



Teaching Idea: Guide to Creating Primary Source Document Activities

I found a primary source document. Now what do I do?

The most difficult part of creating a primary source document activity is finding the source. We seem to focus so much on finding the documents that little attention is given to how to create a meaningful lesson with the document(s). This is a quick guide to help you create lessons with primary source documents.

Step 1

Determine an overarching question for the assignment. What do you want students to know at the end of the lesson? For example, a question could be: "How did British promises lead to conflict in Southwest Asia," or "Should Kurdistan become an independent country?"

Step 2

Find one or more primary source documents to help support your question. If you chose a question that could be argumentative, be sure to find a source from each perspective.

Step 3

Open the Stanford History Education Group's Historical Thinking Strategies Chart (linked here). <https://sheg.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/download-pdf/Historical%20Thinking%20Chart.pdf>

Use this chart to help you create questions to help students learn about the source, context, corroborate the document with others, and close reading. There are more questions in the chart than you will need for a lesson, but the chart is an excellent springboard to help you focus your questions on what you want students to get out of the primary source document. Try to use two questions from each category. This will allow students to learn that understanding a primary source document involves more than just reading the document.

Additionally, the Historical Thinking Chart gives sentence starters for each question, which could be easily used to provide support for students that might struggle with this assignment.

Step 4

Format the primary source document so that students can annotate the document as they read it. Create spaces so there is room for students to write the meaning of what they read or highlight important information.

Step 5

After creating questions to help students understand the primary source, create an activity for them to apply their new understanding. It could be something as simple as writing a few sentences to answer the overarching question, or it could be more involved, like creating a propaganda poster or an essay.