

Thinking Like a Historian

Knowledge Set Teaching Guide

This Knowledge Set introduces historical thinking and inquiry skills as students examine letters from different periods in U.S. history. Each letter includes guiding questions and scaffolding notes to support students in summarizing, sourcing, contextualizing, and corroborating historical sources. This set is a great resource to use at the beginning of the school year to prepare students to read and analyze historical texts.

Target Grades & Subject(s): Grades 6-12; History/Social Studies

Learning Objectives

- Students will summarize key details from a primary source in order to understand the author’s perspective and the historical time period. (CCSS RH.2, RH.6)
- Students will corroborate historical sources by comparing and contrasting multiple documents from the same time period. (CCSS RH.9)
- Students will use evidence from a historical source to make inferences and draw conclusions. (CCSS RH.1)

Before Teaching this Series

- Ask students to discuss the following questions in small groups: What do historians do? How is studying history different from studying biology or current events? After groups have shared their ideas, explain that historians often use specific strategies as they study documents from the past, which they will learn about in this set.
- Review the difference between primary and secondary sources.

Texts in this Set (download texts [here](#))

Text 1: Letter from Mary Lou Reitler to President Kennedy (1962) (1 page)	
This letter was written to President Kennedy in 1962 in response to the government's investment in the space program. The instruction in the text introduces the first phase in analyzing a historical document -- sourcing and summarizing. As students read, they will identify what the text says explicitly about the author, the author’s purpose, and the historical context.	<p><u>Discussion Questions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think the author’s views about the space program were shared by many others during this time period? Why or why not? - What questions do you still have about the time period in which this letter was written?
Text 2: Letter from Thomas Christie to Sandy Christie (1865) (1 page)	
Written during the Civil War, this letter provides examples of archaic words and other details that will help students begin to contextualize the source to further understand the historical time period. After reading, ask students to reflect on how knowing more about the context helped them to understand the letter.	<p><u>Discussion Questions:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If you did not know anything about the Civil War, how would that have changed your understanding of the letter? - Do you think this is a reliable depiction of life as a soldier during the Civil War?
Text 3: Letter from Bobby Murray to the Children's Bureau (1939) (1 page)	
The final two letters in this set were written during the Great Depression. Having two texts from the same time period will give students the opportunity to practice corroborating a source. As students read this letter, they will also begin to make inferences based on the details provided by the author.	<p><u>Extension Activity (Part 1):</u> Have students recall a memorable incident that happened at home or school over the last two weeks. Ask them to write a short story describing the event, including as many details as possible. <i>[Discussion questions: Why did you pick your event? What kind of evidence would be necessary to prove your story is accurate?]</i></p>
Text 4: Letter to Mrs. Roosevelt from a School Supervisor (1936) (1 page)	
As students conclude this set, they will bring together all the skills they have practiced to analyze another perspective on how the Great Depression affected children. After reading, students will compare and contrast the details in this text to the previous letter in this set. Students will also use the information from both sources to construct an interpretation of the time period.	<p><u>Extension Activity (Part 2):</u> Ask students to interview someone who was also present at the event they wrote about previously. Have students compare and contrast the two accounts. <i>[Discussion questions: Did the person you interviewed agree with (or corroborate) your version of the event? What might lead to different versions?]</i></p>