Step Two
Ask each group to summarize its assigned document for the class and to report its answers to the questions. Have all of the students follow along by writing down the other groups’ answers on the organizer. You might also reproduce the organizer on the board or on an overhead for the whole class to see.

Again, question marks will suffice for unanswerable questions.

Step Three
As a class, address the question at the end of each column: What seems to be the best answer? Try to reach a consensus.

When there are discrepancies between the groups’ answers in the columns, ask students to consider factors that would affect the reliability of sources—distance from the event, reliance on memory, reliance on hearsay, etc.

An example of a discrepancy: Orville Wright’s telegram says that the longest flight lasted fifty-seven seconds, but he says in his diary that it lasted fifty-nine seconds. Bishop Wright says fifty-seven seconds in his letter. Should the bishop’s statement be taken as good supporting evidence?

A study of the documents should reveal that the bishop relied on the information in the telegram. At some point in the relays of the message, Orville’s report of fifty-nine seconds—the correct time—was misstated or mistyped. Students might have noticed a detail that calls the accuracy of the telegram into question: Orville became “Orevelle.”

There will be times when no amount of study will reveal conclusive answers. Students will have to decide if, as historians, they should reach an answer based on inference or if they should let the question go as unanswerable.

Step Four
Hand out copies of the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot article, which Bishop Wright calls “friendly, though incorrect.”

Ask students to read the story and mark anything that differs from the conclusions on the graphic organizer.

As a class, make a list of the differences that the students found. What accounts for the differences? Does it seem that the writer of the article was on the scene at Kitty Hawk?

The students will probably agree that the newspaper story is almost entirely inaccurate, but is it entirely without value?

Says Smithsonian archivist Pam Henson: “The article tells us how newsworthy this event was. The inventors are compared to Archimedes [the alchemist]. So although we have to question the facts, it is useful to see how such an event was received.”

Assessment
To assess the students’ understanding of the use of primary source documents in this lesson, you might ask each student to

• Select the document that he or she thinks is the most reliable account of the events
• List the advantages and disadvantages of using primary source documents

Extension or Enrichment
Assign an essay in which students use the documents as the basis for a well-rounded description of the events of December 17, 1903. They should attempt to answer the basic journalistic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why?

They may find that all of the answers lead to a why question. The flights were made at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, but why Kitty Hawk? The flights were made by the Wright brothers, but behind this fact is the ultimate question of the story: Why the Wright brothers? Why did these two bicycle builders succeed in solving a problem that had been on the human mind for centuries?

Students will have to look beyond the documents for answers. If they concluded from the lesson that firsthand accounts are valuable research sources, direct them to our Web site, www.SmithsonianEducation.org. It includes a repository of excerpts from the Wrights’ letters, diaries, and magazine articles. The passages are arranged according to subject. For more of the Wrights’ accounts of December 17, click on “The Wrights Write” and then “First Flight.”