
Digging Through Documents: Uncovering History Using Primary Sources

Subject: U.S. History
Topic: Year-End Activity
Grade: 11
Teacher: Ricci Hall

First and foremost, my goal as a history teacher is to engage students in the work of real historians. To an historian, and if I achieve my goal as a teacher, to my students, the past is not pre-determined. History is an evolving interpretation of the past, which we use to inform our own lives and our own time. The work of an historian is interpreting that past through one's own unique perspective, making judgments, and drawing connections to gain new insights. That is my definition of success for 11th graders in my U.S. History class. When students can make well-supported evaluations of historical events and connect them to the present, they have succeeded and I know that I have done my job as their teacher.

Using Primary Sources in History

Primary sources are an historian's most valuable tool to analyze the past. Accordingly, I place a great deal of emphasis on primary source documents in my class, both as a way of helping my students develop the key skills of the discipline and because they make history fun!

In a primary source-based class, the past is not regurgitated to students in bite-sized chunks from the textbook or the teacher. Instead, students participate in the construction of their own knowledge of history. Students have the experience of time traveling, diving into the context of the past, getting inside the head of an historical figure, and attempting to understand the world as he or she understood it. For example, in my World War II unit, we read primary source documents about the atomic bomb, and then students put themselves in Harry Truman's shoes—writing a diary entry, deciding whether or not to drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This type of activity makes history come alive for students. It is exciting for them to imagine taking control of the reins of presidential power, imagining what they might do in that critical situation.

In addition to being more fun, by studying primary sources, my students become historians in their own right. They develop their own unique interpretations of the past. For them history becomes a tool with which they can interpret their life and the present world they inhabit.

Building a history class around primary source documents is challenging. Students must deal with the often confusing and contradictory nature of the past. Of course, this requires that students THINK. Forcing and enabling students to think for themselves is an important goal for me as a teacher. When using primary sources, the analysis is not included in the text and students have no stock interpretation of events to fall back on. Instead, they must develop their own conclusions, test them against the available evidence, and organize them into a coherent argument.

To help students analyze primary source documents, I use the APPARTS document analysis tool. This method asks students a series of key questions, which can help lead to a thorough analysis of

the document. As students become proficient interpreters of primary source documents, they answer these questions intuitively without the scaffolding of the acronym.

- **Author:** Who created the source? What is their point of view?
- **Place and Time:** Where and when was the source produced?
- **Prior Knowledge:** What do you already know that would further your understanding of this source?
- **Audience:** For whom was the source created? Does this affect the reliability of the source?
- **Reason:** Why was this source produced at the time it was produced?
- **The Main Idea:** What is the source trying to convey?
- **Significance:** Why is this source important?

The language used in primary source documents presents challenges for students. The outdated language used in many documents is challenging for any reader and particularly hard for students at UPCS and other schools like ours, where a majority are non-native English speakers. In order to use primary sources in my history class and to enable my students to become scholars of history, I must become a teacher of English.

What do I mean by that? I utilize deliberate strategies to help students become effective readers, just as the English teacher does across the hall. My students write double entry journals where they quote significant passages from the text alongside a brief interpretation of its meaning. The students conduct literature circles, or “primary source circles” in this case to scaffold them in reading for understanding. I have learned many strategies such as these by observing my English teacher colleagues or discussing teaching techniques during our common planning time, or informally in the halls.

Digging Through Documents Activity Overview

Throughout the year in my U.S. History class, we read and interpret primary source documents to gain a deeper understanding of the events and time we are studying. In fact, the Massachusetts state history frameworks require this approach to the study of history. With each standard, one or more accompanying documents are listed to ensure that students do develop the critical interpretation skills that come from reading these texts. See for example, the excerpt below on Abraham Lincoln.

USI.38 Analyze Abraham Lincoln’s presidency, the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), his views on slavery, and the political obstacles he encountered. (H, C)

Seminal Primary Documents to Read: Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address (1863) and Lincoln’s second inaugural address (1865)

Seminal Primary Documents to Consider: Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech (1858)¹

¹ Massachusetts Department of Education, *Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework*. August 2003, p. 70. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/hss/final.pdf>

As an end of the year activity, we review the required seminal primary source documents according to the state frameworks and ask the following overarching questions: “Which of these documents are most important?” and “What is missing from this list?”

This activity gives students a chance to go back through the entirety of U.S. history, reinterpreting events and making connections between various key documents. The list of texts included in the activity is in the box to the right. (See Appendix A for the full list of documents from the frameworks document.)

The whole activity takes about a week of class time. It begins with students in groups reviewing the documents to refresh their memory. Then, still in their groups, they begin a guided discussion about the documents, and finally each student writes a two-page reflection paper.

On the first day of the activity, I divide students into their discussion groups. I am deliberate about selecting the groups. I place students with a range of reading skills in each group. That way, the stronger readers can help their peers on the more difficult documents. Each group will have a group leader responsible for moderating the discussion to ensure that it is productive and on task. I make sure there is a student capable of handling that important task in each group. From there, I look to create groups that will work well together and produce vigorous debate and discussion.

Summarizing Primary Source Documents

The first activity is to review and summarize each of the 20 documents in the packet I hand them. None of the documents are new to the students, but they generally require at least a cursory review for them to refresh themselves on the content and context of the text. Then, as a group, they fill out a document review sheet identifying the main ideas presented in the document. This review sheet will serve as part of their notes for the remainder of the activity.

The review sheet contains the following prompts, each with space for a few sentences:

- Document title
- Document date
- Summarize the document
- Summarize the historical context in which this document was written
- Connection to other documents in the group (if applicable)
- Connection to other documents present so far
- Other personal/miscellaneous connections

Document List

- Mayflower Compact (1620)
- Declaration of Independence (1776)
- The Northwest Ordinance (1787)
- Federalist Paper #10 (1787-1788)
- The Bill of Rights (1791)
- The Seneca Fall Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions (1848)
- Frederick Douglass’ Independence Day speech at Rochester, NY (1852)
- Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address (1863)
- Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address (1865)
- Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus” (1883)
- Theodore Roosevelt’s “The New Nationalism” speech (1910)
- Woodrow Wilson’s “Peace without Victory” speech (1917)
- Franklin Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech (1941)
- The Truman Doctrine (1947)
- George Keenan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” (1947)
- John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address (1961)
- Martin Luther King’s *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* (1963)
- Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech (1963)
- Lyndon Johnson’s speech to Congress on voting rights (March 15, 1965)

This simple review sheet is a writing-to-learn activity. For each document, students refer back to the text, thinking about its meaning and its context. The process of writing down those ideas will help them uncover connections to other texts, and to their own lives.

Group Discussion: What Is the Most Important Document? What Documents Are Missing?

In the next activity, I ask students to go back through that same set of documents which the writers of the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks determined were the most important for a student of American history to read and, with their group, identify the single most important and explain why. I also ask them to identify what documents are not on the list, but should be.

Group Exercise

With your group leader, discuss the documents that you have uncovered over the past few days. The group leader will be responsible for keeping the discussions moving and productive. Feel free to attack the documents in any order you wish.

There is only one rule to the discussion. In order for you to make a comment about a document, you must piggyback on the comment before you. For example, if someone were said that the creation of the Bill of Rights was a result of the rabid debate between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists, the next student would have to make reference to that before being allowed to comment. For example, he could say: "I like how you explained the role of the Anti-Federalists, but don't forget that the Bill of Rights also secured several rights that colonists thought were violated by the British before the American Revolution."

Remember that you are getting a discussion test grade for your work on this project. Please use one another as important resources as you struggle with the material. At the conclusion of this group discussion, I will ask students the following questions: Which document is most important and why? What documents are missing from the list?

Good luck!

Students participate in many self-led discussions in my class. First of all, they are a great way for small groups of students to exchange ideas, debate, and consider history. It also helps them prepare for seminar style classes in college, where professors will expect them to be able to think on their feet and offer responses that move a discussion forward. My one rule for discussions helps students practice this skill in a low-stakes situation with their friends so that they will be confident constructing an oral response and participating in class in college.

This activity puts students in the driver's seat, acting as historians. They are working off of the interpretation of history that has been suggested to them by the frameworks, and revising it to fit their own understanding of American history. Asking them to select a single most important document is basically an impossible question to answer. That's great for me. I am not interested in students' final answers so much as I am in the process that they took to get there through their discussion groups.

Rather than come to a quick consensus on which text is most important, I prefer to see students grapple with the documents—building an argument for one, then rejecting it in favor of another. In this discussion, they compare and contrast the documents, making connections between them and other aspects of United States history that we have studied. They examine the significance of a document in the context of the present, gauging its importance in modern America. In the end, they settle on a particular document, but the discussion through which they arrived at that final decision is where the learning took place.

As students undertake this discussion, I move throughout the room, listening in on snippets of discussion and making sure that everyone is participating. Occasionally, I'll offer a perspective for a group to consider, but more often than not, by the end of the year, the students are able to have fully self-directed discussions that run more smoothly without my input. This discussion counts as a test grade, which is based on a rubric for class discussion that students develop themselves at the beginning of the year.

The part of the discussion where students identify what documents are missing from the list is always one of my favorite lessons of the year. I give them the opportunity to challenge a prevailing notion of American history and reinterpret on their own. This is an activity of real historians. I ask them to compile a list of documents, which paints an accurate picture of U.S. history as they see it.

The insight of the students in this activity always impresses me. They show that after a year in my class that are able to make the connections and the judgments of real historians. They decipher the overarching theme of one interpretation of American history and offer their own suggestions as to a more accurate representation.

In general, my students note that the required readings on the state frameworks paint a rosy picture of America, and perhaps a falsely rosy picture. The documents on the list describe a powerful, benevolent America. Even where they describe the struggles we have faced as a nation, the documents included in the list present a picture of hope and opportunity, glossing over contradictions between the documents and the experiences that many people have faced. Students asked whether the American body politic truly agreed with Emma Lazarus when she entreated, "Give me your tired, your poor/your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Many students, immigrants themselves, understand and speak articulately about the tension between the vision of America as the Promised Land, which Emma Lazarus describes, and the harsh reality that newcomers often face when they arrive.

They note that, by and large, the history according to the seminal document list is a white man's history. Students often strongly argue that the role and plight of minorities and women, which are often the most shameful aspects of our history, are deemphasized or ignored completely. None of the documents reference the removal of Native Americans from their ancestral lands by the U.S. government. Several students have suggested that *Worcester v. Georgia* or Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* should be added to the list. Others have noted that the only document about the rights of women was the 1838 Seneca Falls declaration. The Japanese internment was not included, nor anything about the treatment of Chinese immigrants in the 19th century. In my course, I use *A Different Mirror* by Ronald Takaki as a supplementary text to the more traditional teaching materials to ensure that minority viewpoints are represented.

Putting It All Together: A Reflection Paper

After a couple of days of discussion on each of the previous topics, I assign each student to develop an argument detailing their own viewpoint in a two-page reflection paper. It is their chance to solidify their views after nearly a week of intense study and active debate. Their minds are in a whirl, and by slowing down to write the paper, students have the opportunity to process everything and organize it into a formal paper, which they present to me.

At UPCS, we use a philosophy of writing to learn. We believe that “writing is thinking.” Through the process of writing, students develop and organize their thoughts, arriving at new insights. With this reflection paper, students continue the learning process begun by the discussion, and I am able to assess their grasp of history and the progress they are making as historians.

Essay Prompt

Now that you have had a chance to review the documents, write a two-page reflection paper responding to the following prompt:

What can you say about common themes found throughout these documents? What documents are missing? Are there groups of people who are over-represented or under-represented? In your paper, include a recommendation to the Governor and Commissioner of Education of seminal documents in American History that should be required for all students to read. Explain why you selected the documents on your list. Compare and contrast your list with the Department of Education’s current required texts.

The task I present to students in the “Digging Through Documents” unit is an ambitious one. The 20 documents cover 350 years of a large scope of history. Students are able to complete this task because they have practiced each element of it throughout the year. They have read dozens of primary source documents, extracting meaning from the text, determining the context in which it was written, and making connections with it. They have participated in countless discussions, practicing the skills to have a productive dialogue. They have read each of the documents in this activity before. The task at hand for them in this activity is to make new connections across the entirety of United States history, for example, comparing the freedoms outlined in our founding documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—with the “the four essential freedoms” that Franklin Roosevelt outlined during the run up to World War II. As students generate powerful insights and present cogent arguments, their comprehension of history improves and their confidence as young historians skyrockets. They are doing the work of real historians, and they know it.