

“Universal Truths” of Teaching with Documents*

- Documents can illustrate abstract concepts—for example, the constitutional separation of powers.
- Many documents suggest cross-curricular connections—for example, geography and government.
- Signed documents can often personalize history for students.
- Primary source documents often appear in a familiar format. The familiarity encourages students to build upon their prior knowledge.
- When the significance of a document is not obvious, its clues prompt students to conduct further research.
- The date of a document can focus student attention on turning points in history.
- Documents can enable students to make connections between seemingly unrelated information—for example, a patent drawing and Article I of the U.S. Constitution.
- Documents can serve as models of effective communication for students. In some letters, students witness the exercise of First Amendment rights and the power of the written word.
- Analyzing multiple documents related to a similar topic allows students to compare different points of view.
- When documents reflect human emotions, students empathize with historical figures.
- Some documents are treasures. Learning about them, and the ideas they embody, connects students to a collective national heritage.
- Subtle references in a document can pique student curiosity and encourage critical thinking.
- Unique markings on a document capture student attention.
- Graphical materials, such as photographs, maps, and posters, challenge students to draw upon visual data to learn historical content.
- Primary sources make students question where information comes from and encourage students to consider their original use.

*As discovered by the National Archives education team, Lee Ann Potter, Daniel Rulli, and Kahlil Chism, January 2005.