

Be skeptical as you read. Be a detective. Ask yourself: Is the document reliable, is there corroboration, and is the source biased? What are the author's underlying assumptions? An abolitionist writing about John Brown differed from a Southerner's report on the raid. Could the source have been designed with posterity more in mind than contemporaries? Woodrow Wilson, assessing blame for the defeat of the Versailles Treaty, played the role of the prophet by foreseeing the Second World War. Finally, the context of references is important. Don't project modern values into the documents. The reference to tyranny in the Declaration of Independence doesn't make George III a fascist or a totalitarian dictator.

How to Analyze Documents

Many of the following examples are based upon former Advanced Placement document-based questions. The principles of how to analyze documents apply to any document.

I. Visuals

A. Pictures and photographs

1. **Subject:** What person, event, or subject is represented?
2. **Time and place:** When and where is the subject taking place?
3. **Point of view:** Is the artist or photographer trying to convey a particular point of view?
4. **Emotional impact:** What is the general impression?
5. **Form of expression:** What kind of picture—drawing, painting, etc.—is it?
6. **Any symbolism present:** Justice blindfolded in a John Brown lithograph with the Virginia state flag in the background with the state motto, "Thus always to Tyrants." Painting, "The Bridge," by Joseph Stella, a mass of entangling wires and cables, some forming church-style windows (technology a new religion?)

B. Cartoon

1. **Who are the characters in the cartoon?** Are they realistic or exaggerated? What are their expressions?
2. **What symbols—flags, Uncle Sam, unemployed, etc.—are there?**
3. **What is the overall idea or impression of the cartoon?**
4. **Title or caption**

C. Poster

1. **Who published it, for what possible reasons?** (It may reflect a biased view.)
2. **Title**
3. **Intended for what audience?**
4. **Purpose of the poster or the evidence**

D. Diagrams and flowcharts

1. They are used to summarize an important idea and to illustrate the idea's parts or components.
2. Check the title.
3. Examine the parts.
4. Labels

E. Maps

1. Maps deal with a specific time period.
2. A map focuses on a specific topic, event, or development in history, often a *change-over-time* illustration (Compromise of 1850).

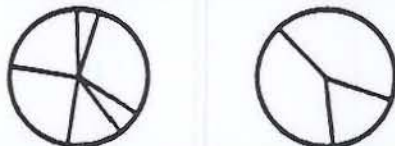
3. Places the subject in a specific location
4. Check the title.
5. Check the key or legend.
6. Remember the differences between geographic maps and electoral vote maps.

F. Charts

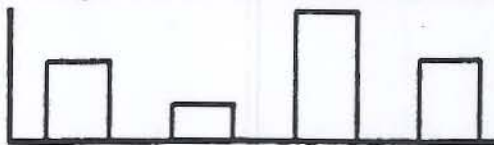
1. They usually illustrate a relationship between two subjects. Decide what those two subjects or ideas are (time and voting, residence and prohibitionist leadership, population and money supply) and their relationship (increases, decreases, no change, directly or indirectly related).
2. Check title and category titles.
3. Are the numbers percentages or absolute? Don't refigure the numbers. (It is stupid to claim that twins born to a family of four represent a 100% increase in the number of children in the family. The chart-makers used the numbers, either absolute or percent, to convey an idea, not to teach mathematics.)
4. Be careful: Large money and population figures are often given in abbreviated form such as thousands. Thus, a 62,000 population figure may really be 62,000,000.
5. Were the changes illustrated significant? (65% to 67% is not.)
6. Remember that the chart illustrates a trend for only a specific period.
7. Remember the possible influence of major events on the time period indicated (voting statistics in 1770-1790 and the Revolutionary War).
8. Be aware of the chart with a collapsed X or Y axis (1770-1775, 1784-1792). It is intended to indicate that an insignificant period was purposefully left out of the chart.

G. Graphs

1. Read the key.
2. Notice the title.
3. Look for dates.
4. Graphs use statistical data to present historical comparisons or changes over time.
5. Circle or pie graph: Each circle represents the total quantity, e.g., 100% of the population. Note that the portions of the circle represent a percentage.



Bar graph: read both axes. One usually represents a percentage or quantity and the other usually a time period. Note that the bars are drawn to scale to make a comparison.



Line graph: Read both axes. Unlike a bar graph, which shows a subject at a specific time, a line graph can show trends over every part of the time period, and often shows several trends at once.



II. Printed Materials

A. Newspapers

1. Editorial or article (abolitionist sympathizer Horace Greeley on John Brown's raid). You should be aware that before the 20th century it is hard to differentiate between an article and editorial opinion.
2. Interview
3. Evidence of the newspaper's economic or political bias (urban, rural, South, *Wall Street Journal*)
4. Letter to the editor
5. Be aware that an editorial or article may either reflect mass opinion or be an attempt to influence or to create mass opinion.

B. Magazine or pamphlet

1. Same checks as under newspapers
2. What is the normal audience of the magazine (*McCall's*, *Field and Stream*)?

C. Book

1. Is it contemporary or not, an eyewitness to an event or second-hand comment (Frank Norris's *The Octopus*)?
2. A disinterested observer (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*; James B. Weaver, *A Call to Action*)
3. Politically partisan, based on evidence or opinion?
4. Remember that the preface is a personal statement.
5. Novels can be symbolic.
6. A review of a book is the reviewer's opinion, not the author's.
7. A recollection of an event long after it happened (Eisenhower recalling a meeting with President Truman three years earlier.)
8. Memoirs—a selective and personal view that is rarely self-critical.

D. Poem

1. Poems are meant to use language as art rather than to give information.
2. Usually illustrates a spiritual or symbolic view of a period, event, or idea.

III. Personal Documents

A. Speech

1. To what audience?
2. Rough draft (It may be more truculent.)
3. Official speech or informal (inaugural address, State of the Union Address)
4. Campaign speech (FDR versus Hoover)
5. Ask yourself, based on what you know about the speaker, is this a view you would expect him to take, such as Andrew Carnegie's opposition to the Treaty of 1898?

B. Letter

1. Official or personal
2. To a subordinate or a superior
3. What is the relationship between the two people?
4. Private or public (John Adams to his wife)
5. From an organization (VFW on immigration)
6. Is the date significant (a letter to a delegate during the Constitutional Convention, or a letter written during Shays's Rebellion)?

C. Diary

1. Personal
2. After or before the fact
3. Remember that a diary is usually not self-critical.

IV. Political Documents

A. Party platform

1. A presidential candidate may or may not agree with the platform.
2. A political platform is often a compromise document, although third party platforms are more truculent.
3. A convention declaration such as Seneca Falls, 1848, may describe present conditions, indicate a degree of stridency, or show the organization's goals and expectations, such as the Populist Party platform, 1892.

B. List of groups supporting legislation

1. What organizations are represented?
2. Any pattern to support or opposition, any common characteristics (South, urban, immigrant, slave states, Midwest, former Populist states)
3. Any surprises or unusual alliances (Carnegie and Bryan in opposition to the Treaty of 1898)

V. Public Records

A. Laws, proclamations, executive orders

1. Why was the law passed; what does it represent? Remember, laws are passed as solutions to a problem, as the representation of a group's ideal (prohibition), as a guide for future behavior (Puritan laws on church attendance), or as a response to public pressure for what is perceived as a problem (Sherman Antitrust Act).
2. Some laws are more symbolic in their passage than in their enforcement (Volstead Act, Sherman Antitrust Act)
3. Commentary on the laws similar to a textbook on laws (Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*)
4. Federal, state, or local law?

B. Court decision

1. Does it declare a law unconstitutional, and if so, what new problems does it create (Dred Scott)?
2. Does the decision support the views of a particular section, party, or class (NRA)?
3. Was the decision enforced or obeyed (Brown, Indian removal)?
4. Narrow or broad interpretation in the decision
5. Note the division in the decisions: 5-4, 9-0, 6-3. Was it close?
6. Trial transcript—Scopes trial, Darrow versus Bryan

C. Legislative debate, Congressional Record, speech in Congress, testimony before a congressional committee

1. Was the speech for constituent consumption or for colleagues?
2. Any other evidence of influence of the speaker among his colleagues (Henry Clay would be more respected than George M. Dallas.)
3. Is the person known for other activities (Carnegie and the Treaty of 1898)?
4. What point of view or organization does a person testifying before Congress represent (a railroad vice-president testifying on long and short haul rate differentials)

D. Government agency report

1. Federal, state, or local
2. How does it reflect the general tone of government at the time (1920s versus 1930s)?
3. Be aware that agency reports are rarely critical of themselves.

4. A report may be intended to lay a basis for future expansion in scope or powers or increased funding.

E. Others

1. Diplomatic correspondence such as instructions from the secretary of state to treaty negotiators or correspondence to Congress or an official about ongoing negotiations.
2. Official letters (from the Rhode Island state assembly to Congress)
3. Treaties—provisions, how do the provisions compare with prior agreements, or cause future consequences (Yalta Agreements).