

Suggested Methods for Integrating Primary Sources into Classroom Instruction

1. Focus Activity

Introduce document analysis as a regular activity at the beginning of each class period to focus student attention on your day's topic.

For example: Place a document on an overhead projector for students to see as they enter the room; or meet students at the door and hand them a document as they enter—as soon as the bell rings, begin a discussion.

2. Brainstorming Activity

Launch a brainstorming session prior to a new unit of study with a document. This will alert students to topics that they will study.

For example: Distribute one or more documents to students and ask them what places, names, concepts, and issues are contained in it/them, along with what questions they prompt. Write these on a sheet of butcher paper. Keep this list posted in the room for the duration of the unit. Check off items as they are studied in the unit.

3. Visualization Exercise

Encourage students to visualize another place or time by viewing and analyzing graphic materials.

For example: Post photographs, maps, and other visual materials created during the period that you are studying around your classroom. Change these images as the units change.

4. Project Inspiration

Let documents serve as examples for student-created projects.

For example: If your economics assignment is for students to create a poster encouraging young people to save money, share examples of World War II savings bond campaign posters with them.

5. Dramatic Presentation Activity

Use documents to inspire dramatic presentations by your students.

For example: Share with students a presidential speech and ask a student volunteer to deliver it to the class; or ask a student to present a dramatic reading of a letter; or assign students to write a script containing quotes from primary source documents.

6. Writing Activity

Use documents to prompt a student writing activity.

For example: Share with students a letter and ask them to either respond to it or write the letter that may have prompted it.

7. Listening Activity

Allow sound recordings to give students the sensation of being present at an historical event.

For example: Dim the lights in your classroom while you play a sound clip from an historical event and ask students to describe or draw the scene and/or the emotions in the voices.

8. Creating a Documentary

Use vintage film footage to encourage student-created documentaries.

For example: In place of a traditional unit assessment, assign student groups the creation of a 10-minute documentary about the time period they have just studied. Ask them to incorporate film footage, photographs, sound, and quotes from other primary sources.

9. Cross-Curricular Activity

Use documents to suggest and reinforce collaboration with a colleague in another department on assignments for students.

For example: If a physics teacher assigns students to create an invention, share with students a patent drawing and ask them to draw one for their invention along with a specification sheet. Or, share documents with students related to the novels (or authors) that they are reading in Language Arts.

10. Current Events Activity (What is Past is Prologue)

Use documents to launch a discussion about an issue or event in the news.

For example: Select a document that relates to a person, event, or place that is currently in the news. Strip the document of information about the date of its creation and distribute it to students. Ask students to speculate about when it was created.

11. Drawing Connections Activity

Use documents to help students recognize cause and effect relationships.

For example: Provide students with two seemingly unrelated documents and ask them to connect them using other documents. One possibility might be to ask them how the Lee Resolution and the Homestead Act are connected. Student answers might include, “Three committees were set up as a result of the Lee Resolution. One committee drafted the Declaration of Independence. Its principle author was Thomas Jefferson. He was the president at the time of the Louisiana Purchase. The territory that became part of the United States as a result of the Louisiana Purchase included much of the land that became available for settlement under the Homestead Act.”

12. Integrating Geography Activity

Use documents to emphasize where significant events have taken place.

For example: Post a large map of the United States or the world on the classroom wall. Each time a new milestone document is discussed, place a pin in the location where the document was created and/or where its impact was the greatest.

13. Small Group Hypothesis Activity

Use documents to encourage creative thinking and the significance of a particular document.

For example: Divide students into small groups, provide them with a document, and ask them to consider “what if” the document never existed.


14. Self-reflective Exercise

Use documents to prompt student understanding of how actions of the government and/or events of the past affect their lives today.

For example: Provide students with copies of the 19th Amendment and the Voting Rights Act and ask students to consider the documents’ implications for their lives.

15. Assessment

Incorporate documents into document-based essay questions to assess student knowledge of a topic or event.

For example: Provide students with four documents that relate to westward expansion (such as, the Northwest Ordinance, the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railway Act, and the Morrill Act). Ask them to use the information contained in the documents and their knowledge of the subject to write an essay explaining the federal government’s role in the settling of the West. 

This list was developed by the education staff of the National Archives and Records Administration.