

Skills Matrix—a collection of best practices for the social studies classroom

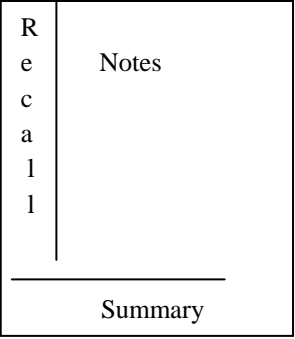
- I. Collecting and Acquiring Information—These skills are used at all levels of Pre-AP* and AP* coursework with progressively more detailed readings and note-taking efforts. These techniques promote active reading and increased comprehension skills. As skills develop, students begin to organize information, identify key concepts and relationships, and acquire knowledge for interpretation and analysis of content materials.

A. Reading	
1. SQR3	
<p>S Survey the assignment</p> <p>Q Question the purpose</p> <p>R Read straight through</p> <p>R Recite the lesson</p> <p>R Review the lesson</p>	<p>SQ3R: This is a method of tackling a reading assignment for students of all levels of experience. The SQ3R method suggests a plan for <u>surveying</u> a given assignment, <u>questioning</u> the author’s purpose, <u>reading</u> the assignment in its entirety, <u>reciting</u> the lesson in some note-taking format, and <u>reviewing</u> the assignment for understanding. Suggested steps of this method include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before you read: SURVEY • While you are surveying: QUESTION • When you begin the assignment: READ • After you have read: RECITE • An ongoing process: REVIEW <p>If all of the materials from a reading assignment have been organized, regular review of your study materials will eliminate the need to “cram” before a test. When preparing for a cumulative test, review of all of your previous study materials will assist in seeing broad relationships, overarching themes, and change over time. For more information, see: Robinson, F.P. (1961, 1970). <i>Effective Study</i> (4th ed.). Harper & Row: New York.</p>
2. PRTR	
<p>P Preview</p> <p>R Read</p> <p>T Think</p> <p>R Review</p>	<p>PRTR: This simple reading method incorporates the principles psychologists have long studied through experimentation. People learn and retain information better if they understand the material to be learned, express ideas in their own words, and rehearse/review materials in several shorter study sessions over time. The PRTR method suggests that the learner preview, read, think, and review as he/she reads.</p> <p>To begin a reading assignment, the learner should <u>preview</u> with a brief look ahead to the lesson, noting subheading or section titles. The learner then <u>reads</u> the major section previewed. The learner should do only a section or two at each reading session so as to absorb the information presented. The next step is to <u>think</u> about what has been read. This is an active process where the learner may take notes, ask questions, and think critically about the assignment. Finally, the learner should <u>review</u>, which should</p>

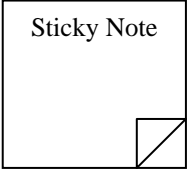
	include scanning the section just read, noting key terms or concepts, and summarizing what has been presented. While this process sounds involved, with practice it becomes routine and takes but a few extra minutes of reading time. It will lead to greater understanding of content materials. For more information, see: Myer, D.G. (2001). <i>Psychology</i> (6 th ed.). Worth Publishers: New York.
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B. Note-Taking

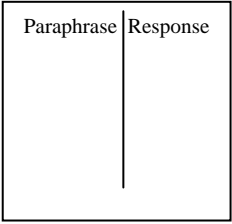
1. Cornell Note-Taking

	<p>Cornell Note-Taking: This is a useful tool for students as they begin to read textbooks, primary and secondary resource materials, or any other assigned reading where specific content information should be gathered and organized for future use. For more information, see: Pauk, W. (2000). <i>How to study in college</i> (7th ed.). Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston.</p>
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2. Sticky Note Annotation

	<p>Sticky Note Annotation: This note-taking method is an alternative when students not allowed to write in their textbooks. Students will need a sticky note type pad of paper. As students read assigned textbook material, they should write in their own words important concepts, key terms, major dates, or issues of note on the removable notepaper. These sticky notes can be placed directly in the text for quick reference. When reviewing reading materials, the sticky note can be a valuable tool for summarizing large quantities of information. Sticky notes can be easily removed for class discussion, essay writing, or exam review.</p>
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3. Dialectical Journal

	<p>Dialectical Journal: This is a double-entry journal that provides a “paper trail of students’ thoughts” as they read text. In this journal, students essentially have a dialogue with their reading material. In the left column, students briefly paraphrase an idea from the text. In the right column, students write their response to the idea. Responses could include stating and defending an opinion, posing and explaining a question, or connecting the text’s content to other people, events, literature, or ideas. For more information, see: Berthoff, A.E. (1982). <i>Forming, thinking, writing: The composing imagination</i>. Boynton/Cook: Portsmouth, NH.</p>
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4. Concept Cards

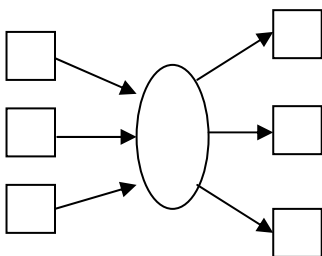
Issue:
Significant Event:

Concept Cards: Using note cards, students can identify major issues, characters, and events and may determine the significance and impact of these events. This method allows student practice in gathering, summarizing, comparing, contrasting, and analyzing information regarding a person, time period, or issue.

5. Matrix

Matrix: At the Pre-AP/AP level, students should be encouraged to develop their own matrices using recognized social studies categories (e.g., PERSIA, SPEC). Choosing a title for the matrix, composing a thematic statement, and creating categories to synthesize the information being gathered are all important parts of the matrix assignment. As students progress, teachers should place more responsibility for these tasks on the student. In grades 6 and 7, it is reasonable for the teacher to provide most of the categories, with the student developing details to fill in the matrix. In grades 8-9, students should develop categories and details with little assistance and be able to justify their designations. At all levels, students need not fill in every box in the matrix, but should include pertinent details; quality of detail, not quantity, is the goal of this technique.

6. Graphic Organizer



Cause-Effect

Graphic Organizers: Using graphic organizers, students can categorize and organize information that they read in a meaningful format that is useful for analysis. Teachers can use these visual tools for explanations and review. Teachers and students can create their own or use blank structures found in most textbooks to show cause-effect, compare-contrast, sequencing, whole-part, and other concepts.

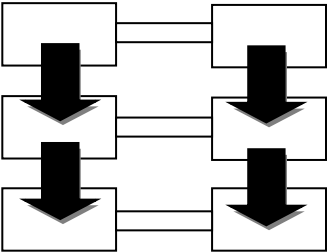

7. Half-Page Solutions


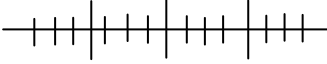
Reading Notes	Class Notes

Half-Page Solutions: As students are required to read assignments of greater length for greater depth, it is important for them to make productive use of time spent in reading and note taking. This strategy assists students in gathering information from a secondary source such as a textbook assignment and merging it with class discussion or lecture. Students fold a sheet of paper in half, placing "Notes from Reading" and "Notes from Class" as headings of the two resulting columns. On the left side of the

	<p>page, students take selective notes indicating only the most significant information from a text or other reading assignment. As the instructor facilitates class discussion, the students decide what information not previously recorded should be added and include this information in their own words on the right side. This technique helps the student learn to take a large quantity of information and synthesize it for future use.</p>
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II. Processing Information- Practicing the techniques of collecting and acquiring data will allow the student to prepare for higher-level critical thinking, such as assessing, analyzing, and interpreting trends, connections, and relationships. The goal of Pre-AP classes is to introduce these skills and give students the opportunity to practice them with teacher guidance. As students progress, they will rely less on their instructor and can become more independent thinkers.

<p>A. Organizing</p>	
<p>1. Incident Reporting</p>	
	<p>Incident Reporting: An “incident report” may be used to analyze a period in history, a specific incident, a current event, or a hypothetical scenario developed by a teacher. Placing these concepts in an overall picture or perspective facilitates students’ practice of higher-level thinking skills. Using the form provided (or one modified to fit specific content), the students can take an in-depth look at chosen subject matter in a way that asks them to gather and use evidence to develop cause and effect, construct multiple sides of an argument, and analyze point of view, bias, and context.</p>
<p>2. Mapshots</p>	
	<p>Mapshots: A mapshot requires students to take notes or organize information using a template to include an appropriate map and designated space to record data. By recording information using the suggested form, students are able to connect the details about each society to that society’s place on the map. Once the details about each society are in place on the map, it is possible to identify spatial trends, connections, and relationships. It is especially useful as a way to link concepts or events that occurred in different parts of the country/world in the same general time period. This activity can be used at all stages of the learning process: information acquisition, information processing, and student assessment.</p>

3. Big Picture Question (BPQ)	
<p style="text-align: center;">“BPQ”</p> 	<p>BPQ: This strategy helps Pre-AP/AP students deal with the greater quantity of reading and volume of detail that they are expected to master. In more challenging courses, it becomes increasingly important for students to be effective readers, connecting their reading to previous learning, and building a framework to accommodate future knowledge. The “Big Picture Question” (BPQ) assists in these tasks by focusing ideas on the primary issue, most important concept, or reason for covering a particular unit of study. Good BPQ’s are broad and open ended and allow for interpretation. For example, a BPQ may ask: “After analysis of documents and other resource materials related to the War of 1812, what events and facts signified that the U.S. gained a sense of nationalism from the war?” As students read assignments, record major facts, and discuss issues in class, they can form an answer to the BPQ. This process can give students direction as they begin to develop thesis statements for essay writing. When this technique is first introduced, the teacher may provide the BPQ. As students become more skilled, they should be encouraged to develop their own questions to focus study.</p>
4. Timeline	
<p style="text-align: center;">Date/Date/Date/Date</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Event/Event/Event/Event</p>	<p>Timeline: Timelines provide concise visual images of a period of history with key years and events marked on a simple line or other graphic. Use this technique either as an introduction or as a unit review, to identify the highlights of a unit of study or time period. This technique is not merely for memorization of facts and dates. Timelines can be used as assessment tools, with students providing significant events as well as an explanation of why each event was designated. The Pre-AP students may need some assistance in selecting important features for a timeline. AP students may select and justify designated events within a larger context or period.</p>
5. SMELL	
<p>S Sender–Receiver Relationship</p>	<p>SMELL: This strategy introduces the skills of constructing and evaluating arguments and using primary and secondary documents to analyze point of view, context, and bias. SMELL was first developed for use in the analysis of advertising. In the classroom, it is especially appropriate for in-depth analysis of persuasive documents. Instructors are encouraged to go beyond the literal in showing students how to use this strategy for analysis.</p> <p>Elements include:</p>

<p>M Message (Summary)</p> <p>E Effect (Desired)</p> <p>L Logic</p> <p>L Language</p>	<p>Sender–Receiver Relationship–Who are the sender and receiver of the message and what is their relationship? <i>Example:</i> In the Declaration of Independence, the literal sender and receiver are the American Colonies and Great Britain. The next level of abstraction is colony to mother country. A higher level of analysis, however, sees an oppressed people sending a message to their perceived oppressor and also looks at the extent to which the founders were writing to a world audience and to future generations.</p> <p>Message –What is the literal summary of the content?</p> <p>Effect–What emotional strategies does the author use?</p> <p>Logic–What is the rationale used by the author? <i>Example:</i> The Declaration of Independence is based on the concept of unalienable rights.</p> <p>Language–Why did the author choose the language and style used in the argument? <i>Example:</i> Travis’ letter from the Alamo. Why does a person who faces death and is asking for reinforcements take time to write such a formal letter?</p>
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6. SOAPSTone

<p>S Speaker</p> <p>O Occasion</p> <p>A Audience</p> <p>P Purpose</p> <p>S Subject</p> <p>T Tone</p>	<p>SOAPSTone can be used as an introductory strategy for primary source analysis. It can be used to build fundamental skills for AP work: developing arguments; analyzing points of view, context, and bias; and assessing issues of change and continuity over time.</p> <p>The elements include:</p> <p>Speaker: Who or what delivers the message of the passage? (N.B.: This may not always be the author.)</p> <p>Occasion: Where and when was the passage produced? What was happening there at that time?</p> <p>Audience: For whom was the document produced?</p> <p>Purpose: Why was the document produced?</p> <p>Subject: What is the main topic of the document?</p> <p>Tone: What feeling or attitude does the document express?</p> <p>This strategy can be used to analyze political cartoons, posters, photos, artistic representations, or almost any other primary source.</p>
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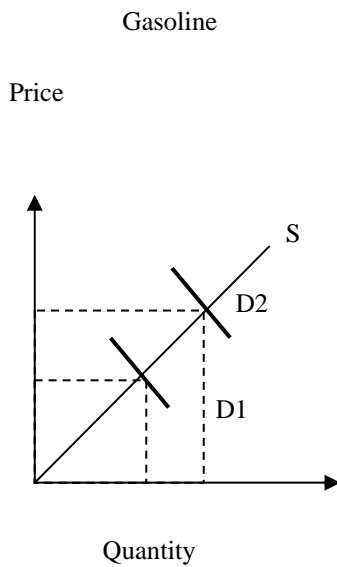
7. APPARTS

<p>A Author</p> <p>P Place and Time</p>	<p>APPARTS: This strategy is used to analyze many types of primary source documents, including political cartoons, letters, news articles, essays, and graphs. Students should be exposed to a variety of primary source types to develop skills in analyzing and</p>
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<p>P Prior Knowledge</p> <p>A Audience</p> <p>R Reason</p> <p>T The Main Idea</p> <p>S Significance</p>	<p>using pertinent information from both context and message. Used with other methods of analyzing primary sources, APPARTS will assist students as they learn to respond effectively to agree/disagree statements and other essay topics. It is a building block to creating thesis statements, developing arguments with plausible support, and explaining frame of reference and bias. APPARTS helps prepare students for the Document- Based Question (DBQ) on Advanced Placement exams.</p> <p>Key elements include:</p> <p>Author: Who produced the material studied?</p> <p>Place and Time: Where and when was the document produced?</p> <p>Prior Knowledge: What do the students know about or need to know to understand the document?</p> <p>Audience: For whom was the document produced?</p> <p>Reason: Why was it produced?</p> <p>The Main Idea: What is the document mostly about?</p> <p>Significance: What is the importance of the document in history?</p>
<p>8. SPEC</p>	
<p>S Social</p> <p>P Political</p> <p>E Economical</p> <p>C Cultural</p>	<p>SPEC: SPEC is a classification tool used to help students construct meaning of time periods. As students answer questions about the social, political, economic, and cultural events of an era, they develop a clearer understanding of its place in history and begin to bridge new information to previously learned information. This process is essential as students begin to organize writing assignments that reach Pre-AP/AP social studies goals: identifying and understanding cause-and-effect relationships, assessing multiple causes of historical events, explaining trends, developing unifying themes, and comparing continuity and change between different time periods.</p>
<p>9. PERSIA</p>	
<p>P Political</p> <p>E Economic</p> <p>R Religious</p> <p>S Social</p> <p>I Intellectual</p> <p>A Artistic</p>	<p>PERSIA: A slightly more elaborate variation on SPEC, PERSIA also assists students in gaining a deeper understanding of reading materials, and in organizing writing assignments that reach Pre-AP/AP social studies goals. It may be preferable to SPEC for courses or units focusing in depth on a society’s cultural traditions and product. Categories for evaluation include:</p> <p>Political</p> <p>Economic</p> <p>Religious</p> <p>Social</p> <p>Intellectual</p> <p>Artistic Influences</p>

B. Analyzing

1. Economic Graphic Analysis



Economic Graphic Analysis: To help students of all grade levels in understanding economic concepts, use these instructions to analyze change in price and quantity. Teachers and students can use graphic analysis that is as easy as 1, 2, 3 to understand important economic concepts.

Note there are two variables: Price and Quantity
S = Supply (quantities supplied at various prices)
D = Demand (quantities demanded at various prices)

Before the change; The quantity supplied and the quantity demanded are equal at a given price.

The change; Example: Soldiers return from World War II, get married, start families, and begin to buy cars (in addition to other things). As a result, demand for gasoline increases.

After the change; Price increases (inflation) and quantity increases.

Use this basic information for supply and demand economic strand lessons.

2. Political Cartoons



Political Cartoons: Using political cartoons provides students practice in developing the skills necessary to analyze and engage in critical interpretations. Political cartoons may be used to introduce new material, to compare (e.g., same event from different perspectives, issues at different historical times, different regions of the world), or as an assessment tool.

To analyze:

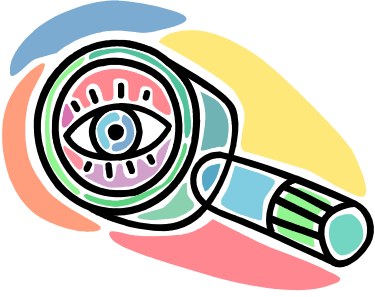
1. Start by looking at visual elements of the cartoon.
2. Read the captions and text of the cartoon.
3. What outside knowledge is necessary to understand the cartoon?
4. Look for symbols/symbolism.
5. What message is conveyed?
6. Analyze the effectiveness of the message.

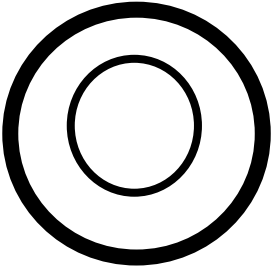

See:

http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/cartoon_analysis_worksheet.pdf

	<p>A: Attitude: What are the feeling(s) expressed by the author?</p> <p>S: Shifts: What changes in speakers and attitudes occur in the poem.</p> <p>T: Title interpreted: What does the title mean beyond the literal?</p> <p>T: Theme: What is the poet saying?</p>
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5. OPTIC

<p style="text-align: center;">OPTIC</p> 	<p>OPTIC: OPTIC is an organized approach for teaching students how to read visual or graphic text closely. As noted in <i>How to Study in College</i> (2001) by Walter Pauk, the five letters in the word OPTIC provide a mnemonic device to remember the five key elements in analyzing a visual.</p> <p>O is for Overview</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a brief overview of the main subject of the visual. <p>P is for Parts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scrutinize the parts of the visual. • Note any elements or details that seem important. <p>T is for Title</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the title or caption of the visual (if present) for added information. <p>I is for Interrelationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the words in the title or caption and the individual parts of the visual to determine connections and relationships within the graphic. <p>C is for conclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw a conclusion about the meaning of the visual as a whole. • Summarize the message in one or two sentences. <p>OPTIC can be used with any visual or graphic text, including photographs, diagrams, charts, and fine art. For more information, see: Pauk, W. (2000). <i>How to study in college</i> (7th ed.). Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston.</p>
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C. Discussing	
1. Inner/Outer Circles	
	<p>Inner/Outer Circle: This technique can be used to develop students' understanding of concepts while practicing higher-level questioning. This method gives students the responsibility for running a structured classroom discussion. To prepare for the activity, the teacher assigns a discussion-worthy reading. In addition, the teacher instructs students in writing higher-order questions that go beyond simple knowledge-based and comprehension questions to one requiring greater application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Students write three to five critical thinking questions. As the activity begins, the inner circle discusses and answers questions posed by the outer circle, while the outer circle listens, takes notes, and poses prepared questions. Roles then reverse. The teacher is a non-participating observer.</p>
2. Question Wall	
<p>Can you recall? How would you rephrase? What would result if? What is the relationship between? Can you predict the outcome? What would you cite to defend the actions? How would you prioritize?</p>	<p>Question Wall: To move students to a higher level of thinking, the instructor should model higher-level questioning and should give students the opportunity to practice these questioning techniques themselves. As a reference for themselves and for students, instructors may consider creating a Question Wall on which they post selected questions. As the entire class becomes familiar with these questions and practices using them, students will begin to demonstrate greater depth of thinking with greater confidence and frequency. For more information, see: Bloom, B.S. (1956). <i>Taxonomy of educational objectives: Cognitive domain</i>. David McKay and Company: New York.</p>
3. Socratic Model	
	<p>Socratic Model: Socratic seminars typically consist of 50-80 minute periods. In groups of 25 or fewer, students prepare for the seminar by reading a common text (e.g., a novel, poem, essay, or document) or viewing a work of art. The teacher poses questions requiring students to evaluate options and make decisions. In Socratic seminars, students must respond with a variety of thoughtful explanations: they must give evidence, make generalizations, and tell how the information is represented for them. In other words, they must engage in active learning. When they develop knowledge, understanding, and ethical attitudes and behaviors, they are more apt to retain these attributes than if they had received them passively.</p>

4. Verb Wall	
VERB WALL	<p>Verb Wall: The verbs below correlate with the six levels of thinking in Bloom's Taxonomy. Posting these verbs in a prominent place in the classroom attunes students to the difference between lower-and higher-level tasks and helps raise the level of classroom discussion. This in turn develops habits of mind that are central to an advanced level of critical thinking.</p>
Knowledge	<p>VERB LIST</p> <p>Level I. Knowledge know, define, memorize, repeat, record, list, recall, name, relate, collect, label, specify, cite, enumerate, tell, recount</p>
Comprehension	<p>Level II. Comprehension restate, summarize, discuss, describe, recognize, explain, express, identify, locate, report, retell, review, translate</p>
Application	<p>Level III. Application exhibit, solve, interview, simulate, apply, employ, use, demonstrate, dramatize, practice, illustrate, operate, calculate, show, experiment</p>
Analysis	<p>Level IV. Analysis interpret, analyze, differentiate, compare, contrast, scrutinize, categorize, probe, investigate, discover, inquire, detect, classify, arrange, group, organize, examine, survey, dissect, inventory, question, test, distinguish, diagram, inspect</p>
Synthesis	<p>Level V. Synthesis compose, plan, propose, produce, invent, develop, design, formulate, arrange, assemble, construct, set up, prepare, imagine, hypothesize, incorporate, generalize, originate, predict, contrive, concoct, systematize</p>
Evaluation	<p>Level VI. Evaluation judge, decide, appraise, evaluate, rate, compare, value, revise, conclude, select, assess, measure, estimate, infer, deduce, score, predict, choose, recommend, determine</p>

III. Study Skills - Students who accept the academic challenge of higher-level classes often are not prepared for the task of studying for tests or cumulative examinations. Perhaps in previous learning experiences, simply being in class and attending to the presentation at hand was sufficient to retain the level of information necessary to do well in class. However, as students progress with their courses of study, it is necessary to ensure that students have a basic idea of how to study efficiently.

1. How to Learn to Study

How to Learn to Study



How to Learn to Study: The following are a few “how to” suggestions for students just beginning to develop personal study techniques, as well as to those who have established techniques that may not be as effective as desired. Consider this advice to help students to learn to study:

- Be sure you attend all classes. If you are absent, get class notes as soon as possible.
 - Attend all available review sessions. The teacher may present materials in a slightly different manner or you might gain understanding on a second presentation.
 - Seek tutoring help for difficult concepts before you get “lost” in your studies.
 - Spend quality time studying to learn and fully comprehend course material.
 - Use soft instrumental music (no lyrics) to filter out background noise and increase concentration for productive study time.
 - Find designated space without clutter or distractions that is similar to a desk for a study setting.
 - Work by yourself for basic understanding. Study groups are helpful in some circumstances but learn to rely on yourself.
- These tips may help improve a student’s overall study confidence, which should lead to greater academic success.

Working With Primary/Secondary Sources and the DBQ

What are Primary/Secondary Sources?

Historians classify sources of information about the past in one of two categories: primary sources or secondary sources. Primary sources, our focus here, are created by eyewitnesses to or participants in an event who record the event or their reactions to it during or immediately following the event. In the social studies classroom, these will include historical documents, pictures, letters, political cartoons, and graphical information from an original source. Documents are considered primary sources if they originated with people who had primary, or firsthand, knowledge of the event.

The writings of people who were not present at the event when it occurred, or who recorded their impressions long after the event, are secondary sources. Examples include a graph made from historical data and an article based on facts taken from primary sources.

It is important for your students to begin to appreciate that a primary source is not necessarily a “better,” or more reliable, source than a secondary one. Primary sources are excellent teaching tools in part because they are more prone to factors that affect the reliability of the information such as, the author’s incomplete or inaccurate understanding of a current situation, self-interest, and purposes in writing apart from trying to inform and create a historically complete record. Getting your students to look for, account for, and address the possible role of these factors is a big part of your job as a Pre-AP* teacher.

In a sense, therefore, the use of primary sources is the “lab component” in social studies. Document analysis is authentic learning, requiring students to compare information and judge its accuracy, develop and test hypotheses, and formulate and revise interpretations.

How to Use Primary Sources

Before you, as a teacher, use any primary source in class, be sure that you have analyzed it yourself to determine its usefulness and to decide what learning you wish students to gain from it. This is more crucial for primary sources than for more traditional teaching materials, such as textbooks. The following is a list of considerations when using primary resources.

- Know what specifically you want to get out of the document and which parts you want to use. Often historical documents are lengthy, yet the concept or content that is the subject of your lesson is imbedded in only one or two phrases. For most uses in social studies, excerpts are preferable, as they save both teacher and student time. In excerpting the documents for classroom use, though, balance this time-saving benefit against the need to teach the student how to elicit the most significant information from a source. And when a document has an overall structure that is essential to understanding it, be sure that your editing preserves this structure.
- Whenever possible, work directly with a copy of the document rather than with a transcription. This allows the student to “feel” and “see” the history that you are trying to teach. Within reasonable limits, it can also foster students’ appreciation of some of the difficulties in interpreting historical records.
- Explain to students the historical context in which the primary source was created. Some documents may describe violent events or may contain expressions now considered offensive. Prepare your students in advance by explaining how these events or expressions reflect the time period of the document.

Evaluation of Primary and Secondary Sources

Below is a comparison table of tools for evaluating primary and secondary sources. The SPEC and PERSIA techniques are described more fully in the Skills Matrix.

SPEC	PERSIA	SPRITE	GRIPE
Social	Political	Social	Geographic
Political	Economic	Political	Religious
Economic	Religious	Religious	Intellectual
Cultural	Social	Intellectual	Political
	Intellectual	Technological	Economic
	Artistic	Economic	

One other technique deserves mention. OIEC (Observation, Inference, Evidence, Conclusion) is one of the more versatile strategies for evaluating documents, pictures, political cartoons. It is easy for students to remember and use, and it helps them identify the central concepts and facts that pertain to a document.

Observation—Students observe a primary resource, picture, or graphic and list the facts that they identify.

Inference—Based on their observations and their previous knowledge, students make inferences about the source.

Evidence—Students list specific evidence to support their inferences.

Conclusion—Students write a conclusion.

What are Document-Based Questions?

Although the phrases "document-based question" and "document-based essay" may sound complicated, they easily can be understood when they are broken into parts. A document is anything written or printed that provides facts or information, such as a map, a letter, or a photograph. A document-based question (DBQ) is a question that is about one or more of these written or printed source materials. Some document-based questions ask for specific information and can be answered in one or two sentences. Others require the students to take information from several documents and use it in an extended piece of writing or essay. These questions may ask the student to analyze, evaluate, or compare the points of view of two or more documents. The question most often expects the student to use knowledge of American history as well as the documents to answer an open-ended question about the subject of the documents. Generally, the more documents used to support an answer, the stronger an essay will be.

How to Approach Document-Based Questions

(Student Handout)

Whenever you take a DBQ test, begin by reading the test directions carefully. First read the historical background information and ask yourself, "What do I already know about this subject or time period?" The chances are good that you have already studied the time period and know something about it. Next, read the

task (prompt) carefully. This part of the test directions tells what your essay will be about. Pay particular attention to key action words that say what you are supposed to do.

Here are some action words that often appear in test directions.

Analyze– Break something into its parts, describe the parts, and show how the parts are related to one another

Compare– Tell about the similarities between two things

Contrast– Tell about the differences between two things

Describe–Tell about something in detail

Interpret–Explain or describe the meaning or significance of something

Support–Provide evidence to back up or to prove your main idea

After you have an idea what the general task is for your essay, then your next step depends on whether the supporting evidence in your answer is to consist entirely of analysis of the documents or (as in AP* U.S. history) is also supposed to draw on outside knowledge. If you are supposed to support the arguments in your answer with outside knowledge as well as evidence from the documents, then engage in some brainstorming before you examine the documents. Think about relevant events, concepts, and movements, and begin to organize them according to categories dictated by the prompt. You will likely need to adjust your evidence after examining the documents, but your answer will be stronger if the documentary evidence is brought in for support of your own points, rather than if you let the documents drive your entire analysis.

When you are ready to examine the documents, for each one ask yourself the following questions:

Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?

Who is pictured in the document? Who wrote or created it?

Who is it about? Who was its original audience?

What is the document about? What kind of document is it?

What is the purpose of the document?

When and where was the document produced?

Why did the artist paint/draw this picture?

Why are the characters pictured the way they are?

How might this picture change people's view of...?

A useful way of approaching these questions is to follow a series of steps.

- Read the essay question several times to make sure that you fully understand the intent of the question. Continually refer back to the question as you analyze the documents.

- Read or study each document. First make sure that you understand what the document says or shows. Use SPRITE, OPTIC, APPARTS or other strategies that you have learned to analyze primary resources.
- After you have read all the documents, read the essay question again. Write down one or two sentences pertaining to each particular document that give your basic answer to the question. Why was the document made? How does the document relate to its time period?
- Pay close attention to any titles and captions or accompanying notes that appear with the documents.
- Outline your essay. Think about how to use each document to support your idea. You do not need to use every document.
- Write your essay. Your essay should have three parts: (1) an introduction that states your answer to the question; (2) a body that develops your answer and offers evidence from the documents; and (3) a conclusion that restates your answer. You should include specific historical details. Work to include comments on documents in your essay.
- Edit your essay. Read through the essay, changing it as necessary to make your sentences clear and effective and to correct errors in spelling and punctuation.