

## Writing a Diary: Observations from an Assistant

### Warming Up

What is the most exciting thing you have done this past month? Think about this for a moment, and then write down your idea. Now, imagine that you are reliving the experience you just recalled, and write diary entries to record your observations from that time. Draft three entries in your diary. Provide a date and several sentences of observations for each entry. It is acceptable to estimate dates; you do not need to recall the exact dates of the original event for this exercise.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Once your diary is complete, exchange diaries with a peer or teacher. Then, discuss what you learned from reading the diary. Use the following prompts to guide your discussion:

- How did your partner describe the events? What language did he or she use? What obvious goal was he or she trying to accomplish?
- What did you learn from this diary that you would not have learned had you merely read a third-party summary of the same event?
- What does this difference tell you about the use of primary sources in understanding historical events, especially first-person accounts like diaries?

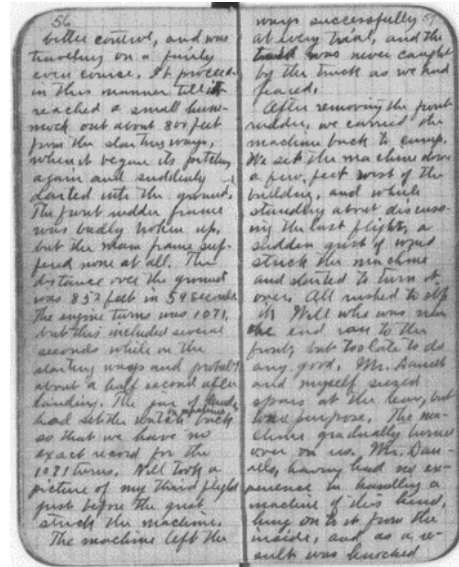
## Getting Started

On the same day that Wilbur and Orville Wright made history by flying a powered airplane over the sands of Kitty Hawk, another important, but less well-known event occurred. The following entry from Orville Wright's diary describes this lesser-known event.

"After removing the front rudder, we carried the machine back to camp. We set the machine down a few feet west of the building, and while standing about discussing the last flight, a sudden gust of wind struck the machine and started to turn it over. All rushed to stop it. Will who was near one end ran to the front, but too late to do any good. Mr. Daniels and myself seized spars at the rear, but to no purpose. The machine gradually turned over on us. Mr. Daniels, having had no experience in handling a machine of this kind, hung on to it from the inside, and as a result was knocked down and turned over and over with it as it went. His escape was miraculous, as he was in with the engine and chains. The engine legs were all broken off, the chain guides badly bent, a number of uprights, and nearly all the rear ends of the ribs were broken."

The "machine" Orville was describing was, of course, the first successful airplane. Just a few hours before, it had been soaring above the dunes. But, according to Orville, Mr. Daniels only just barely escaped becoming its first casualty while it was sitting dormant on the ground at the end of the day. The historic events from earlier that day have largely and rightly overshadowed this end-of-the-day event. But what did Mr. Daniels think at the time and later? Were he to have written a diary, what might he have said about this experience with a tumbling airplane?

Now, imagine that you are an assistant to Wilbur and Orville Wright. As their assistant, you have been a witness to this event and many others. Thankfully for history, you have been recording your observations in your own journal. It is your turn to highlight six to eight of your diary entries. What will you say about Wilbur and Orville's experiment? How might your perspective enhance or change what we know from the diaries of the famous Wright brothers?



Orville Wright, Diary, 1903, Image 30. Library of Congress; <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mwright.01007/?sp=30>

## Real-World Topics

- Historians must learn to read and interpret documents from different historical contexts, cultures, and sometimes languages.
- Reading primary documents is different from reading secondary documents; they require mastering different skills.

## Readings

The following list of readings and sources should be used to complete the activity.

### Books:

- Russell Freedman, *The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane* (New York: Holiday House, 1991).

### Archival Sources:

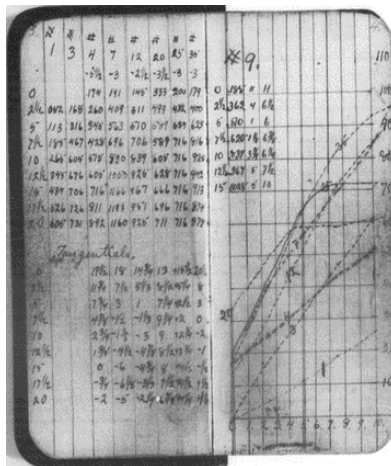
- [Orville Wright's 1903 Diary](#)

### Additional Online Resources:

- [Wright Brothers Aeroplane Company: A Virtual Museum of Pioneer Aviation](#)
- [Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum: The Wright Brothers and The Invention of the Aerial Age](#)
- [National Park Service: 1903-The First Flight](#)

## The Wrights' Diaries: A Closer Look

While working on their flying machine, both Wilbur and Orville were fully aware of the fact that they were contributing to an important project. They recognized that if they were successful, people would look back on their work and want to know all about it. For this reason, they left historians and others a number of documents and artifacts. Some of the most important of these are the diaries of Wilbur and Orville.



Wilbur Wright, Diary, 1902-05, Image 3.  
Library of Congress;  
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/mwright.01006/?sp=3/?sp=30>

These two diaries differ in important ways. The diaries of Wilbur that have been preserved tend to record technical data on the experiments they conducted. These diaries largely include tables of numbers, short notes on experiments and size adjustments, and graphs that further document the tables and figures. For most of us, these notes are not particularly interesting. But for the aeronautical community, these scientific notes, formulas, and computations are a gold mine of information. Wilbur's notes shed light on how the Wrights conducted their experiments, what went wrong, what went right, how they adjusted their approach, and why they did so in the way that they did. In the hands of the right scholar with the appropriate educational background, these numbers and line graphs explain the birth of flight in intricate detail.

Orville's diaries are very different. These diaries are far more narrative and descriptive than those of Wilbur. Orville made entries like the following examples:

September 15 [1902]: Worked 10 hours each on machines. Straightened end of upper surface. Took old machine apart, varnished uprights, and put them in new machine. Put in a part of the wires for the trussing. Two surfaces, with uprights, wires & hinges 87.

October 2 [1902]: Stayed up till 10 o'clock discussing "tangential" with Spratt.

October 3 [1902]: Lorin and Spratt went fishing, spending the whole morning in catching enough crabs for bait for a short time's fishing in the afternoon. They returned about 4 o'clock p.m. with an eel, and a few small chubs and robins, and a good deal of sunburn.

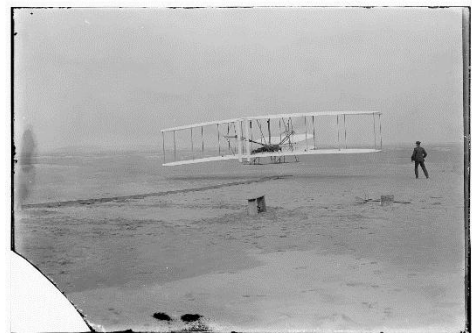
The wind was very low, and after making a number of glides we were compelled to quit. No record was kept of the morning glides and only a few of those of the afternoon.

October 16 [1902]: Wind very light all day. In afternoon we attempted a few glides on the east slope of Big Hill, but without success. Bill Tate called and ate dinner with us. Towards evening we went over to the old Haman house, where we heard a great variety of birds in the trees and swamps but could see but few of them. In morning I found live star fish on the beach, which I killed with gasoline.

It is from Orville's diary that we get the dramatic description of the first flight made on December 17, 1903. His diary reads:

"When we got up a wind of between 20 and 25 miles was blowing from the north. We got the machine out early and put out the signal for the men at the station. . . . After running the engine and propellers a few minutes to get them in working order, I got on the machine at 10:35 for the first trial. . . . On slipping the rope the machine started off increasing in speed to probably 7 or 8 miles. The machine lifted from the truck just as it was entering on the fourth rail. Mr. Daniels took a picture just as it left the tracks. I found the control of the front rudder quite difficult on account of its being balanced too near the center and thus had a tendency to turn itself when started so that the rudder was turned too far on one side and then too far on the other. As a result the machine would rise suddenly to about 10 ft. and then as suddenly, on turning the rudder, dart for the ground. A sudden dart when out about 100 feet from the end of the tracks ended the flight. Time about 12 seconds (not known exactly as watch was not promptly stopped)."

For most of us, the numbers, measurement data, and graphs of Wilbur are no substitute for this clear textual description of the first flight. But together, the diaries of Wilbur and Orville provide us and generations after us a picture of the emergence of the aeronautical age that is complex and informative.



First flight, 120 feet in 12 seconds, 10:35 a.m.; Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Library of Congress; <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppprs.00626/>

### Activity: Drafting a Diary

Examine [Orville Wright's 1903 diary](#) available on the Library of Congress site. As you read, complete the [graphic organizer](#) by recording at least six important events that contributed to the successful December flight. See the first sample entry to understand how this graphic organizer should be used.

Once you have recorded the important events from Orville Wright's diary, consult Russell Freedman, *The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane* to learn more about the historical context of these events. Make notes about this historical context in the [graphic organizer](#).

Use the completed graphic organizer to create your own diary entries. To create this diary, you will assume the role of an assistant to Orville and Wilbur Wright. Draft six to eight diary entries from this perspective. These entries should roughly parallel the entries chosen from Orville's diary and address the following question:

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Why was it significant?

Write your diary entries on aged paper so that the diaries look authentic.

### **Paleography Training:**

Typed text on screens or on paper is now exceedingly common. These days, you are far more likely to come across typed material than hand-written documents. Before computer technology became widely accessible, hand-written documents were very common. During the time of the Wright brothers' experiments, the turn of the 19th century, hand-written documents were the norm, especially for letters, diaries, and work notes. Because we, in the 21st century, have become so accustomed to reading typed text, it can sometimes be difficult to read the handwriting of others. Making things more difficult, the further back in time one goes, phrases, sentence structure, and even spellings are different. The study of old writing systems and the deciphering of old hand-written materials is called paleography. Sharpening your paleographical skill will help you complete this activity.

Like any skill, the best way to sharpen your paleography skill is to practice reading old handwriting. The more you practice, the more proficient you will become. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when reading historical handwritten documents:

**Take your time:** Reading old handwriting takes patience. Do not try to skim. Focus on each word, and move slowly and deliberately.

**Read out loud:** Listening to yourself read slowly will help you pace yourself and will help you untangle difficult words.

**Pay attention to commonly used words:** Words like "the," "and," and many commonly used nouns will recur throughout any document. Because the same person has written them, they will look similar. Pay attention to how these letters are written. Learning to distinguish between an author's "i" and that same author's "t," for example, will help you decode difficult words.

**Pay attention to abbreviations:** When we write things out by hand, we tend to use abbreviations more often. Old writing uses old abbreviations, which you might not be familiar with at first. Once you learn these abbreviations, you will be able to read through them quickly each time they inevitably recur.

There are also a number of resources available online to help you. Here is a short selection that may prove useful:

- [Paleography-A practical online tutorial \(The National Archives, UK\)](#)
- [English Handwriting 1500 – 1700: an online course \(University of Cambridge\)](#)
- [How to Read 18<sup>th</sup> Century British-American Writing](#)

### **Aging Your Diary:**

To make your diary look authentic, create a few sheets of paper that appear more than 100 years old. There are a number of ways to do this, but the simplest way is to merely print faux aged paper. You will need a color printer for this, and you can find printable aged paper at [this link](#).

Alternatively, you can create your own aged paper by following these steps:

**Step 1:** Roll a single piece of printer paper into a ball, open, then roll it into a tight ball again.

**Step 2:** Smooth the paper flat and place it on the floor.

**Step 3:** Put on shoes that have been worn outdoors. Step carefully on the paper to stain it lightly to create an aged look.

**Step 4:** Use the aged paper to write your diary entries.

## Reflect

Consider the following reflection prompts to use for a class discussion:

- What information does one learn from a diary entry that one would not learn from reading a secondary report about the same event?
- What famous person's diaries would you like to read and why?
- Have you ever kept a diary? What did you use your diary for? Are there any life events that you wished you had recorded in a diary? What might people think of you if they discovered your diary 100 years from now?