

Primary Source Analysis: Suggestions for Teachers

Primary sources are firsthand accounts that provide glimpses into history. The Records Search database (<https://history.house.gov/HouseRecord/Search/>) contains unique materials related to the U.S. House of Representatives. By analyzing these sources, students can better understand historic events, American culture, perspectives, and the House itself. Below are some suggestions to help facilitate analysis and discussion of primary sources. While these suggestions will guide you through analyzing documents on Records Search, we invite you to use this graphic organizer with any primary source that your class is examining.

- 1. Select a document and review the historical context before introducing it to your students.**
Records Search provides identifying information and historical context for each primary source. The detailed description and links to related material will help you get started.
- 2. Download a scanned copy of the document by clicking “Download PDF of House Record.”**
A high-resolution version of each document is available in PDF format. This makes it easy to project the document 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.**
The graphic organizer will guide students as they analyze the document. 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 document individually or in small groups, demonstrate the process for the entire class. Encourage questions about primary documents, analysis, and the worksheet itself.
- 5. Allow students to analyze documents in small groups or individually.**
Allow students to work through the process on their own. If possible, encourage them to annotate a printed copy of the document with questions, comments, unfamiliar words, 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 document’s connections to the historic era or unit being studied. Place particular emphasis on the significance of the document.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Primary Source Analysis

Step 1: Identify

Title

Author

Date Created

Type of Document

What is your prior knowledge of this author?

What is your prior knowledge of this time period?

Step 2: Understand

Purpose

Message

Audience

Step 3: Connect

What does this document tell us about the author?

What does this document tell us about the time period?

Why is this document important?

Primary Source Analysis: Directions

Step 1: Identify

Title

What is the title of this document?

Author

Who wrote or created this document? (Hint: the author might not be a single person.)

Date Created

When was this document created?

Type of Document

What kind of document is it? (Examples: letter, bill, resolution, map, press release)

What is your prior knowledge of this author?

What do you already know about the author?

What is your prior knowledge of this time period?

What do you already know about this time period? What major events were affecting the United States during this time?

Step 2: Understand

Purpose

Why did the author create this document?
What was his or her goal?

Message

What information does this document provide?

Audience

Who is meant to read this document?

Step 3: Connect

What does this document tell us about the author?

After reading this document, what do you now know about the author or creator? What is his or her perspective?

What does this document tell us about the time period?

After reading this document, what do you now know about this time period? What historical insight does this document give us?

Why is this document important?

This is the most important question: so what? Why do we care? Why does this document matter to history?

Primary Source Analysis: Completed Example

Step 1: Identify

Title

HUAC Minutes on May Day Parade

Author

House Committee on Un-American Activities or House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)

Date Created

June 6, 1947

Type of Document

Committee meeting minutes

What is your prior knowledge of this author?

I know that the House Un-American Activities Committee investigated Americans who were believed to be communists.

What is your prior knowledge of this time period?

I know that World War II had just ended, and the Cold War was beginning. Americans were concerned about the spread of communism.

Step 2: Understand

Purpose

The purpose of this document was to record what was discussed at the HUAC meeting.

Message

These notes tell us that HUAC was concerned about communism's influence on the May Day parade, a labor strike, the Anti-Defamation League, and the "Southern Conference for Human Welfare."

Audience

Anyone interested in knowing what happened at this meeting, particularly members of HUAC.

Step 3: Connect

What does this document tell us about the author?

These notes tell us that HUAC was interested in many potential communist threats around the country. This document also shows that the Committee gathered information through investigations.

What does this document tell us about the time period?

This document tells us that after World War II, Americans feared the spread of communism in the United States. The U.S. House dedicated a Committee to investigating events or actions that may pose a threat to American ideals.

Why is this document important?

This document is important because it shows us the variety of events, groups, and people that HUAC monitored and investigated. It gives us a glimpse into the paranoia and fear that Americans had toward communism during the Cold War.