



# Identifying Bias

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Guided Practice for Students

# Example: Website

- [A Look Back at John Brown](#)
- INITIAL OBSERVATIONS:
  - I see that this page is called *Prologue Magazine* and that there's an issue number and author's name given.
  - I see links in the top ribbon for searching different databases and collections within the National Archives as well as previous issues of this online magazine.
  - As I scroll the page, I can read subheadings such as "Some Definitions of Terrorism," "What Brown Did," "Who Was John Brown?," "Terrorist, Guerrilla Fighter, Revolutionary?," and "Remembering, Honoring, John Brown."
  - I notice five images of primary sources (photos and documents) with captions and source citations.
  - At the bottom of the page, I can read about the author and his credentials and the sources he used for this article. I can also find more information about the National Archives.

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar with links: RESEARCH OUR RECORDS, VETERANS' SERVICE RECORDS, EDUCATOR RESOURCES, VISIT US, and AMERICA'S FOUNDING DOCUMENTS. The main header is "Prologue Magazine" with a sub-header "Home > Publications > Prologue Magazine > Prologue | Spring 2011 > A Look Back at John Brown". The article title is "A Look Back at John Brown" by Paul Finkelman, dated Spring 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1. A portrait of John Brown is featured with a caption: "For Southerners, Brown was the embodiment of all their fears—a white man willing to die to end slavery. For many Northerners, he was a prophet of righteousness." The article text discusses the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War and the bicentennial of Brown's birth in 2000, mentioning domestic terrorism and the meaning of terrorism in the 21st century.

The screenshot shows the Archives.gov footer with a grid of links. The "Publications" column includes links for Federal Register, Prologue Magazine, and All Publications. The "Shop Online" column includes links for "Visit the National Archives Store" and "Buy Reproductions and Microfilm". An orange arrow points to the "Buy Reproductions and Microfilm" link.

# Example: Website

- [A Look Back at John Brown](#)

- CREDIBILITY:

- This article appears in the online magazine Prologue which is housed on the National Archives website. I can learn more about the National Archives by clicking on the ABOUT US button at the bottom of the page.
- The author's name is Paul Finkelman, and his credentials are explained at the bottom of the page.
- The purpose of the article is to inform anyone who has an interest in abolition, or the events related to John Brown's Raid at Harper's Ferry.
- There is no advertising on the page. The National Archives is government funded, but there was a disclaimer indicating that the articles published in the magazine do not necessarily represent views of the Archives or any other government agency.

RESEARCH OUR RECORDS VETERANS' SERVICE RECORDS EDUCATOR RESOURCES VISIT US AMERICA'S FOUNDING DOCUMENTS

Prologue Magazine

Home > Publications > Prologue Magazine > Prologue | Spring 2011 > A Look Back at John Brown

Prologue

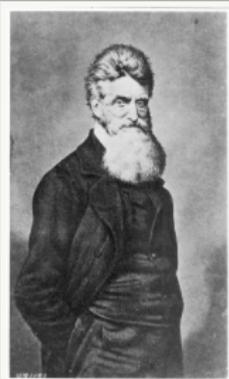
Main Page  
Previous Issues  
Genealogy/Notes  
Special Issues  
"Pieces of History" blog

Resources  
All Publications

## A Look Back at John Brown

Spring 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1

By Paul Finkelman



As we celebrate the beginning of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, it is worthwhile to remember, and contemplate, the most important figure in the struggle against slavery immediately before the war: John Brown.

When Brown was hanged in 1859 for his raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia, many saw him as the harbinger of the future. For Southerners, he was the embodiment of all their fears—a white man willing to die to end slavery—and the most potent symbol yet of aggressive Northern antislavery sentiment. For many Northerners, he was a prophet of righteousness, bringing down a terrible swift sword against the immorality of slavery and the haughtiness of the Southern master class.

In 2000, the United States marked the bicentennial of Brown's birth. At that time, domestic terrorism was a growing problem. Bombings, ambushes, and assassinations had been directed at women's clinics and physicians in a number of places; a bomb planted in Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park during the 1996 summer Olympics had killed one person and wounded more than a hundred people; in 1995 a pair of right-wing extremists had planted a bomb at the Alfred A. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and injuring more than 680 others.

During that bicentennial year, a number of historians and others talked about whether John Brown was America's first terrorist. Was he a model for the cowards who planted bombs at clinics, in public parks, or in buildings? Significantly, at least one modern terrorist, Paul Hill, compared himself to John Brown after he was arrested for murdering two people who worked at a women's clinic in Florida.

A year after Brown's bicentennial, the United States was faced with multiple terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The meaning of terrorism had changed. It was no longer the result of random attacks by an individual or two. Now it was tied to a worldwide conspiracy, coordinated overseas and meticulously planned. The American response was a "war on terror" in an age of rising incidents of terrorism, numerous scholars, and more important, much of the general public, have again asked if John Brown was America's "first terrorist."

### Some Definitions of Terrorism

There are no complete or certain definitions of terrorism. Terrorists seek to "terrify" people and strike fear in the minds of those at whom their terror is directed. This, however, is not a complete definition. After all, few would consider soldiers in warfare terrorists, yet surely they try to make their enemy "fearful" of them. Starting with World War II, large-scale bombing has been a fact of modern warfare, but bombing of military targets is surely not an act of terrorism.

Archives.gov

<b>Information For...</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Citizen Archivists</li><li>Federal Employees</li><li>Genealogists</li><li>Members of Congress</li><li>Preservation</li><li>Records Managers</li><li>The Press</li></ul>	<b>Publications</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Federal Register</li><li>Prologue Magazine</li><li>Subscribe to Email Newsletters</li><li>All Publications</li></ul>	<b>Orgs. &amp; Offices</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Center for Legislative Archives</li><li>Federal Records Center</li><li>Office of the Inspector General</li><li>Presidential Libraries</li><li>Staff Directory</li></ul>	<b>About Us</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>What is the National Archives?</li><li>Doing Business with Us</li><li>Plans and Reports</li><li>Open Government</li><li>Our Plain Language Activities</li></ul>	<b>I Want To...</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Get My Military Record</li><li>Plan a Research Visit</li><li>Visit the Museum</li><li>View Online Exhibits</li><li>Apply for a Grant</li></ul>	<b>Participate</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Attend an Event</li><li>Donate to the Archives</li><li>Work at the Archives</li><li>Volunteer at the Archives</li></ul>
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**Resources**

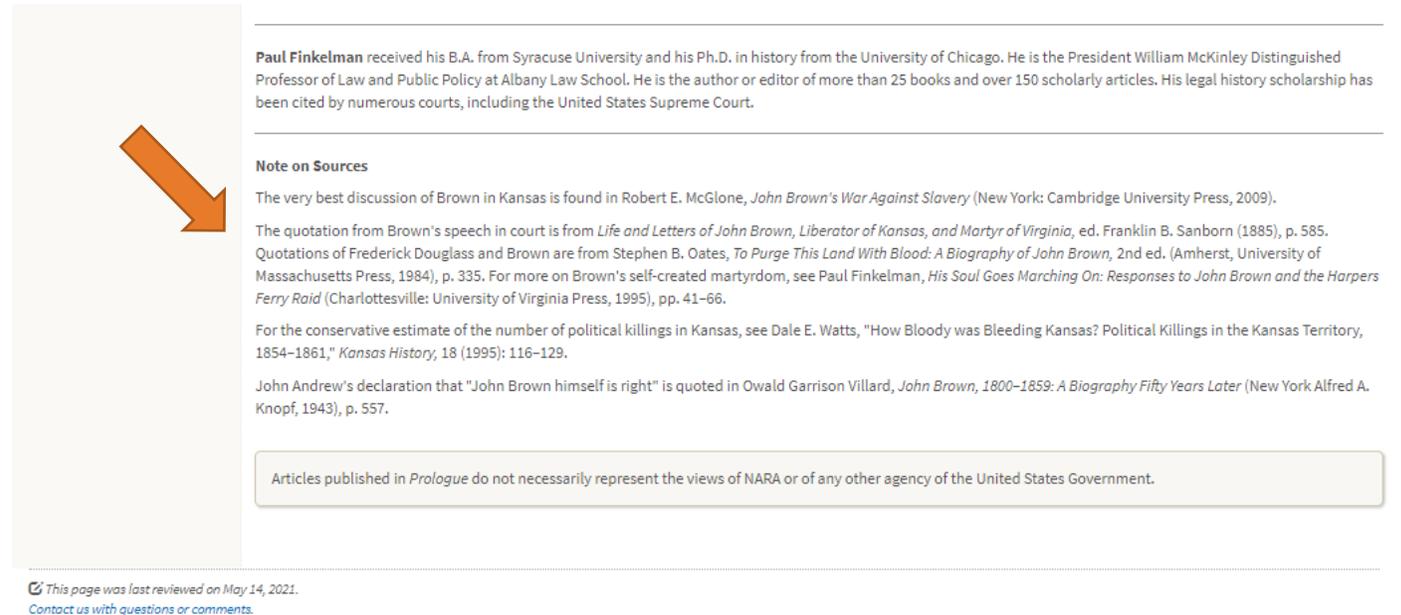
- A-Z Index
- America's Founding Docs
- Contact Us
- En Español
- FAQs
- Forms

**Shop Online**

- Visit the National Archives Store
- Buy Reproductions and Microfilm

# Example: Website

- [A Look Back at John Brown](#)
- ACCURACY:
  - This article was written in 2011 but was reviewed as recently as May 14, 2021.
  - The author provides sources at the end of the article.
  - The author presents detailed descriptions of Brown's actions and how he was viewed by Northerners and Southerners, as well as making some comparisons of his actions to those in recent American history, all with appropriate language.



**Paul Finkelman** received his B.A. from Syracuse University and his Ph.D. in history from the University of Chicago. He is the President William McKinley Distinguished Professor of Law and Public Policy at Albany Law School. He is the author or editor of more than 25 books and over 150 scholarly articles. His legal history scholarship has been cited by numerous courts, including the United States Supreme Court.

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**Note on Sources**

The very best discussion of Brown in Kansas is found in Robert E. McGlone, *John Brown's War Against Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

The quotation from Brown's speech in court is from *Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia*, ed. Franklin B. Sanborn (1885), p. 585. Quotations of Frederick Douglass and Brown are from Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown*, 2nd ed. (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), p. 335. For more on Brown's self-created martyrdom, see Paul Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), pp. 41–66.

For the conservative estimate of the number of political killings in Kansas, see Dale E. Watts, "How Bloody was Bleeding Kansas? Political Killings in the Kansas Territory, 1854–1861," *Kansas History*, 18 (1995): 116–129.

John Andrew's declaration that "John Brown himself is right" is quoted in Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800–1859: A Biography Fifty Years Later* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), p. 557.

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Articles published in *Prologue* do not necessarily represent the views of NARA or of any other agency of the United States Government.

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 This page was last reviewed on May 14, 2021.  
[Contact us with questions or comments.](#)

# Example: Website

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For abolitionists and antislavery activists, black and white, Brown emerged as a hero, a martyr, and ultimately, a harbinger of the end of slavery. Most Northern whites, especially those not committed to abolition, were aghast at the violence of his action. Yet there was also widespread support for him in the region. Northerners variously came to see Brown as an antislavery saint, a brave but foolish extremist, a lunatic, and a threat to the Union.

The future Republican governor of Massachusetts, John A. Andrew, summed up the feelings of many Northerners when he refused to endorse Brown's tactics or the wisdom of the raid, but declared that "John Brown himself is right." But most Republican politicians worried that they would be tarred by his extremism and lose the next election. Democrats and what remained of the Whigs (who would become Constitutional Unionists), by contrast, feared that Brown's raid would polarize the nation, put the Republicans in power, and chase the South out of the Union.

For white Southerners, Brown was the worst possible nightmare: a fearless, committed abolitionist, armed, accompanied by blacks, and willing to die to end slavery. Indeed, in the minds of Southerners, Brown was the greatest threat to slavery the South had ever witnessed. Most Southerners had at least a vague fear of slave rebellions. But Southerners had convinced themselves that most slaves were content with their status and that, in any event, blacks were incapable of anything worse than sporadic violence. Brown, however, raised the ominous possibility of armed black slaves, led by whites, who together would destroy Southern white society.

was charged with and convicted of treason, murder, and conspiring with slaves to revolt. Severely wounded during his capture, Brown had to be carried into court and lay on a stretcher. (Harpers Ferry National Park)



- [A Look Back at John Brown](#)
- **BALANCED:**
  - This article outlines a reasonable account of John Brown's life and the significance of the aftermath of his raid.
  - The author presents information that addresses perspectives of Northerners Southerners, supporters and opponents of John Brown, and the general population of the country at the time who were captivated by the story.
  - The only perspective I don't see would be that of the slaves, particularly since Brown was convinced that they would join his raid. I would have to search for other resources to learn of their stories.

# Example: Website

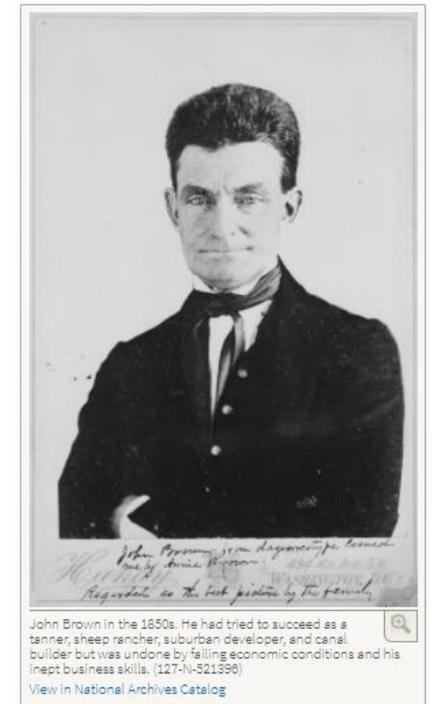
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- [A Look Back at John Brown](#)
- SUPPORTED:
  - The author uses specific details such as dates and names of places and people significant to the events in John Brown's life.
  - The author uses direct quotes a few times and provides the details for each source at the bottom of the page.
  - The author provides full captions and citations for the images used.



Perhaps we end up accepting the argument of the abolitionist lawyer and later governor of Massachusetts, John A. Andrew, who declared "whether the enterprise of John Brown and his associates in Virginia was wise or foolish, right or wrong; I only know that, whether the enterprise itself was the one or the other, John Brown himself is right."

John Andrew's declaration that "John Brown himself is right" is quoted in Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800–1859: A Biography Fifty Years Later* (New York Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), p. 557.



# Example: Website

## [A Look Back at John Brown](#)

### SUMMARY

- Overall, I would consider this to be a reliable source with minimal bias. The author is a distinguished historian with considerable expertise in topics related to slavery.
- The information is accurate and aligns with other sources I have viewed about John Brown.
- The author presents a wide perspective of the events and significance for the topic.
- The article is well-supported with credible information and images.

### QUESTIONS

- Are there any accounts of free blacks or slaves about the actions of John Brown?

# Practice #1: Website

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[John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War](#)



# Practice #1: Website

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- [John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War](#)

Click on the link and skim the website's structure and content. What do you see? What can you read or view? Is there any sound playing? Don't worry about evaluating what you see, you will do that in the next step.

Record your initial observations here:

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# Practice #1: Website

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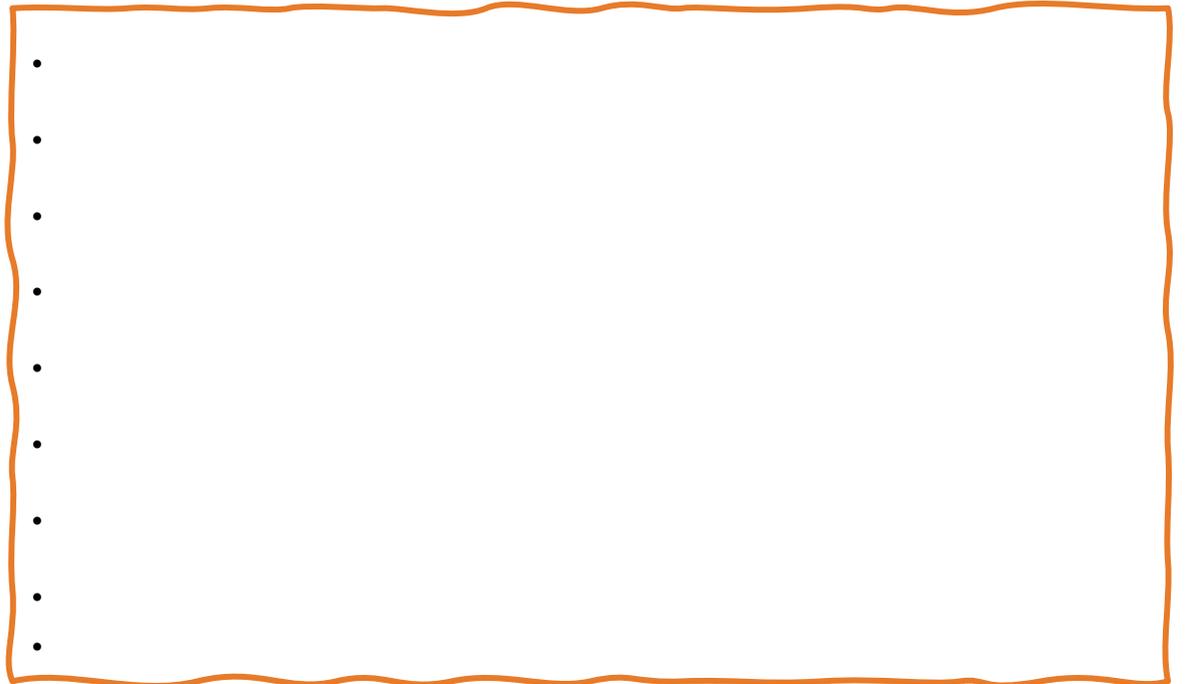
[John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War](#)

Look again at the source and read only the article titled "John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War."

Evaluate the article for its **CREDIBILITY** by considering:

1. What can you learn about the organization who runs the How Stuff Works website?
2. What can you learn about the author of the article?
3. Does the author use any wording that is overly positive or negative or leads you to believe they have a position on the topic of John Brown?
4. Is there advertising on the page? If so, how might it impact your understanding of this article?
5. What do you think is the purpose of the article? What makes you think that?

Record your thoughts here:



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# Practice #1: Website

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[John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War](#)

Evaluate the article for its **ACCURACY** by considering:

1. When was the article published? Updated or reviewed?
2. Does the author provide any sources for the information in the article? If so, are they credible? If no sources are given, why do you think that is?
3. Does the author make any exaggerated claims or phrases?
4. Would you trust the information in this article? Why or why not?

Record your thoughts here:

A large rectangular box with an orange border, containing a vertical list of ten dots for taking notes.

# Practice #1: Website

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[John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War](#)

Evaluate the article for its **BALANCE** by considering:

1. Does the author present balanced information? If not, can you think of a perspective that should be accounted for?
2. Can you tell if the author favors one perspective over another? How?

Record your thoughts here:

A large rectangular box with an orange border, containing a vertical list of ten dots for taking notes.

# Practice #1: Website

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[John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War](#)

Evaluate the article for its **SUPPORT** by considering:

1. Does the author provide evidence-based information? If yes, list at least two pieces of evidence the author provides.
2. If sources are not provided, what about this article would encourage you to use the information for your own research?

Record your thoughts here:

A large rectangular box with an orange border, containing a vertical list of ten dots for taking notes.

# Practice #1: Website

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[John Brown's Failed Raid on Harper's Ferry Was a Major Impetus for the U.S. Civil War](#)

What would be your final judgment about this source and identifying potential bias?

What other questions do you have about this source or the information?



Record your explanation here:

JUDGMENT:

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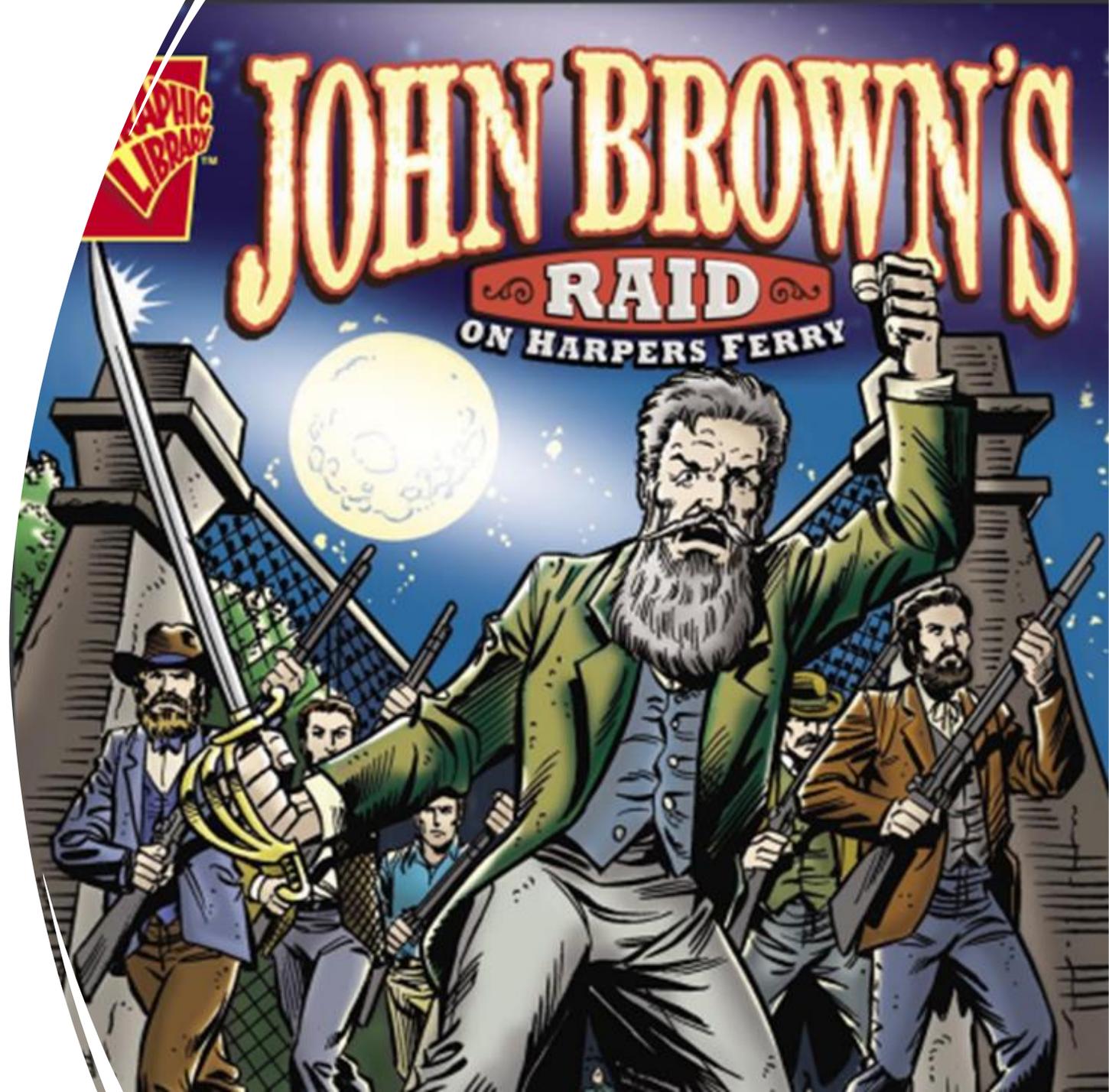
QUESTIONS

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# Practice #2: Book

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[John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry Graphic Novel](#)



# Practice #2: Book

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[John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry Graphic Novel](#)

Click on the link and skim the book's structure and content. What do you see? What can you read or view?

Record your initial observations here:

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# Practice #2: Book

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[John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry Graphic Novel](#)

What would be your final judgment about this source and identifying potential bias?

What other questions do you have about this source or the information?



Record your explanation here:

JUDGMENT:

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QUESTIONS

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# Practice #3: Primary Source Document

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Charles H. Ray to Abraham  
Lincoln, Monday, October  
31, 1859

My Dear Sir,

I see you have been  
guilty of another speech. If it  
embodies the ideas which you  
probid us using, why will  
you not write it out and  
send it hither for publica-  
tion? If not, why will you  
not make another and  
give the party the benefit  
your facts?

We are damnably  
exercised here about the  
effect of Old Brown's witch-

# Practice #3: Primary Source Document

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[Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859](#)

Click on the link and skim the page for this document. What do you see? What can you read or view? Be sure to look at all three images of the letter and accompanying envelope as well as the transcription on the left.

Record your initial observations here:

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# Practice #3: Primary Source Document

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[Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859](#)

Look again at the source and read the text of the letter.

Evaluate the letter for its **CREDIBILITY** by considering:

1. What can you learn about the writer Charles H. Ray?
2. Does the author use any wording that is overly positive or negative or leads you to believe they have a position on the topic of John Brown?
3. What do you think is the purpose of the letter? What makes you think that?

Record your thoughts here:

A large rectangular box with an orange border, containing a vertical list of ten dots for taking notes.

# Practice #3: Primary Source Document

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[Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859](#)

Evaluate the letter for its **ACCURACY** by considering:

1. When was the letter written?
2. Does the author provide any reference to events you've already learned in your research of John Brown?
3. Does the author make any exaggerated claims or phrases?
4. Would you trust the information in this letter? Why or why not?

Record your thoughts here:

A large rectangular box with an orange border, containing a vertical list of ten dots for taking notes.

# Practice #3: Primary Source Document

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[Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859](#)

Evaluate the letter for its **BALANCE** by considering:

1. Does the author present balanced information?
2. Can you tell if the author favors one perspective over another? How?

Record your thoughts here:

A large rectangular box with an orange border, containing a vertical list of ten dots for taking notes.



# Practice #3: Primary Source Document

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[Charles H. Ray to Abraham Lincoln, Monday, October 31, 1859](#)

What would be your final judgment about this source and identifying potential bias?

What other questions do you have about this source or the information?



Record your explanation here:

JUDGMENT:

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QUESTIONS

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# Sources

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