

Grades 11–12 Playlist: Analyze a Primary Document for Purpose and Rhetorical Features

Aligns with CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.9:

- Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

Welcome

Reading historical documents like the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address requires a toolkit of skills that are in many ways different from those used to read modern informational texts. This playlist will explore these skills through an analysis of the preamble to the Declaration of Independence.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- identify and analyze the purpose of a primary document.
- identify and analyze the theme of a primary document.
- explore rhetorical features of a primary document.

Exploring the Standard

Background: Primary and Secondary Documents

Historians divide the world’s documents into two categories: primary documents and secondary documents. Primary documents are those that were produced in a specific historical context and relay information about that context. Secondary documents are those documents that look back upon the past and explain it as history. To do this, secondary documents often use primary documents as windows into the past.

Consider this example. Suppose a historian wants to write a book about the founding of the United States. That historian will look at and analyze a number of founding documents, such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Depending on the type of history he or she is writing, the historian might also consider newspaper articles, letters, ship logs, and a host of other documents. The history that the historian is writing is a secondary document. The many historical documents that the historian analyzes in his or her secondary history are all primary documents.

Background: The Declaration of Independence

The United States emerged as a sovereign and independent nation at the end of the eighteenth century during the final phase of the Age of Enlightenment (also known as the Age of Reason), a movement dominated by questions regarding authority and a desire to improve life through rational thinking. As such, the founding documents of the country reflect the bold ideas of that period. These ideas—individual sovereignty, the denial of the legitimacy of tyranny, the right of



citizens to elect their own representatives, a free press, religious toleration, and many others—may seem common now, but in the eighteenth century they were still somewhat radical. To understand the Declaration of Independence, it is important to appreciate the boldness and radicalness of declaring these ideas at the time it was written.

Read!

For more information about the Age of Enlightenment, visit this website:

- <http://www.history.com/topics/enlightenment>

Read!

For more information about U.S. history, read through these primary documents:

- The Declaration of Independence: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp
- The U.S. Constitution: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution>
- The Bill of Rights: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights.html
- Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln2.asp

A Closer Look: Understanding Purpose

The first tool one needs to master in order to analyze primary documents is to understand the purpose of the document one is analyzing. This can be tricky because the purpose of a primary document at the time it was written may be different from the purpose for that same document today. For example, if a modern person is looking at an apple pie recipe from 1800, his or her purpose may be to learn about common ingredients in a kitchen at that time or how a 200-year-old oven works. But the person who wrote down the recipe in 1800 had a very different purpose in mind—likely, to remind himself or herself how to bake the pie or to tell another person how to bake an apple pie.



Teaching Notes: Analyze a Primary Document for Purpose and Rhetorical Features

The goal of RI.11-12.9 is for students to learn how to read historical primary documents for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classroom as well as additional resources to peruse and integrate into instruction as appropriate.

Activities

1. Select an excerpt from any one of the following primary source documents:
 - The Declaration of Independence: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/declare.asp
 - The U.S. Constitution: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution>
 - The Bill of Rights: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights.html
 - Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln2.asp
2. Have students read the excerpt to find the purpose and historical context. Consider having them draft a paragraph addressing these two points and using the information in the documents to support their analysis. It is also productive to have students work in small groups or pairs.
3. Provide the students with a short teacher-created analysis. Be sure to follow the same pattern that students were directed to use. Identify the purpose and the historical context, and support the analysis with clear examples from the excerpt.
4. Identify a number of important rhetorical statements in the document. For the first one or two, explain to students how these historical background and purpose of the document help show the significance of these rhetorical flourishes. Then, have the students perform the same exercise as a class. Be prepared to help them with clues and additional context.

Writing Prompts

1. Provide student with another short excerpt. Have them draft a short essay identifying the purpose, historical context, theme, important rhetorical features, and significance of these rhetorical features.
2. Provide students with a teacher-drafted worksheet that includes a short excerpt of a document, a short explanation of the historical context, and questions that require students to use this information to draft a short essay explaining the theme and the significance of certain teacher-identified rhetorical features.

