

Process Paper for the Friends of the Library Research Award, Oberlin College  
Brooke Ortel

When I began this project, I hadn't narrowed my focus to a single topic. My three main areas of interest included early American educational texts, Native American creation stories, and the story of John Smith and Pocahontas. I hoped to find connections between these three topics and demonstrate their importance in my paper. Predictably, I found that researching three topics for a 12-15 page paper was a bit much, so I decided to stick with early American educational texts, focusing on the Puritans in particular. I started my research by searching the Evans Early American Imprints (1639-1800) for digitized copies of *The New-England Primer*, a text that had been mentioned in class, and other early educational materials. Throughout my research project, I referenced various items on the list of resources compiled by Rosalinda Linares specifically for ENGL 255 (unfortunately, I don't have the complete list of all of the databases I used, but there were multiple!).

I was curious about *The New-England Primer's* content, especially the illustrated alphabet. After a search of primers using the Evans database, I was quickly overwhelmed by the number of different versions, but eventually chose to focus on the 1727 edition, which also included John Cotton's *Milk for Babes*. I also discovered an "Indian Primer" published around the same time, which provided an interesting comparison to *The New-England Primer*, intended for white children. By this time, I had decided that Puritan educational materials, with *The New-England Primer* as my main primary text, would be the focus of my paper, dropping the other two topics. Returning to the Evans database, I came across *A Little Reader's Assistant*, which was published toward the end of my target time period (1700-1800), and decided to use it as a comparison text to the earlier primers. I skimmed through these core primary documents start to finish, but wound up focusing on the illustrated alphabet, using its rhyming content and images to assess what reading and words meant in Puritan culture, especially in relation to concepts of nature and religion.

While I attempted my own independent analysis of the primary texts first, building on ideas that came up in class, I sought out secondary resources as well, using the specific databases included in the ENGL 255 list. I also used more general searching mechanisms through the library website, including Academic Search Complete and JSTOR, to investigate the history of early reading texts in America and find academic journal articles on those topics. My final sources included pieces from an academic journal on children's literature, a paper from the *Bibliographic Society of America*, *The Elementary School Journal*, and *Early American Literature*. Not only did these articles give me some historical background on *The Primer* and the other educational materials I had discovered using the Evans database, but they also offered new ways of looking at the content. I was amazed at how much detailed analysis of the Puritan alphabet existed! Of course, I found far more than I could include and had to discard some of the less relevant pieces, including "'Both Great and Small': Adult Proportion and Divine Scale in Edward Taylor's 'Preface' and The New England Primer," Calvin and Locke: Dueling Epistemologies in 'The New-England Primer,'" "Thy Life to Mend, This Book Attend': Reading and Healing in the Arc of Children's Literature," and a 1906 write-up of *The Little Reader's Assistant* titled "Practical Nature Study."

As I sifted through the journal articles, I also looked at their bibliographies to find the titles of print sources that I tracked down in the library. My ambitious list of titles, which included several on John Smith and Pocahontas (sadly, I couldn't fit them into my more focused project) was eventually whittled down to two: Patricia Crain's *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of American* and Jennifer Monaghan's *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America*. In exploring these books, I focused on the illustrated alphabet in *The New-England Primer* and the story of *The Indian Primer*, which was largely absent from most of the secondary literature that I encountered.