creation story.
The celestial exotic struck deep in the ground,
Like a native it flourished and bore;
The fame of its fruit drew the nations around.

To seek out this peaceable shore,
Unmindful of names or distinction they came,
For freemen like brothers agree;
With one spirit endued, they one friendship pursued,
And their temple was Liberty Tree.

American ideals of equality and liberty
Beneath this fair tree, like the patriarchs of old,
Their bread in contentment they ate,
Unvexed with the troubles of silver and gold,
The cares of the grand and the great.
With timber and tar they Old England supplied,
And supported her power on the sea;
Her battles they fought, without getting a groat,
For the honor of Liberty Tree.

But hear, O ye swains, 'tis a tale most profane,
How all the tyrannical powers,
Kings, Commons, and Lords, are uniting again
To cut down this guardian of ours,
From the east to the west blow the trumpet to arms
Through the land let the sound of it flee,
Let the far and the near, all unite with a cheer,
In defence of our Liberty Tree.

Thomas Paine

Like Statue of Liberty, but this was written 110 years before the statue came to us shores

In this time period (late 18th century), 1776, "Lady Columbia" personified this idea. She was a patriotic symbol for the American colonies - pioneered by Phillis Wheatley - an African American poet, in an ode/letter to George Washington. Revolution will be seen ahead...?

I think this is an allusion to the "manna" / "bread from Heaven" the Israelites are said to have eaten after the exodus from enslavement while wandering in the desert.

"unvexed" = calm, serene, undisturbed

"regions" = location, so how can day (time) be a place, unless means the borders as drawn at that time.

"AGREE" about WHAT? and who are the "millions of millions?"

"Sky Woman" is a revered figure in creation story of Haudenosaunee Indigenous ppl. Story about and generous read about in a book - and I'm remembering the song with imagery.

Shipping off hard-earned, grown or colonies back to the British Empire = "Taxation without representation" [They had to support the crown's might, felt used and abused in return]

"This guardian of ours" = Liberty itself?

in 1776

Download Annotations

Literary Devices Handout

Tips for the Expert Learner Role

Introduction to Expert Readers

WHAT IS CLOSE READING?

Close reading means reading a text carefully and purposefully, paying attention to details, language, evidence, and the author's message. Sometimes, people read a text multiple times, with a different focus each time.

Close reading also means asking questions and making personal connections between what you're reading and what you already know. It requires doing extra digging—looking up the definition of an unfamiliar word, researching the historical period when the document was written, or looking into the background of the author.

EXAMPLE: WHY NO AUTHOR?

If there is no author listed on a primary source, that can lead to important close reading questions:

- Why is there no author?
- Was it written by one person or multiple?
- Why did they not include their name? (e.g., gender bias, political fear)

Historians often ask questions about credibility, purpose, informativity, impact, novelty, and patterns.

CLOSE-READING EXAMPLE

Look at the arrow next to "trees." The Expert Annotator asks, "What happens on trees?"

Ask: Why did the Expert Annotator ask that question? Why would exploring it help them understand the text better?

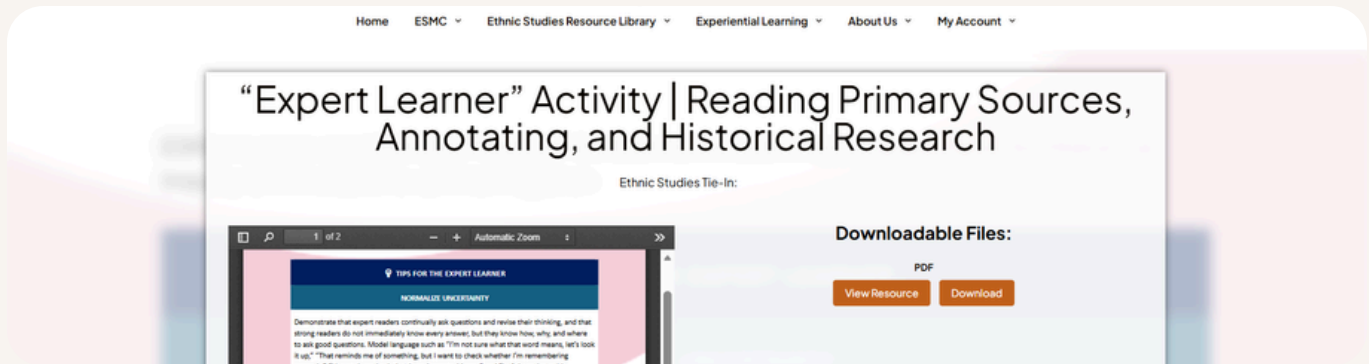
The Expert Annotator finishes the note by asking "What 'hangs' on trees?" Encourage students to keep that question in mind as you close-read the Expert Annotator's notes and the ballad, "Liberty Tree," as a class.

THE EXPERT LEARNER ROLE

An Expert Learner approaches a text the way a historian or scholar would—with curiosity, skepticism, and a willingness to dig deeper. Before reading, they define key terms. While reading, they ask questions, make connections, and note patterns. After reading, they reflect on what they learned and what questions remain.

In this activity, students and teachers practice the Expert Learner role by following the annotations of an Expert Reader and discussing why each annotation was made.

Introduction to Expert Learners



Recommendations

GUIDANCE FOR INSTRUCTORS

Sit down with your students. Literally join them at the table as a peer in this activity. Read together, think together, and ask questions with the text, the annotator, and each other. Read aloud popcorn style. Students will learn historical context, new vocabulary, and critical inquiry and reading skills, but the goal is for students not merely to understand the meanings or notice literary devices. It is for students to explore the use, form, and type of annotating itself and become confident *doing* annotations independently.

Recommendations

ROLE ASSIGNMENTS

At first, the teacher will be the **Expert Learner**. As the Expert Learner, pause the group strategically, noting your own reactions, ideas or questions. Stay attuned to the student behaviors and ask students frequently if they wish to contribute thoughts, connections, frustrations, excitement, ideas, or questions – whether contextual, clarification, or purely out of curiosity. Identify moments where students might have found answers to the student questions on a handout, and guide students towards completing both fact-based and synthesis questions throughout the activity.

CLOSE-READING EXAMPLE

- **Group 1:** Assign half the class to one group. These students will read the original text and pause when the annotator has made a note on that text. Any student assigned to Group 1 can jump in to read the original text.
- **Group 2:** The other half of students will be assigned to read the annotator's comments. Any student assigned to group 2 can jump in to read an annotator's comment.

NOTE ON LIMITATIONS

The Expert Annotations are one example of how an experienced reader engages with a complex historical text; they are not unfalsifiable data sources. Use them to make expert thinking visible: asking questions, identifying uncertainty, making evidence-based connections, and revising interpretations as new information emerges. The goal is to apprentice students into the habits of historical inquiry, so they gradually become independent close readers themselves. Students will learn that historians build understanding by gathering evidence rather than relying on immediate certainty.

EXTERNALIZING EXPERT LEARNING

Podcast Hosts!

Moving from externalized onto the page to externalized through conversation – In conversation pairs, students simulate a podcast environment! While interviewing each other, students record their conversation. They may create a title for the show, and they are welcome to prepare in advance if doing so best suits student comfort-levels and accessibility needs.

PROMPTS

- Points my classmates and I made that the Expert Annotator...
 - Did address
 - Did not address
- Five new things I learned or thought from engaging with the Expert Annotator's notes
- One thing that feels clearer or more certain to me
- One thing I'm still struggling with
- Two questions I have
- "This line was interesting to me because...What did you think about it? Why?"
- "I don't like that is says ... what do you think?"
- "I loved this word because it conveys... but I'm not sure because it might...what do you think?"
- "I remember you once said...so reading this, I wonder how you feel about..."