

Teaching with Document Packets

After requests, I've decided to include this little guide as a basic overview of how I use document packets in class, and to provide some tips and tricks along the way. In the vein of history, I've decided to group this through a series of questions, as historians do nothing really but ask questions. Note: I've also included on the website my "Ten Commandments of Document Packets", which I hand out to students. Please feel free to use and refer to as well.

Q# 1: Why document packets?

In short: *to make the students suffer more*. Terrible jokes aside (though a few teachers I had once probably would take that literally) there is no better way for a student to truly practice historical skills than by doing what historians do: examining primary sources with historical reasoning in order to find the truth (or at least, the closest thing to the truth we can find!). This isn't to say that secondary sources, textbooks, lectures, etc. aren't needed. THEY ARE! As the teacher, you serve as the secondary source, guiding the students and giving them the context. However, you need to take those training wheels off at times, and let them ride on their own - let 'em skin their knees a little - though you should intervene if they're going to go into traffic, metaphorically speaking.

Having the students examine the documents for themselves is following the model of previous classical generations - we learn best by going back to the source. And there is nothing more close to the past than primary sources.

Q# 2: How do we approach primary sources?

A natural question you might have is *how on earth do I take 21st century students and have them read artifacts from [insert date from really long time ago here]*? The past is a foreign country, and it's easy to get lost. What all students need is a process or method when approaching the sources. There have been many of these methods made (apologize for the alliteration), but this is my own. It is called READ.

1. R - Research Author & Context
2. E - Evaluate the Source
3. A - Analyze Other Documents
4. D - Determine the Truth

READ is the four step historical thinking process all students should practice when examining a source - whether from 2,000 years ago or what was posted last night on the internet. Every document in the packet will include questions with these steps at the beginning of each question, so as to remind the students and train their brain to adopt the READ process. (If you're wondering, I used IONIC as my five-step process, but felt READ was quicker and easier to remember for the students).

The first step is “R - Research Author & Context”. Here, the student will do what often goes against their inclination - to just read and trust whatever is front of them. But what they must learn is the first thing we all must do when reading something is to ask certain questions about authorship and broader context. Questions like:

1. Who is the author? What's their background? Perspective? Status? Job? Rich? Poor?
2. Context? - When and where was this written? What was different culturally, religiously, politically, ethically compared to our time? Same?
3. With all these questions in mind, how does that affect the content?

This may seem silly, but knowing the author and the context gives a massive leg up (and often, helps maintain proper interpretation) of past documents. For instance, if a student sees the name “Adolf Hitler”, they should know quickly that he's a sociopathic power-hungry dictator who despised any “lesser” race, especially the Jews, and led one of the largest genocides in human history. So, for instance, you don't want to take what Hitler says about the Jews as truth. On the other hand, knowing authors can just help you process documents better. Understanding the Civil Rights movement and the opposition to it by religious moderates Martin Luther King, Jr. will give you a massive leg up when reading *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* by MLK. Otherwise, you can find yourself quite lost.

Let's move on though to “E - Evaluate the Source”. This is much more straightforward. Here, the student is really trying to find the main idea - what's the overall point? **They should mark, underline, highlight, etc. whatever in the passage makes that clear to help their eyes, especially if later they're writing a essay on those documents.** I personally count that as part of their grade. They should pay attention to what evidence is being used, what language (positive, negative, over the top, etc.) is used, along with the tone. Tone can be critical, as students can often miss sarcasm in documents.

Next up is “A - Analyze Other Documents”. Perhaps the other greatest tendency of the average human is to read or watch ONE source, and then to take that as the gospel truth. It's easier and quicker that way. However, no serious historian would ever build an entire thesis on one source - they'd get laughed out the room. Students, by looking at other sources, are then forced to wrestle

with multiple perspectives in order to find the truth. When looking at other sources, there are times where it is appropriate to ask certain questions:

1. What other documents are there?
2. How does document so-and-so agree? Disagree?
3. Which documents are most reliable? Which documents, though perhaps less reliable, still might have insights to share?

As a tip, **it is key to stress** to students that just because some documents may be more unreliable or less trustworthy, does not mean that nothing is useful. There can still be some general facts, or even if nothing else, information about the document's perspective that might prove useful in building an argument.

Last up is “D - Determine the Truth”. Here, the student, after considering all the sources and weighing the possible interpretations, is to decide what is the most plausible answer to the historical question asked at the beginning of the document packet. Speaking of which:

Q# 3: How do I use the packet?

Here are the basic steps of using this packet:

1. Have students read the historical question at the top, then the introduction/historical context section.
2. Have students always read the Document Title, author, and source information. **BEFORE** they read the actual text, they are to answer the “R” question. This is to train them to always ask questions about the author and context before approaching the text itself.
3. Then, they are to read the text or examine the image, and answer the rest of the questions. They are to mark and highlight the key parts of the text that show the MI, tone, or language, as part of their grade. They are also to write in complete sentences to ensure they are answering questions properly. It is fine as the year goes on to let up on this some, but it is key to start strong early in the year.
4. Students are to progress through each document in this fashion, until they reach the end assignment. The end assignment often takes the form of a small essay, a historical cartoon, a invective/panegyric assignment, or a seminar presentation/debate. Instructions and/or rubrics are often included at the end of the document packets that use them.
5. **SPECIAL NOTE:** The packets I use in class are extensive, and grow in length the longer I teach them. I want to push my students as far as I can, challenging them with longer and more complex documents. However, my students are at a high performing school, and are ready to take on that challenge. Your students or context might be different - *and that is totally fine*. With that in mind, please trim down documents, cut questions, skip

questions, whatever is necessary to maintain learning and engagement with your students. If something is too much for them, adjust it. I won't lose any sleep, as it is not about me. And I won't know anyway, because I won't be there. Feel free to chop away.

Tips on breaking the monotony:

1. Early on, model the students on how to read, and drop back in every now and then later in the year to remind them.
2. Answer the questions by volunteers, by spot asking, etc. It is also good to let the students answer on their own quietly, and then spot check certain questions or all of them after they have finished.
3. As time goes on, have different students read the documents or source info, or take on differing paragraphs.
4. Let students work in pairs on occasion on a series of documents - don't do it too often, as it could lead to dillydallying, but it helps break up the usual routine.
5. Try to limit document reading to 30 minutes or so. It's okay to go less or more, but it helps if you're not reading the entire class and just answering question after question.
6. Make sure to familiarize yourself with the documents before class - if you know them already, you will be able to ask more interesting questions, guide discussion, or point out things the students may have missed. The students can sense your own investment, and will respond accordingly.

Q# 4: What should a thesis & response look like?

Note: In certain document packets, students will be required to write out a small thesis - essay response. The following includes a basic and advanced example of what your responses should look like in regards to format and diction. As a sidenote, some of this is accurate, and some of this I made up for fun. Don't take this as a wholesale accurate depiction of Japanese culture.

Thesis & Response - Determine the Truth

MQ: To what extent did the concept of the “American Dream” affect Japanese culture in the 20th Century?

Instructions: Answer the main question of the packet, citing evidence from the text and using outside information from the historical context essay, class discussion, or from the textbook. Below include a 1-2 sentence thesis with a specific claim and at least 2 specific historical points. Then, include a 6-8 sentence paragraph that expounds on your thesis. You must cite/reference at least five different documents.

Good Thesis: In the years following World War II, Japanese culture experienced drastic change in their fashion as they adopted American suits and beauty stylings. However, Japan often resisted the concept of the nuclear family, instead valuing work for work's sake over work for familial stability.

Bad Thesis: In the years following World War II, Japanese culture had new fashion and new ways of working.

Basic Response:

The American Dream, which pictured a family of 4-5 with a hard-working husband in an office job, a domestic housewife who took care of the home and yard, and at least 2-3 children who attended school and prepared for life, was the middle class ideal for many Americans during the 1940s and 50s. (Doc. 1) Japan notably adapted differing aspects of this “dream”. Men began to dress like American workers (emulating the suit and tie) and modeled themselves after successful figures, like John D. Rockefeller or Frank Sinatra. (Doc. 2 and 3). Japanese housewives too modeled their hair, makeup, and appearance after American housewives. (Doc. 4). However, as the years went on, Japanese men prized more the “dream” of financial success than the “dream” of a large family. Thus, Japanese men sacrificed time at home, or avoided marriage altogether. (Doc. 5) All in all, the American Dream was adapted in differing degrees by the Japanese populace during the 20th Century, rather than wholesale adopted.

Advanced Response:

The American Dream, described by cultural anthropologist John Medina as a family of 4-5 with a hard-working husband in a stable job, a domestic housewife who took care of the home and yard, and at least 2-3 children who attended school and prepared for life, was the middle class ideal for many

Americans during the mid 20th Century. (Doc. 1) Japan notably adapted differing aspects of this “dream”. Dr. Mikkelsen, a reputable sociologist who lived in Japan for years, noted that in the 1950s men started to dress like American workers (emulating the suit and tie) and modeled themselves after successful figures, like John D. Rockefeller or Frank Sinatra. (Doc. 2 and 3). The fashion editor of the Tokyo Today newspaper, Hiyao Miyazuki, noted that Japanese housewives too patterned their hair, makeup, and appearance after American housewives around the same time. (Doc. 4). However, as the years went on, Japanese men prized more the “dream” of financial success than the “dream” of a large family. Hideo Kojima, the head of one of the largest companies in Japan, recounted how honor was found in its highest form through their careers. Thus, Japanese men sacrificed time at home, or avoided marriage altogether, as they believed that “the reason to live was to work”. (Doc. 5) All in all, the American Dream was adapted in differing degrees by the Japanese populace during the 20th Century, rather than wholesale adopted.

The Difference between Basic and Advanced:

What sets these two responses apart is mainly noting the author, and describing the reliability (or un reliability), point of view, or position of the source. Though “Basic” suffices for this exercise, in the future I will expect the “Advanced” response more.

Hot Tips:

1. Never repeat your thesis in your response section.
2. Always write in the past tense and complete sentences.
3. Always cite your sources parenthetically.
4. Always have a thesis with specific historical points, not vague themes or a general theme. This is different from English class. Historians like specific, historical, physical, real, etc. points, not ideals.
5. Again, don’t quote a source for more than a few words. No sentence long quotations or two lines, etc.

Q# 5: How do I run a debate / presentation / seminar?

Here are the basic steps of leading one of the seminar debates in some of my packets:

1. Split students into groups of around 4. Inform them that with this historical question, they are choosing their own position.
2. They are to work on the documents often together (though you may lead if you wish) until they finish.
3. Once done, read the instructions for the thesis section and have them write out their thesis, and provide feedback.
4. Then, the students are to use the presentation outline to prepare for the seminar presentation and debate. They are essentially constructing a historical essay, but more towards a verbal evaluation.
5. It will usually take students 1 and a half to 2 hours to prepare their presentations.
6. Once they are ready, have the students form a round circle with their desks. It creates an excellent collegiate atmosphere. And they love the round circle - it feels like a UN meeting.
7. Each group will then go. They usually take around 6-8 minutes to present, and then face 8-12 minutes of questions from the teacher and peers. I prefer to let the peers do more questions, and I ask one or two.
8. Each student will grade their peers, though you will grade them and have final say.
9. Rinse and repeat!