

## National Endowment for the Humanities Primary Source Documents Homework

**Directions:** Read the following Primary Source Documents, making notes about key ideas along the left hand side, and then fill out the charts that follow. You may either type up your responses or write them out.

Excerpt from Columbus's letter to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella (1493):

*I have determined to write you this letter to inform you of everything that has been done and discovered in this voyage of mine.*

*On the thirty-third day after leaving Cadiz I came into the Indian Sea, where I discovered many islands inhabited by numerous people. I took possession of all of them for our most fortunate King by making public proclamation and unfurling his standard, no one making any resistance. The island called Juana, as well as the others in its neighborhood, is exceedingly fertile. It has numerous harbors on all sides, very safe and wide, above comparison with any I have ever seen.*

*Through it flow many very broad and health-giving rivers; and there are in it numerous very lofty mountains. All these island are very beautiful, and of quite different shapes; easy to be traversed, and full of the greatest variety of trees reaching to the stars. . . .*

*In the island, which I have said before was called Hispana, there are very lofty and beautiful mountains, great farms, groves and fields, most fertile both for cultivation and for pasturage, and well adapted for constructing buildings. The convenience of the harbors in this island, and the excellence of the rivers, in volume and salubrity, surpass human belief, unless one should see them. In it the trees, pasture-lands and fruits differ much from those of Juana. Besides, this Hispana abounds in various kinds of species, gold and metals. The inhabitants . . . are all, as I said before, unprovided with any sort of iron, and they are destitute of arms, which are entirely unknown to them, and for which they are not adapted; not on account of any bodily deformity, for they are well made, but because they are timid and full of terror. . . . But when they see that they are safe, and all fear is banished, they are very guileless and honest, and very liberal of all they have. No one refuses the asker anything that he possesses; on the contrary they themselves invite us to ask for it. They manifest the greatest affection towards all of us, exchanging valuable things for trifles, content with the very least thing or nothing at all. . . . I gave them many beautiful and pleasing things, which I had brought with me, for no return whatever, in order to win their affection, and that they might become Christians and inclined to love our King and Queen and Princes and all the people of Spain; and that they might be eager to search for and gather and give to us what they abound in and we greatly need.*

Woodcut of Italian origin and dating from about 1500 is believed to be the first European depiction of Native Americans in the New World.



## Interpreting a Primary Source Document Questions: Letter from Columbus

<p>Look at the physical nature of your source. This is particularly important and powerful if you are dealing with an original source (i.e., an actual old letter, rather than a transcribed and published version of the same letter). What can you learn from the form of the source? (Was it written on fancy paper in elegant handwriting, or on scrap-paper, scribbled in pencil?) What does this tell you?</p>	
<p>Think about the purpose of the source. What was the author's message or argument? What was he/she trying to get across? Is the message explicit, or are there implicit messages as well?</p>	
<p>How does the author try to get the message across? What methods does he/she use?</p>	
<p>What do you know about the author? Race, sex, class, occupation, religion, age, region, political beliefs? Does any of this matter? How?</p>	
<p>Who constituted the intended audience? Was this source meant for one person's eyes, or for the public? How does that affect the source?</p>	
<p>What can a careful reading of the text (even if it is an object) tell you? How does the language work? What are the important metaphors or symbols? What can the author's choice of words tell you? What about the silences--what does the author choose NOT to talk about?</p>	

## Interpreting a Primary Source Document Questions: Woodcut Drawing

<p>Look at the physical nature of your source. This is particularly important and powerful if you are dealing with an original source (i.e., an actual old letter, rather than a transcribed and published version of the same letter). What can you learn from the form of the source? (Was it written on fancy paper in elegant handwriting, or on scrap-paper, scribbled in pencil?) What does this tell you?</p>	
<p>Think about the purpose of the source. What was the author's message or argument? What was he/she trying to get across? Is the message explicit, or are there implicit messages as well?</p>	
<p>How does the author try to get the message across? What methods does he/she use?</p>	
<p>What do you know about the author? Race, sex, class, occupation, religion, age, region, political beliefs? Does any of this matter? How?</p>	
<p>Who constituted the intended audience? Was this source meant for one person's eyes, or for the public? How does that affect the source?</p>	
<p>What can a careful reading of the text (even if it is an object) tell you? How does the language work? What are the important metaphors or symbols? What can the author's choice of words tell you? What about the silences--what does the author choose NOT to talk about?</p>	