

Transcribing Telegrams

Snapshot: In this activity, students will learn about how archivists do their work and practice transcribing Civil War telegrams with an online tool. This activity can be completed in one class period (about 50 minutes).

Activity overview for teachers

Begin the activity by getting a sense of what students may already know about archivists and what more they need to know. This can be done by asking students to think about how we know about history and how we keep records and information from the past. The goal of this opening discussion is just to get students thinking about how archivists help us to know history by preserving and accessing things from the past.

Next, have students watch a video and read an article produced by the Society of American Archivists about what archivists do and why they are important. The video and article are online here - <http://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives>

Once they have learned about the role of archivists, introduce the Decoding the Civil War project to students. The project is focused on digitizing and transcribing Civil War era telegram messages that were recorded by Colonel Thomas T. Eckert, the head of the Union military telegraph office in the Civil War. Col. Eckert recorded the text of 15,971 telegram messages during the war. You can learn more about this collection at <http://hdl.huntington.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p16003coll11>

The messages were recorded by Eckert in ledger books on grids that could be used to send the messages using a secret code. You can learn more about this process in our Explainers (The Telegraph in the Civil War and Cipher in the Civil War). Archivists at the Huntington Library, home of the Eckert collection, digitized all 15,971 messages and partnered with Zooniverse to create an online tool for transcribing the telegram messages.

Direct students to visit the Decoding the Civil War website at <http://decodingthecivilwar.org>. Explain to students that this website was created to help archivists who are working to preserve telegrams from the Civil War. The website gives everyday people an opportunity to practice transcribing telegrams. Each student should open up a telegram from the website on their computer and transcribe as much of the telegram as they can within the time allotted. After transcribing, students should provide a short summary of the telegram they transcribed and respond to the following questions:

- What was the easiest part of transcribing the telegram?
- What was the hardest part of transcribing a telegram?

Tell students to imagine they are writers for an advice column and someone has written to you asking for advice about becoming an archivist. Ask students to write a letter saying what it is like to work as an archivist based on the video, article, and the transcription activity.

Directions for students

Step 1 - The role of an archivist: What do you know about archives and the archivists who work there? After you have recorded your answer, watch a video and read an article produced by the Society of American Archivists about what archivists do and why they are important. The video and article are online here - <http://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives>

Step 2 - Practice transcribing: Visit the transcription site and open up a telegram on your computer. Transcribe as much of the telegram as you can within 5 minutes.

<http://decodingthecivilwar.org>

Step 3 - Reflect: Briefly summarize the telegram you transcribed and respond to the following questions:

- What was the easiest part of transcribing the telegram?
- What was the hardest part of transcribing a telegram?

Step 4 - Extension: Imagine you are a writer for an advice column and someone has written to you saying that they are thinking of becoming an archivist and they want your advice. Write a letter saying what it is like to work as an archivist based on the video, article, and the transcription activity.