# How To Analyze Primary Documents

## What?
Having the ability to dissect the words and artifacts from the past is an essential skill in order to understand people and events from the past.

## Why?
Students are expected to examine the evidence of the past and determine, using their social studies skills, what is a historical event based on evidence and what is based on personal points of view and bias.

## How?
To begin with, investigators into the past are faced with two different types of sources:

### Primary Sources
- something made at or near the time of a historical event by someone close to the event.
- usually written records of some kind.
- other types of evidence, such as photographs, songs, and posters.
- physical objects from the period under study, such as a Revolution-era musket.
- an 1850s newspaper article describing working conditions in a factory is an example of a primary source on the impact of the Industrial Revolution on workers’ lives.
- about African Americans living in the South during Reconstruction might include census records, photographic images, letters, and diaries.
- are items created during or around the time of an event by someone who observed the event firsthand.

### Secondary Sources
- secondhand descriptions or interpretations of an event that are created after some time has passed.
- based mainly on evidence found in primary sources, although they can also be based on other secondary sources.
- a recently published history of the American Revolution, a documentary film on the history of baseball, an encyclopedia article on the Civil War, and a map or table based on statistical information collected by a government agency.
- A website relating information such as an online encyclopedia.

Students have to have the ability to differentiate between the two and have the ability to analyze both. It is just as important for students to examine the motive behind the source by analyzing the who and when of a document.

- **Historical Context:** Historical Context is the political, social, cultural, and economic environment related to historical moments, events, and trends. Historical artifacts and sources were created within particular worlds and are tied to the political, social, and economic conditions of those worlds. When looking at the past, a historian must separate personal experiences and feelings from those who lived in the time period studied.
- **Point of View:** Participants in historical events naturally have different points of view, or opinions, on the causes and meanings of events. Students should be able to determine a primary source’s point of view and analyze why participants in a historical event differed in their opinions on the event’s causes or meaning.
How To Analyze Primary Documents

- **Bias**: Bias can be described as having a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair. When examining primary and secondary sources, it is important to understand many speeches, personal writings, reporting of events often have bias attached to it.

Analysis is a matter of breaking down the document into parts and using these parts to interpret what is being said. The next step is to make an inference about the main idea of the document and the wider historical context. When analyzing a document, students will run into two scenarios: a document with a question, and a document without a question. Documents with a question are easier, because students have a purpose for reading. Documents without a question are harder, because they must find point of view (hereafter **POV**), bias, and apply historical context. Regardless of the scenario, students will need to understand the parts of analysis.

**Parts of an Analysis:**
- Vocabulary - words you need to define
- Periodization (When) - places, time periods, events you need to know
- Facts (What) - what is being stated
- Author (Who) - who wrote the document or who is speaking
- Opinion (POV and/or Bias) - usually implied, not directly stated within document

**Process:**
- Read the document first.
- Define new vocabulary.
- Estimate the time period and note what is going on during that period.
- State the facts of the document.
- Explain who is the author, look for social class, gender, occupation, culture, nationality and so on. For an opinion, ask why would this person have this **POV**, referring to BOTH bias and historical context?
- Once students have completed the “parts of analysis,” and created a generalization, they will use historical context and the generalization to make an inference.

You can use this process anytime during the guided practice or independent practice phase during the lesson cycle.
Primary Sources are...

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Historical Context in Primary and Secondary Sources

Historical thinking is the reading, analysis and writing necessary to understand the past. It is not only what we know about the past—it is how we know it. Thinking historically helps us get closer to that past—to retrieve and construct a more accurate and complete picture of what happened and what it meant.

Historical Context is the political, social, cultural, and economic environment related to historical moments, events, and trends. Historical artifacts and sources were created within particular worlds and are tied to the political, social, and economic conditions of those worlds. When looking at the past, a historian must separate personal experiences and feelings from those who lived in the time period studied.
### How To Analyze Documents

#### Visual Analysis - Pictures / Paintings / Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How To</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have students read the title of the visual. If there is not a title, have them decide what the visual is about. Have students determine what is the subject/topic of the picture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have students identify the people and objects shown in the visual and explain who and what are shown in the picture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have students identify the relationships among people and objects in the visual. Have students make the connections among the people and objects in the picture to the past or present?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write or state a summary of the visual in one sentence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title of Visual / What It Should Be Titled</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>![Image of NRA Blue Eagle](source: Graphic of National Recovery Act (NRA) Blue Eagle, National Archives and Records Administration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>What I Recognize (Symbols / People / Objects / Words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Relationships / Connections to the Past or Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What I Think Is the Main Idea of What I am Looking At</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Graphic of National Recovery Act (NRA) Blue Eagle, National Archives and Records Administration
**How To Analyze Documents**

**Visual Analysis - Political Cartoons**

### How To

1. Have students read the title and predict what is the political cartoon telling the reader.

2. Have students read the captions and labels and describe who and what are in the cartoon.

3. Have students look for symbols and explain what they mean.

4. Have students look for caricatures (exaggerated facial and body features) or stereotyping and explain what these caricatures/stereotyping suggest.

5. Have students make relationships with the cartoon and what they remember about main events in history.

6. Based on all the elements of the cartoon, have students determine what is the main idea (meaning, message, or issue) of the political cartoon.

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**Political Cartoon Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual</th>
<th>What I Recognize (People / Objects / Words)</th>
<th>What I Recognize (Symbols)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Do The Caricatures / Stereotypes Suggest?

|        | 4                                          |

Relationships / Connections to the Past or Present

|        | 5                                          |

What I Think Is the Main Idea of What I am Looking At

|        | 6                                          |

Title of Visual / What It Should Be Titled
How To Analyze Documents

Visual Analysis - Maps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How To</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Map Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual</th>
<th>What Type of Map Is It?</th>
<th>Where Is It?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **What Do The Symbols / Colors / Patterns Represent?**
- **Relationships / Connections to the Past or Present**
- **What I Think Is the Main Idea of What I am Looking At**

**Title of Visual / What It Should Be Titled**

1. [Map Image]

Labor unrest

1912 Textile Strike
Police, militia attack strikers; women beaten, arrested.

1914 Ludlow Massacre
Eleven children found dead after state militia burns a striking miners' tent village.

1892 Silver Mines Unrest
Miners strike to protest wage cut. To break the union, the state jails over 1,000 workers.

1887 Sugar Cane Workers Strike
State militia breaks strike, killing 30 people, mostly African Americans.

1894 Pullman Strike
About 14,000 troops attack striking railroad workers, killing 30.

1886 Haymarket Affair
A bomb explodes at a labor rally, killing seven police. Four labor leaders are later executed despite lack of evidence.

1892 Homestead Massacre
Steel workers strike to protest a wage cut. Seven people are killed in a clash with state militia.

1902 Anthracite Coal Strike
About 140,000 miners strike to win union recognition. Theodore Roosevelt forces arbitration to settle the strike.

How To Analyze Documents

Visual Analysis - Graph, Table, or Chart

**How To**

1. Have students read the title of the table or chart.

2. Have students determine the subject or topic of the chart/table.

3. Have students read all the headings and labels in the chart/table and explain what the headings represent.

4. Have students determine the information is being presented in each row for each column heading (Chart, Graph or Table) or What information is being presented in each “slice” (Pie Graph).

5. Have students determine the representation between the visual and the past and/or present day.

6. Have students determine the main idea of the entire visual.

**Chart / Graph / Table Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual</th>
<th>What Type of Visual Is It?</th>
<th>What Do the Headings Represent?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="Unemployment Chart" /></td>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="2" /></td>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="3" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment in the United States, 1929–1942</td>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="4" /></td>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="5" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Workforce Unemployed</td>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="6" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="Source" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="Title of Visual / What It Should Be Titled" /></td>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="1" /></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Historical Statistics of the United States, U.S. Bureau of the Census (adapted)
Of the complicated European systems of national polity we have heretofore been independent. From their wars, their tumults, and anxieties we have been, happily, almost entirely exempt. Whilst these are confined to the nations which gave them existence, ... they can not affect us except as they appeal to our sympathies in the cause of human freedom and universal advancement.

—President Franklin Pierce, inaugural address, 1853

These remarks best reflect confirmation of which U.S. president’s foreign-policy goals?

A. George Washington
B. James Madison
C. James Monroe
D. John Quincy Adams

**The Process**

Using the I Remember statement, we recall the foreign policies of Washington and Monroe.

The passage is about the U.S. remaining neutral from European affairs.

From the answer choices, George Washington’s foreign policy closely relates to what is in the passage; therefore, “A. George Washington” is the correct answer.

The ability to correctly paraphrase the passage and apply the historical context allows us to make the connection from the passage to the question being asked.