

Understanding the Military Journal of James Thacher, M.D.

History is made up of more than just dates and places. It is the people that lived, the things that they did, and what they believed. One of the best ways to learn about the people who lived during a certain time is to read the records they left behind, typically letters and journals.

These personal accounts provide first-hand experiences and opinions, helping historians discover what actually happened way back when or what motivated people to do the things they did. To understand a document, historians ask questions such as who is the author? What is the objective of the piece? Who is its audience? Do we have reasons to think that this piece is accurately describing events? How does it match with other documents one has from the era?

For this activity, imagine that you are a historian who recently discovered the journal of James Thacher, a doctor who served in the revolutionary war. It is your job to read it and determine which parts are factual. You also want to figure out how he feels about the American Revolution (*To help you do that, your teacher may also have you look at a well-known text from the era, the Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress, which was released in 1774, the year before Thacher's journal entries here. If so, also answer the italicized questions below.*)

There are four boxes on this worksheet:

- In the first, write down which events that you believe to be true.
- In the second, write down events that you believe are true, but that might be exaggerated somehow.
- In the third, write down the opinions he shares. These will help you understand how he views the events that he shares

- *In the fourth, write down connections to the Declaration and Resolves.*

Once you have completed the exercise, be ready to discuss the following points:

- Who is he writing for? Does that influence how he would write this and what he would include?
- Why did you list certain events as factual and others as possibly having some exaggeration? How do his opinions affect what he writes?
- How are his opinions similar to, or different from, the *Declaration and Resolves*?
- Why do you think he quoted *Common Sense*? What do you think of the very last line?
- Based on what you have read, what conclusions can you draw about life during 1775-1776? Does Thacher's journal reinforce what you have already learned about the American Revolution? If so, how?
- Thacher's writing style is very different from today's. Do you think that the differences between writing styles back then and today can affect the way that a historian understands the original writer's intentions? How can that affect the way that history is recorded?

Facts:

Opinions:

Events that you believe to be true:

Events that you believe are true, but exaggerated:

*Connections to the
Declaration and Resolves:*