

# Thinking Historically

## Teaching with Primary Sources at DePaul University

- ❖ **“If history already happened, why does it keep changing?”** If you’ve ever taught history or social studies, you’ve probably heard this question from your students. Many students fall into the trap of looking for a “Holy Grail” source that presents a full account of the past—as teachers, we need to break them of this habit and help them *think like historians*.
- ❖ **Above all else, thinking like a historian involves an understanding that *all* sources must be questioned, evaluated, and critically considered in context with other sources.** Though we can never get a truly full account of the past, we can help our students understand major themes, concepts, and phenomena by critically analyzing historical documents and sources.
- ❖ **How can we help our students think like historians?** Teaching a way of thinking requires making that thinking *visible*. Below are a set of specific strategies for reading historical documents.
  - **Sourcing:** Thinking about a document’s author and its creation.  
Select a historical document. Ask: *Who created this document? When? Why? How trustworthy is it?*
  - **Contextualizing:** Situating the document and its events in time and place.  
Brainstorm the document’s historical context, piecing together major events, themes, and people that distinguish the era or period in which the document was created. Have students list their responses for later reference.
  - **Close Reading:** Carefully considering what the document says and the language used to say it.  
Have students document every thought that comes to mind, no matter how trivial, as you try to make sense of the document. In particular, they should note interesting or unfamiliar words or phrases, consider context clues about time and place, or question the source’s perspective on events.
  - **Using Background Knowledge:** Using historical information and knowledge to understand the document.  
Ask: *What else do we know about this topic? What other outside knowledge do we possess that might help us understand the document?*
  - **Reading the Silences:** Identifying what has been left out or is missing from the document by questioning its account.  
After reading the document, ask students about what they did *not* see. Ask: *What is the document missing? Whose voices are excluded? What perspectives are missing?*
  - **Corroborating:** Asking questions about details across *multiple* sources to determine points of agreement and disagreement. Think about how you can proceed with a historical investigation. Ask: *Now that we have read this document, what questions do you have? What other sources might support or refute this document’s interpretation? What sources might enhance our understanding of the topic?*

**SOURCING:** *Who created this document, and why? Is it reliable?*

**CORROBORATING:** *What questions do you have? What other sources might enhance our understanding of this topic?*



**CONTEXTUALIZING:** *Brainstorm what you know about the time and place this document was created.*

**READING THE SILENCES:** *What information is not contained in the document? What's missing? Whose voices are excluded? What perspectives might help you better understand this document?*



**CLOSE READING:** *As you examine the document, note all of your observations (no matter how minor) here.*

**USING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE:** *List any background knowledge you may have about this document, its creator, or its time period.*

