I teach Victorian literature, and one of my goals is to help students make connections between the texts we study and the historical period that surrounded those texts. I also want to nurture a sense of intellectual curiosity about the past. I always include an assignment that asks students to dig into an archive, so that they can learn the joys of scholarly discovery while cultivating a deeper understanding of the Victorian past.

In this assignment, I ask students to locate an article from The Illustrated London News that addresses an issue or theme from a novel we are studying and that appeared within ten years of the novel’s publication. Students read the article, and then create a blog entry that not only describes what they found, but also articulates how reading this document and the novel together produces a richer understanding of the period. The entries are read by the entire class, and, after spending a class period talking about all the entries and looking at the objects found, students come away with a sense of the Victorian period through an archive that they had an active part in making and curating.

—Ryan Fong English