


# Reading Like a Historian & Adapting and Using Primary Sources

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Danice Toyias, MCHCE  
danice.toyias@mchce.net



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## Part I: Reading Like a Historian



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### History, as a discipline, has:

- ◆ A specific focus.
- ◆ A specific vocabulary.
- ◆ A specific set of skills.
- ◆ A specific set of strategies.
- ◆ A specific set of knowledge that is created from historical study.

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*Historians have developed powerful ways of reading that allow them to see patterns, make sense of contradictions, and formulate reasoned interpretations (v).*

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**So What?**

- ◆ It is these critical thinking and critical reading skills that our students are taught in our K-12 history and social studies classrooms—considering most do not go on to become historians—that become essential tools for citizenship when they become adults (v, vi).

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**Reading Like a Historian:  
Where to we begin?**

- ◆ Essential Questions: Send us back to the original sources to formulate arguments that admit no easy answers (v).
- ◆ Each question requires us to marshal facts to argue our case (v).

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## 2 Pillars to Reading Like a Historian

- ◆ Sourcing a Document
- ◆ Contextualizing a Document

◆ Document used here to describe any kind of source.

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## Pillar 1: Sourcing

- ◆ Begin a document at the end.
- ◆ Who wrote it?
- ◆ When was it written?
- ◆ What kind of document is it?
- ◆ Is the author a first-hand witness? Is the account based on hearsay? Is it based on memory?

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*Even before approaching a document's substance, historians have formed a list of questions that create a mental framework to hang the details that follow (vi).*



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## Sourcing Activity

- ◆ Each teacher receives a document. The topic is on Civil Rights.
- ◆ Please take a moment to source your document. Please feel free to write all over it. Write your questions on your document as well.

*It's not about gathering information to repeat on a test, but about engaging a human source in spirited conversation (vi).*

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## Pillar 2: Contextualization

- ◆ Events must be located in place and time to be understood.
- ◆ When was the document written? Where was it written?
- ◆ When did the person writing it live? At what point were they in their life when they wrote it?
- ◆ Where did they live?
- ◆ Was this something in which they were actively engaged, or were they a passerby?
- ◆ What about the event in the document? Was it something of national memory, or more local?
- ◆ Create a timeline for the document (including the event, author, subject) to see how it fits the "big picture."

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*Just as students in Language Arts classes are taught about similes and alliteration, so history students must be taught to source authors and to contextualize historical documents (vi).*



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## Contextualizing Activity

- ◆ Note: Most of this activity will be "homework."
- ◆ Please get into grade-level groups. (Elementary, Middle, and High School). If you have a large group, feel free to break into smaller ones so long as you are with your grade level.
- ◆ Work together to contextualize your document. If there are holes, please write questions you have, or notes to yourself for further study (you can look quick questions up on the internet). Please save the more time-consuming ones for tonight.

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## Part 2: Adapting and Using Primary Sources

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## Adapting and Using

- ◆1: Select
- ◆2: Modify

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## 1: Selecting Document(s)

- ◆ (\*Remember this all begins with an essential question.)
- ◆ Choose documents that convey the essence of the historical problem (vii).
- ◆ Quality is more important than quantity—this is the place to teach students to SLOW DOWN and READ CLOSELY (vii).
- ◆ Documents should encourage students to think about word choice and subtext (vii).

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## 2: Modify Documents for YOUR Classroom

- ◆ Focus student attention by:
  - ◆ Cutting excess verbiage
  - ◆ Include a Word Bank, provide vocabulary, key definitions
  - ◆ Head Note—Orient students to what follows
  - ◆ Adapt language when the original language is a barrier
    - ◆ Conventionalize spelling, simplify syntax, change vocabulary
- ◆ Try to retain as much original texture and feel. To do this will take practice, so....
- ◆ ALWAYS include an original in your files, and citation (not just a web link) so you can easily find it again.

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## From the Civil War to Civil Rights

- ◆ “SPLC Study Finds that More than Half of States Fail at Teaching the Civil Rights Movement”
- ◆ Chapter 7: Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott (pages 105-123)
- ◆ Essential Question: “Whom Does History Remember & Forget?” *Examine how we pluck figures from the past’s cast of characters, elevating some as heroes, while sentencing others to obscurity* (111).

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## Homework

- ◆ Using the source you were given:
  - ◆ 1) Determine an essential question (probably obtained from your sourcing exercise) that you could use in your classroom.
  - ◆ 2) Contextualize your source. \*For the next steps you may use the document you were given or choose a better source that contains the essence of your essential question.\*
  - ◆ 3) Modify the document so it is accessible to your students.
  - ◆ 4) List possible lesson activities.
  - ◆ 5) Describe assessment strategies.
  - ◆ 6) Write your answer to the essential question.

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