

### **Primary Source Analysis Tool – Critical Thinking Questions**

This handout intends to provide teachers with critical thinking question ideas to support primary source analysis in the classroom. Primary source analysis is a vital part of historical thinking—it encourages students to examine evidence closely, apply key concepts, make comparisons, and evaluate arguments within their historical context. The questions are designed to help students practice core skills: analyzing the source itself, applying broader historical ideas, citing textual evidence, comparing perspectives across time or sources, and assessing the relevance of the document to larger themes. These strategies build the analytical foundation students need to think like historians. You will see sample questions, taken from a Declaration of Independence analysis activity.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact Emilee McHorney, JMC's teacher programs manager, at [emchorney@gojmc.org](mailto:emchorney@gojmc.org).

#### **Skill: Source Analysis**

Questions focused on the source itself. This could include questions about:

- a. Intended audience
- b. Primary purpose of the text
- c. Academic vocabulary
- d. Author's claim
- e. Key evidence presented in the source

*Sample Source Analysis Question:*

According to the author, why are the colonies justified in their decision to separate?

Explain why the author included a list of grievances about the King.

#### **Skill: Concept Application**

Questions using prior knowledge to connect to the source. This could include questions about:

- a. How does this source connect to events or concepts students have already learned about?



- b. Provide students with a sample scenario (hypothetical or historical) or quote from another source. Would the original author support or oppose?

*Sample Concept Application Question:*

Describe how the Declaration of Independence embodies Enlightenment ideas - such as natural rights, the social contract, or the right to revolution.

### **Skill: Textual Evidence & Argument Evaluation**

Evaluating the merits (ideas, points of view, evidence) of the argument being made by the author. This could include questions about:

- a. What is the strongest or weakest evidence the author uses?
  - a. Ask students to rank evidence from the document based on its effectiveness.
- b. Find evidence that supports [a specific claim].
- c. How does [a specific piece of evidence] bolster the author's claim?
- d. What does the author leave out? Why do you think the author left that point out?

*Sample Textual Evidence & Argument Evaluation Question:*

Describe how the excerpt (list of grievances about the King) supports Jefferson's earlier claim about the nature and purpose of government?

### **Skill: Comparison**

Ability to identify, compare, and evaluate multiple perspectives on a given historical event. This could include questions about:

- a. How might [contemporary historical figure] respond to this author?
- b. Why would [another historical figure] agree or disagree with the author?
- c. Is this similar or different to [another historical event or debate]?

*Sample Comparison Question:*

Compare what Jefferson says in the excerpt with John Locke's ideas of natural rights.

### **Relevancy Questions**

Questions to connect the source to students' lives today. This could include questions about:

- a. Draw parallels in the content or argument to current issues.
- b. Ask students whether they agree or disagree with the author. Why? What evidence would they draw on to make the same or opposite argument?



c. Reflection

- a. S-I-T strategy: students identify what they find surprising, interesting, and troubling about the material
- b. How would you feel if you had been part of the original audience?  
Would you be persuaded by the author's argument?

*Sample Relevancy Question:*

Evaluate America's ability to uphold the democratic ideals (equality, liberty, popular sovereignty, etc.) emphasized in the Declaration of Independence.

