

CHAPTER 4 / Analyzing Information

Read the following two excerpts. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

Excerpt from President Jefferson's letter of instructions to Captain Meriwether Lewis, 20 June 1803 "The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by it's course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, . . . may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce. . . . Beginning at the mouth of the Missouri, you will take [careful] observations of latitude & longitude. . . . The commerce which may be carried on with the people inhabiting the line you will pursue, renders a knowledge of those people important. You will therefore endeavor to make yourself acquainted . . . with the names of the nations & their numbers; the extent & limits of their possessions. . . . Other objects worthy of notice will be the soil & face of the country, it's growth & vegetable productions, especially those not of the U.S. . . . the animals of the country generally, & especially those not known in the U.S."

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Excerpt from "Lewis and Clark: Stop celebrating. They don't matter." By David Plotz. Posted Friday, Aug. 16, 2002, www.slate.com "Lewis and Clark, it's claimed, opened the West and launched the American empire. . . . Except they didn't. First of all, Lewis and Clark were not first of all. The members of the Corps of Discovery were not the first people to see the land they traveled. Indians had been everywhere, of course, [and] . . . explorer Alexander MacKenzie had traversed the Canadian Rockies a decade before them. . . . They failed at their primary mission. Jefferson had dispatched them to find a water route across the continent—the fabled Northwest Passage—but they discovered that water transport from coast to coast was impossible. . . . [T]he expedition also failed in a much more important way. It produced nothing useful. Meriwether Lewis was supposed to distill his notes into a gripping narrative, but he had writer's block and killed himself in 1809 without ever writing a word. . . . [T]heir mountains of scientific and anthropological data wasn't published for a century, long after it could have helped pioneers. . . ."

- (1) What type of document is the Thomas Jefferson piece?
- (2) What type of document is the David Plotz piece?
- (3) What are the four main objectives that President Jefferson gave to Captain Lewis for the expedition?
- (4) Which is the objective that Mr. Plotz says was not met?
- (5) After reading the two pieces and the chapter, form your own opinion about Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery. Did they matter or not? Support your answer with at least three points.