

## Primary Source Analysis Guide

Primary sources expose your students to first-hand accounts of historical events. Reading letters and speeches by historical figures who shaped American history—whether it's Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in the Founding era, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in the 1850s, or Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X during the Civil Rights Movement—introduces students directly to the debates and ideas that continue to animate American political life.

Teaching history and civics through primary sources creates opportunities for students to ask questions, evaluate information, make inferences, and develop reasoned explanations and interpretations of events and issues—all skills they'll need to be part of a thoughtful citizenry!

This document includes some tips for using primary sources with students. 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).

## Key Considerations When Teaching with Primary Sources

### Relevance:

Choosing relevant sources for students is crucial because it helps them connect historical events to meaningful themes and ideas. When sources are directly related to students' interests or current issues, students engage more deeply, think critically, and better understand the past's impact on the present.

- Choose sources that are directly connected to the learning objective(s) and/or standards.
- Choose sources that students can relate to their lives or current events.

### Student Engagement:

Engaging students in primary source analysis requires intentional strategies that make complex historical texts accessible and meaningful. Primary sources help students connect personally to the past, but without support, they can feel overwhelming.

- Reading the words that important historical figures wrote or spoke themselves helps students relate in a personal way to events of the past and promotes a deeper understanding of history.
- Hook students by providing necessary historical context.
- Model effective primary source analysis so they know what success looks like.
- Break up the text into smaller chunks to make it more approachable.
- Address language differences when working with older material.



**Promotion of Student Inquiry:**

Inquiry-based learning allows students to explore questions rather than simply being presented with a list of facts. In a classroom, that might look like students actively engaging with materials, discussing ideas, analyzing sources, and constructing their own understanding through guided exploration.

- Inquiry into primary sources encourages students to wrestle with contradictions and compare multiple sources that represent differing points of view.
- Leverage a primary source analysis tool, such as critical thinking questions, or other resources to guide students through the text with purpose.
- Consider utilizing student-generated questions by using the Question Formulation Technique or other questioning protocol.

**Assessment:**

Assessing students' primary source analysis helps measure how well they understand historical context, interpret evidence, and think critically. It shows their ability to draw conclusions, support ideas with textual evidence, and connect past events to broader themes.

- Provide students with criteria for success to give a clear picture of the end product.
- Assess source analysis skill separately from content knowledge.
  - When assessing analysis, you're looking at how they think about and use sources.
    - Analysis assessment may focus on skills like identifying source purpose and perspective, utilizing evidence, recognizing bias and context, connecting source(s) to historical themes, etc.
  - When assessing content knowledge, you're checking what they know about historical facts and narratives.
    - Content assessment may focus on facts, concepts, chronology, understanding key events and ideas, etc.
- Differentiate as needed for different skill levels.

