Historical Bias Lesson

 A quick example of how you can help kids understand bias while looking at evidence and to encourage high levels of document analysis.

**1. Start by** creating four documents containing Abraham Lincoln quotes. Each document contains one quote. Label them Document A, Document B, Document C, and Document D.

Document A contains the following quote:

*Nothing in the Constitution or laws of any State can destroy a right distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution of the United States. The right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution of the United States. Therefore, nothing in the Constitution or laws of any State can destroy the right of property in a slave.*

*October 7, 1858*

Document B contains the following quote:

*I will say that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not, not ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races from living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they can not so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.*

*September 18, 1858*

Document C contains the following quote:

*Has anything ever threatened the existence of this Union save and except this very institution of slavery? What is it that we hold most dear amongst us? Our own liberty and prosperity. What has ever threatened our liberty and prosperity, save and except this institution of slavery? If this is true, how do you propose to improve the condition of things by enlarging slavery—by spreading it out and making it bigger? You may have a cancer upon your person, and not be able to cut it out, lest you bleed to death; but surely it is no way to cure it, to engraft it and spread it over your whole body.*

*October 15, 1858*

Document D contains the following quote:

*The signers of the Declaration of Independence meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.*

*June 26, 1857*

**2. Divide your class** into four groups – A, B, C, and D. Each group gets their respective document. Then provide the guiding question:

*Was the person who said this a racist?*

You might also ask a simpler question:

*Was the person who said this for or against slavery?*

Have each of the four groups work in small groups – helping them as needed to read their document. Don’t tell them that Lincoln was the speaker. Don’t tell them that they have different documents.

**3. Have students answer** the question by voting with their feet. Those who think the answer is yes, go to the left of the room. No to the right. There should be surprise on the faces of at least some of your kids.

**4. Have students explain** their answer. Lead a discussion about how people might view the speaker differently.

**5. Reveal** that the person was Abraham Lincoln. Then tell them that they have different sets of documents:

*What if I told you that you disagreed because you weren’t given the same facts?*

As Kevin said,

*The light bulbs went off in their heads and they all quickly started looking around to see what other students had been reading. It was great!*

**6. Talk about** how bias can manifest itself in lots of ways such as which facts to include in a collection, context, author, place, date, audience. Does it make a difference where Lincoln said what he said? When he said it? Who he said it to? What medium?

This can lead to a great conversation about sourcing evidence and the techniques used to tease out the sorts of information historians need.

**7. Close by showing** two different YouTube videos. Kevin used the original trailer of the movie Finding Nemo and [an edited version](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwyOc-weR3E). I like Home Alone. Here’s the [original](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CK2Btk6Ybm0) and [an edited version](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kRflVovKyE). There are lots of these floating around, [some darker then others](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUuShby0Vhg). (If you have time, there are sure to be other movies with similar edited versions.) But I like this closing activity because it cements the idea that bias is everywhere and that we need to know how to ask better questions.