

Primary Source Analysis — Photographs: Suggestions for Teachers

Primary sources are firsthand evidence that provide glimpses into history. The Collections Search database (<https://history.house.gov/Collection/>) contains works of art and historical artifacts related to the U.S. House of Representatives. By analyzing these materials, students can better understand historical events, American culture, and the House itself. Below are some suggestions to help facilitate analysis and discussion of objects as primary sources. While these suggestions will guide you through analyzing photographs in our Collections Search, we invite you to use this graphic organizer with any primary source that your class is examining.

- 1. Select a photograph and review the catalogue record before introducing it to your students.** Collection Search provides detailed information about each photograph, and links to further information about the subject and the historical context. The detailed description and links to related material will help you get started.
- 2. Save a copy of the image.** Expand the image in the Collection Search record, and save by right-clicking on the image. This makes it easy to project the image on a screen for the whole class to view together or print copies for individuals or groups.
- 3. Provide students with our Primary Source Analysis graphic organizer.** There are three different organizers for different types of objects in the Collections Search database: artworks, artifacts, and photographs. The graphic organizer will guide students as they analyze the object. The worksheet can be used as a classroom activity, homework, a supplement to student notes, or a formal or informal assessment.
- 4. Use the graphic organizer to model the process for analyzing primary sources.** Before asking students to analyze a photograph individually or in small groups, demonstrate the process for the entire class. Encourage questions about photographs as primary sources, analysis, and the worksheet itself.
- 5. Allow students to analyze photographs in small groups or individually.** Allow students to work through the process on their own. If possible, encourage them to annotate a printed image, noting questions, comments, unfamiliar attributes, etc.
- 6. Facilitate a class discussion.** After completing their graphic organizers, students should share their analyses with the class. As the leader of this discussion, you should highlight for your students the photograph's connections to the historical era or unit being studied.

Primary Source Analysis—Photographs

Step 1: Identify

Title, Date, Photographer

Is there a caption? What information does it include?

Describe what you see in the photograph.

What is your prior knowledge of this time period?

Step 2: Understand

Why do you think someone took this photo?

Who do you think was the audience for this photo?
Why do you think so?

Step 3: Connect

How do the photographer's choices—like composition, content, perspective—impact the meaning of the photograph?

What does the photo tell us about the time it was taken?

How does this photo relate to U.S. History?

Primary Source Analysis — Photographs: Completed Example

Step 1: Identify

Title, Date, Photographer

Bonus Army Protest at the Capitol, 1932
No photographer named.

Is there a caption? What information does it include?

Yes. It says that the people in the photo, supporters of a payment of bonuses to World War I veterans, are protesting at the Capitol when Congress failed to take action. The people are from Spring—something (paper ripped), and someone was from California as well.

Describe what you see in the photograph.

A large group of men and boys—most in civilian clothes, a few in uniforms—are gathered at the U.S. Capitol. In the center, there is a small dog wearing a shirt with the word “bonus” legible. Protesters hold signs that criticize President Hoover and make a statement about foreign governments paying bonuses to their soldiers “with borrowed American money.”

What is your prior knowledge of this time period?

This was taken during the Great Depression, before the New Deal was passed. Many people were unemployed and needed assistance in 1932.

Step 2: Understand

Why do you think someone took this photo?

This photo was taken to report on a news story. On the back, there is a stamp beneath the torn caption that says “newsp...” indicating that it was once owned or was taken by a newspaper. The way the photo looks made me think that it was taken to show information, not to make an artistic statement. The people are all posed in a group, and their signs are clearly visible.

Who do you think was the audience for this photo? Why do you think so?

This photo is meant for people interested in news and politics. Because it includes a lot of information – many types of people and their signs that explain what their grievances are—I think that it was intended to convey information about the event.

Step 3: Connect

How do the photographer’s choices—like composition, content, perspective—impact the meaning of the photograph?

The choice to show the large group gathered with the Capitol in the background helps indicate the extent of the protest and its importance. Including people of different ages and races, in uniform and in civilian clothes, shows who supported the bonuses for war veterans.

What does the photo tell us about the time it was taken?

War veterans were not given benefits and had to fight to receive money. People were also desperate for help during the Depression, demonstrated by the number of people that traveled to express their need for help at the Capitol.

How does this photo relate to U.S. History?

1932 was a difficult year in America: the Great Depression had been happening for a few years, and droughts in the Midwest destroyed crops and made things worse. The next year, Franklin Roosevelt was elected president, after which decisive actions to help people were taken. But at this time, people had been struggling for a few years, with limited help, and so actions like this protest to get veterans payments took place.