

Writing Your First Primary Source Project: Lessons from TRIUMPHS Authorship Workshops

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The TRIUMPHS (TRansforming Instruction: Understanding Mathematics via Primary Historical Sources) Society encourages writing PSPs (Primary Source Projects) to develop classroom resources based on primary historical sources. The Society hosted two members-only authorship workshops in Fall 2025 focused on key stages of the PSP development process: finding and selecting sources, and designing effective student tasks. These sessions brought together experienced PSP authors and prospective contributors to share strategies, challenges, and practical insights drawn from real projects and classroom use. This editorial is intended to share resources from those workshops, including common frameworks, illustrative examples, and a developing template for writing PSPs. Our hope is that these reflections both demystify the PSP-writing process and inspire you to begin (or continue) writing a PSP of your own, equipped with concrete tools, flexible strategies, and confidence that this work can start small and grow through iteration, use, and community feedback. Prospective PSP authors may also find useful the TRIUMPHS Society’s [Resources for Creating Historical Projects](#) webpage, which includes links to helpful articles, online archives, primary sources and English translations, and secondary sources relevant to PSP authorship. The site also houses [Resources for Using Historical Projects](#), including TRIUMPHS’ database of more than one hundred classroom-ready PSPs. In addition, the editors of *Annals* have created a [PSP template](#) that authors are encouraged to use as they develop their projects.

Session 1: Sourcing Good Primary Sources

Facilitated by Dominic Klyve, October 15, 2025.

The first workshop focused on one of the most challenging aspects of PSP authorship: locating useful primary sources and assessing their reliability. Facilitators described two broad strategies for finding sources: (1) starting with strong secondary sources that point to appropriate primary materials and help connect them to modern teaching goals, and (2) beginning with a teaching topic and “mining the literature” to identify a suitable primary source. Discussion of Adam Parker’s article, “Pitfalls and Potential Solutions to Your Primary Source Problems” highlighted common issues such as misquotation, misattribution, and oversimplification in secondary sources [[Parker \(2023\)](#)]. The discussion focused on a pragmatic approach: working from reputable references, cross-checking when

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possible, and relying on collegial feedback rather than attempting exhaustive historical reconstruction.

The session then shifted to an interactive source-finding activity centered on introducing the method of least squares in a statistics class through a primary source. Participants described searching bookshelves and indices in standard mathematics and statistics references, along with targeted online searches (including Google Scholar and curated archives) to locate translations and scholarly analyses. Promising leads included an accessible translation of Legendre’s work, articles examining priority disputes between Legendre and Gauss, and concise historical accounts summarizing key primary texts and controversies (such as Legendre’s 1820 critique of Gauss and an 1877 annotated history of least squares). The discussion underscored that the “best” source depends on instructional goals and student accessibility. Later or clearer sources may be preferable to the earliest one; multiple sources can be compared; and PSPs should be viewed as flexible resources that instructors can adapt or use selectively. Prospective PSP authors do not need to find a perfect or definitive source, nor do they need to become historians. Instead, effective projects emerge from clear instructional goals, pragmatic source-finding strategies, and engagement with a scholarly community.

Session 2: The Task of Task Writing

Facilitated by Janet Heine Barnett and Daniel E. Otero, November 19, 2025

The second workshop focused on the design of student tasks, emphasizing that tasks are the primary mechanism through which students engage with primary sources. The facilitators shared results from an analysis of published PSPs that examined how projects distribute space among primary source excerpts, author commentary, and student tasks, and introduced a coding scheme for different types of tasks [Barnett et al. (2024)]. In particular, they distinguished between source-dependent tasks (which prompt interpretation, guided reading, or comparison with modern presentations) and more exercise-like tasks (which resemble textbook problems and may prepare students for reading or connect the mathematics to current curricula). Rather than prescribing an ideal balance, the analysis highlighted the wide variation across PSPs and emphasized that task choices should be driven by the source, audience, and instructional goals.

Participants then engaged in hands-on task writing using a short excerpt from *The Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art* related to the greatest common divisor. Proposed tasks included working through small numerical examples, comparing multiple methods in the text, and asking students to articulate which approaches they find clearer or more efficient. This activity illustrated how the same source can support very different task sequences for different audiences, and how open-ended prompts can serve as purposeful entry points that motivate reading and provide instructors with insight into student thinking. A second activity, using brief sources related to binomial coefficients from different cultural contexts, further emphasized the value of comparison tasks and questions that invite students to unpack unfamiliar language or representations.

Summary and Next Steps

Taken together, these sessions emphasize that effective PSPs are designed, not discovered, and that they evolve through use. A PSP does not depend on finding the earliest or most complete source, but on crafting tasks that turn a “good enough” source into a meaningful learning experience. PSPs should be treated as living teaching tools rather than finished artifacts: authors are encouraged to start small, use portions of a project, compare sources, and revise in response to classroom experience and collegial feedback. The central takeaway for new PSP authors is permission to work iteratively, prioritize student understanding over historical completeness, and trust that refinement will come through use, reflection, and community review.

The *Annals of the TRIUMPHS Society* is a new journal, and we are actively seeking submissions of Primary Source Projects (PSPs). We encourage readers to review the resources from the authorship workshop sessions, including recordings that are accessible at the TRIUMPHS Society’s [Programming](#) webpage. We also recommend that you review the [About the Journal](#) page for the journal’s section policies, as well as the [Author Guidelines](#). Authors need to [register](#) with the journal prior to submitting or, if already registered, can simply [log in](#) and begin the submission process.

References

- Barnett, J. H., Can, C., and Otero, D. E. (2024). Tagging Opportunities to Learn: A Coding Scheme for Student Tasks. *The Mathematics Enthusiast*, 21(1).
- Parker, A. E. (2023). Pitfalls and Potential Solutions to Your Primary Source Problems. *MAA Convergence*, 20.