

SOCIAL STUDIES READING STRATEGIES



Practical Strategies for Developing Historical Thinkers

BEFORE READING

Activate curiosity
and build
background
knowledge.

DURING READING

Engage with text
and analyze
information.

ACTIVE NOTE MAKING

Organize, analyze,
and synthesize
learning.

AFTER READING

Process,
communicate,
and apply
understanding.



SOCIAL STUDIES SUCCESS

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES. PURPOSEFUL INSTRUCTION. DEEPER THINKING.

The Social Studies Success Framework

Teaching Social Studies is about more than covering content—it is about helping students think like historians, geographers, economists, political scientists, and informed citizens. Developing those disciplinary habits of mind begins with purposeful reading. Reading in Social Studies is unique because students analyze documents, interpret maps, evaluate evidence, and compare multiple perspectives rather than simply recall facts.

Successful Social Studies readers do more than decode words. They question, analyze evidence, make connections, evaluate perspectives, and construct meaning from historical texts and sources.

Rather than presenting a collection of unrelated strategies, this manual organizes every strategy around how students learn Social Studies—preparing for learning, engaging with content, and processing understanding.



Before Reading (Pre-Reading)

Students activate prior knowledge, preview key concepts and vocabulary, and build the background knowledge needed to understand new learning. These strategies spark curiosity, encourage questioning, and prepare students to engage thoughtfully with content before they begin reading.



During Reading

Students actively engage with historical content by analyzing evidence, making inferences, asking questions, and organizing information.

The During Reading section is organized into two parts:

Active Reading Strategies help students engage directly with text through discussion, annotation, questioning, visual analysis, and comprehension.

Active Note Making helps students organize, compare, analyze, and synthesize new learning through purposeful note making and graphic organizers.

Together, these strategies help students construct meaning, organize their thinking, and develop the disciplinary skills needed to think like historians.



After Reading (Processing)

Students communicate their understanding, evaluate ideas, explain relationships, and apply their learning through discussion, writing, and creative processing. These strategies extend thinking beyond the reading and help students make meaningful connections to the content.



Using This Manual

For the best results:

- ✓ Start with the **Teacher Planning Guide** to identify your instructional goal.
- ✓ Use the **Quick Start Guide** to choose strategies that match your available preparation time.
- ✓ Select the strategy that best supports your content and your students' learning needs.

Teacher Planning Guide



BEFORE READING

I need students to...



Activate prior knowledge

- Analogies
- Four Corner Debate
- Carousel Brainstorming



Preview vocabulary

- Predict This
- Card Sort
- Fast Facts



Build background knowledge

- Image Analysis
- Character Quotes
- Artifact Examination



Analyze images

- Crop-It
- Image Analysis
- Picture Prediction



Generate curiosity

- Book Bits
- Character Quotes
- Artifact Examination



Explore multiple perspectives

- Four Corner Debate
- Character Quotes
- Primary Source Snapshot



DURING READING

I need students to...



Read collaboratively

- WRAP
- C-R-R



Monitor comprehension

- Think Aloud
- Three-Minute Pauses
- Text Coding



Annotate the text

- Annotating
- Text Coding
- SNOTS Notes



Ask meaningful questions

- Question Dice
- Beat the Teacher
- RAP-Q



Find the main idea

- Just One
- Hashtag Notes
- GIST



Summarize information

- GIST
- C-R-R
- Hashtag Notes



ACTIVE NOTE MAKING

I need students to...



Compare and contrast ideas

- Double Bubble
- Triple Venn Diagram
- Janus Figure



Analyze cause and effect

- Cause & Effect
- Fishbone Organizer
- Problem-Solution



Sequence events

- Connections Across Time
- Cartoon Capers
- Problem-Solution



Organize information visually

- Mind Map
- Doodle Notes
- Sketch Notes



Summarize key ideas

- GIST
- Somebody-Wanted-But-So-Then
- Summarization Star



Analyze evidence

- Opinion Proof
- Image Analysis
- Sketch to Stretch



Evaluate decisions

- Decision Tree
- Changing History



AFTER READING

I need students to...



Review learning

- Alpha Blocks
- GIST
- Pick a Card
- Any Card



Reflect on learning

- Mosaic
- Character Maps
- Annotated Image



Discuss ideas

- Dialogue Detectives
- Pick a Card
- Any Card
- Beyond the Frame



Apply learning creatively

- Pipe Cleaner Processing
- Mosaic
- I Am Poem



Communicate understanding

- Elevator Speech
- I Am Poem
- Dialogue Detectives



Extend thinking

- Changing History
- Beyond the Frame
- Annotated Image

Quick Start Guide



Grab & Go

Little or No Prep



PERFECT FOR:

- ✓ Busy weeks
- ✓ Bell ringers
- ✓ Last-minute lessons



STRATEGIES



Think Aloud



WRAP



C-R-R



Three-Minute Pauses



Just One



GIST



Alpha Blocks



Pick a Card,
Any Card



Elevator Speech



Ready Tomorrow

10–20 Minutes



PERFECT FOR:

- ✓ Regular daily lessons
- ✓ Station activities
- ✓ Small-group instruction



STRATEGIES



Text Coding



Annotlighting



SNOTS Notes



Character Quotes



Fast Facts



Image Analysis



Fishbone Organizer



Mind Map



Character Maps



Worth the Prep

1–2 Days Before Class



PERFECT FOR:

- ✓ Unit launches
- ✓ Collaborative learning
- ✓ High-engagement days



STRATEGIES



Four Corner Debate



Carousel



Brainstorming



Predict This



Card Sort



Crop-It



Artifact Examination



Picture Prediction



Question Dice



Beat the Teacher



Pattern Puzzles



Mosaic



Pipe Cleaner Processing

Stage One: Before Reading Strategies

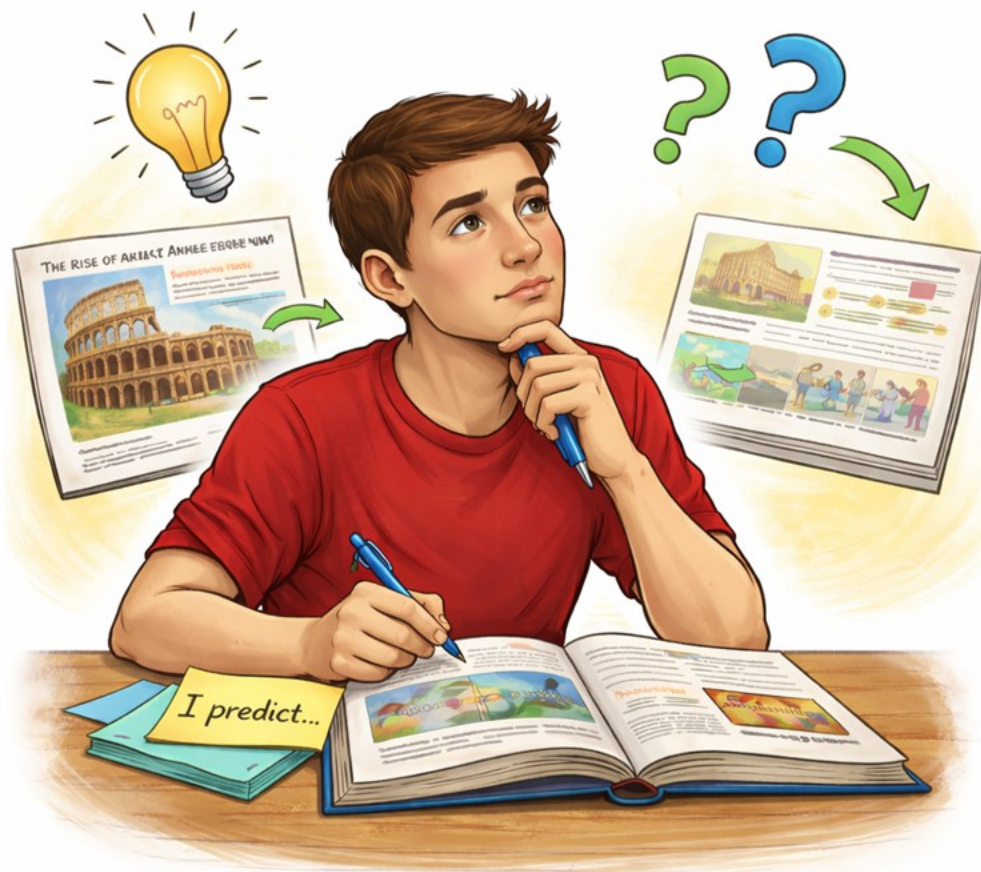


Image Analysis

Before
Reading

Use images to build understanding before reading.

Purpose	In Action
✓ Analyze visual evidence ✓ Develop observation skills ✓ Make evidence-based inferences	 Observe • What details stand out to you? • What people, objects, or actions do you see? • What is the setting (time/place clues)?
Steps	
Select images Choose a few strong images that clearly represent key concepts from the upcoming lesson (events, scenes, or actions—not just portraits). Observe closely Ask students: <i>What do you see?</i> Focus on details with interpretation. Infer meaning Ask: <i>What is happening?</i> Students use evidence from the image to make inferences.	 Infer • What do you think is happening in this image? • What clues from the image support your thinking? • Why do you think this is happening? • What might have happened just before this moment? • What might happen next?  Connect • What is this important? • How is this connected to what we are learning today? • How does this connect to what we are learning today? Examples U.S. History • Dust Bowl migrants traveling west • Little Rock Nine entering Central High School Texas History • The Alamo (battle or aftermath) • Cattle drive on the Chisholm Trail World History • Industrial Revolution factory (child labor) • Trench warfare in WWI World Geography • Ganges River (religious activity) • Amazon rainforest (deforestation scene)
Connect to content Ask: <i>Why does this matter?</i> Guide students to connect the image to the topic or “big idea.” Build on learning Students read, take notes, or discuss to confirm, revise, or extend their thinking.	Benefits ✓ Makes historical content more engaging ✓ Promotes evidence-based thinking ✓ Improves comprehension

Build curiosity and preview key ideas before reading.

Purpose
✓ Preview important concepts ✓ Generate predictions ✓ Prepare students to read with purpose
Steps
Select key excerpts Choose important phrases or sentences from the text. Reveal ideas, but don't give everything away. Create "book bits" Write each excerpt on a strip of paper (one per student). Individual thinking Students read their book bit and consider: <i>What might this text be about?</i> Share aloud (no discussion) Students move around the room and read their book bit to others (<i>Listen only—no explaining or discussing</i>) Optional structure: • Two lines facing each other • Read → rotate → repeat Quick write Students return to their seat and write: • what they think the text is about • what they predict or notice. Discussion Students share ideas and refine their thinking.

In Action
  
Examples
Topic: The Great Depression "Banks began to close across the country." "People stood in long lines for food." "Many families lost their homes." "The stock market crashed suddenly." "President Roosevelt promised a 'New Deal.'"
Benefits
✓ Sparks curiosity before reading ✓ Builds anticipation for new learning ✓ Increases reading engagement

Character Quotes

Before
Reading

Start with their words—then read to learn more.

Purpose
✓ Analyze historical perspectives ✓ Infer character traits and beliefs ✓ Prepare students for historical inquiry
Steps
Select quotes Choose quotes that reveal different aspects of a historical figure's personality, beliefs, or leadership. Distribute quotes Give each group a different quote. Group analysis Students read the quote and generate words or phrases that describe the person's traits or perspectives. Share & justify thinking Groups share their quote and explain how it supports their ideas. Teacher records traits and reveals all quotes are from the same figure. Develop a profile Students write a short personality profile using the class-generated traits (4–5 sentences). <i>Optional sentence stem:</i> _____ was the type of person who _____. He/She also seemed to be _____. Other traits included _____. His/Her words suggest that he/she believed _____. Read & refine understanding Students read the text, then revise and add to their profile using evidence.

In Action

Examples
Topic: Abraham Lincoln • "A house divided against itself cannot stand." • "Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves." • "Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." • "I am a slow walker, but I never walk back."
Benefits
✓ Humanizes historical figures ✓ Builds historical empathy ✓ Strengthens historical thinking

Stage Two: During Reading Strategies



Whisper Read Alternating Paragraphs.

Purpose	In Action
✓ Monitor comprehension collaboratively ✓ Interpret historical information ✓ Summarize key ideas	
Steps	
Partner students: Pair students and assign each partner a number (1 and 2). Start the reading: Student 1 whisper-reads the first paragraph to their partner. Alternate reading: Student 2 whisper-reads the next paragraph. Partners continue alternating paragraphs until the text is finished. Monitor & support: Circulate as students read to support pacing and engagement. Debrief: Bring the class back together to discuss key ideas from the reading.	
	Examples
	When to Use It • When introducing a new or challenging text • When you want all students actively engaged in reading • When working with longer passages that need structure Best Texts • Textbook passages • Primary or secondary sources • Articles or informational texts
	Benefits
	✓ Increases student engagement ✓ Strengthens oral communication ✓ Reinforces historical understanding

C-R-R

During
Reading

Cover-Read-Retell

Purpose
✓ Summarize historical information ✓ Explain ideas using evidence ✓ Monitor comprehension
Steps
Partner up Assign students to pairs and label them Partner 1 and Partner 2 Read aloud Partner 1 reads a paragraph aloud while Partner 2 covers the text. Summarize Partner 2 shares a verbal summary of what they heard. (Uncover the text if needed for support.) Switch roles Partners switch and repeat the process with the next section. Debrief Discuss key ideas as a class after reading.

In Action

Examples
Teacher Launch (During Reading) “Partner 1, you will read the first paragraph aloud while Partner 2 covers the text.” • “Partner 2, when your partner finishes, summarize what you heard—do not look at the text unless you need help.” • “Then switch roles and repeat with the next paragraph.” • “Your goal is to listen carefully and give a clear, accurate summary.”
Benefits
✓ Reinforces key historical concepts ✓ Improves recall of important ideas ✓ Strengthens academic communication

Text Coding

During
Reading

Track Thinking with Symbols

Purpose	
✓ Identify significant historical details ✓ Monitor comprehension ✓ Analyze textual evidence	
Steps	
1.	Provide materials Give students a passage and a Text Coding card.
2.	Set the focus Choose 1–2 codes if students aren't overwhelmed. (Example: ? = question ★ = important)
1.	Model the process Read the first paragraph and demonstrate how to mark the text.
2.	Head & code Students read in pairs or groups and pause to mark the text.
3.	Discuss & compare Students share and explain their codes with a partner or group.
4.	Reflect (optional) Students revisit codes to clarify confusion or identify key ideas.

In Action	
	
Examples	
	
Benefits	
✓ Makes thinking visible ✓ Encourages purposeful reading ✓ Strengthens close reading skills	

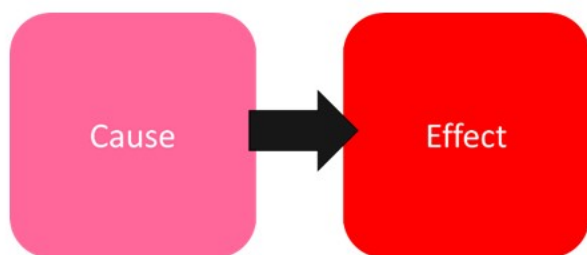
Stage Two:

Active Note Making



Social Studies Skills

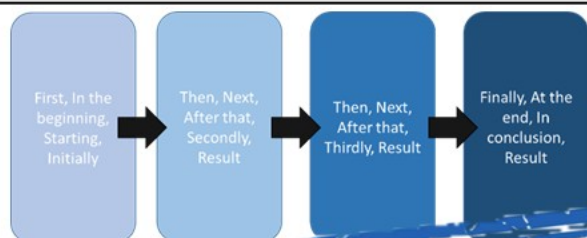
Sequencing



Cause / Effect

- Why something happened
- What happened because of it
- How one event caused another

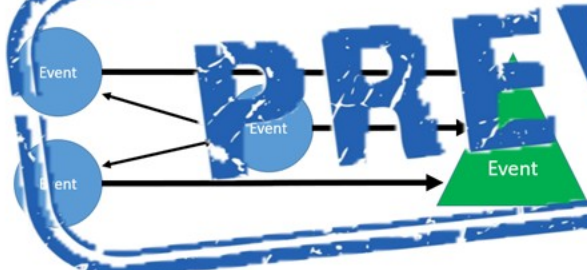
Clue Words: **cause, effect, led to, resulted in, because, why did/was, how did, impact, turning point, which factor, significant, purpose, contributed to**



Sequencing

- Puts events in the correct order
- Tells what happened first, next, or last

Clue Words: **first, next, then, after, before, during, order, sequence, timeline**

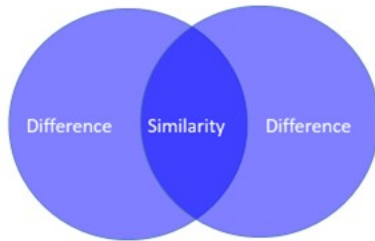


Connections Over Time

How ideas or events changed over time
How something from the past affects the future

Clue words: **influenced, over time, long-term, later, impact on, continued, changed, shows how**

Categorization



Compare/Contrast

- How things are similar or different
- Looks at two or more ideas or events

Clue Words: **compare, contrast, similar, different, both, whereas, however**



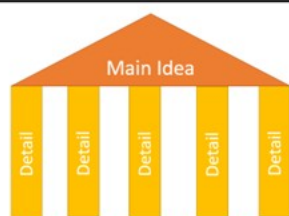
Categorization

- Groups, people, or ideas into right group or time period
- Where something belongs

Clue Words: **which era, which group, best fits, correctly replaces, title of the list, classified as, completes**

Social Studies Skills

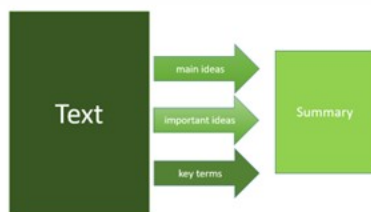
Text Dependent



Main Idea

- What is this mostly about?

Clue Words: **main idea, best describes, overall**



Summarization

- Which choice best sums it up?

Clue Words: **best summarizes, summary**

Evidence Based

Drawing Conclusions

- Use clues & facts to figure it out
- Answer not directly stated

Clue Words: **use, what can be concluded, supported, not supported**

Making Predictions

- Use information to decide what most likely happens next

Clue Words: **most likely, would probably, what will happen next**

Point of View/Perspective

- What do they believe? Their opinion?

Clue Words: **point of view, perspective, would most likely say, believed, supported, opposed**

Inferencing

- Text suggests but doesn't say
- Read between the lines

Clue Words: **implies, suggests, indicates, inferred**

Purpose

- ✓ Sequence historical events
- ✓ Summarize historical information

Steps

1. Read a short section of text.
2. After each section, draw a simple cartoon to show the main idea.
3. Repeat for several sections.
4. Sequence the cartoons in order and add brief captions to summarize the learning.

Example



Connections Across Time

Active
Note
Making

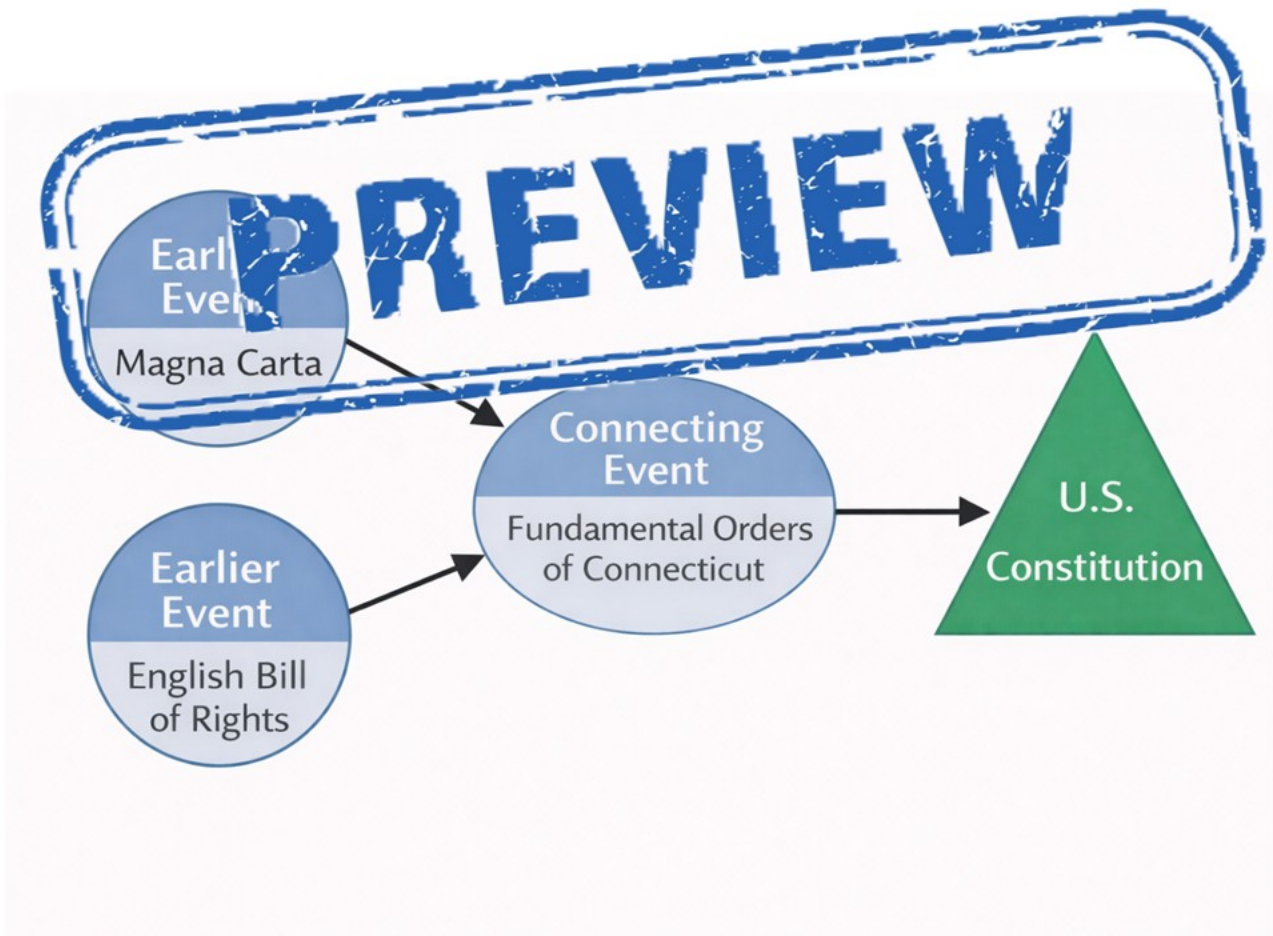
Purpose

- ✓ Analyze continuity and change over time
- ✓ Explain historical relationships

Steps

1. Identify a central event or idea.
2. Have students read to identify earlier events that connect to it.
3. Record each event and describe how it contributes to the central event.
4. Discuss how multiple events across time influence the outcome.

Example



Purpose

- ✓ Determine the central idea
- ✓ Summarize historical information

Steps

1. Students read the text and jot down key words or ideas as they go.
2. Students work with a partner to determine the main idea of the text.
3. Students use their notes or memory to write a summary in 20 words.

Example



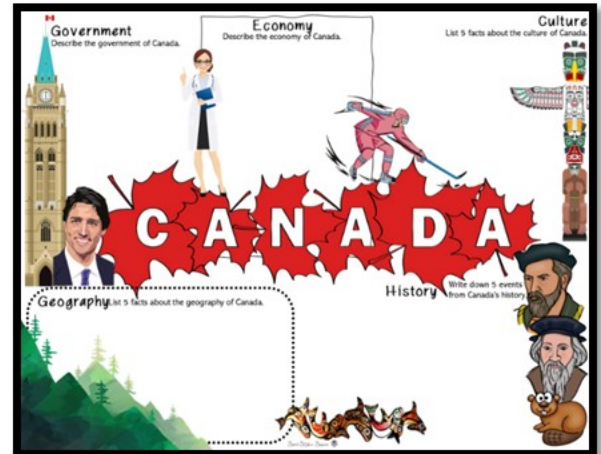
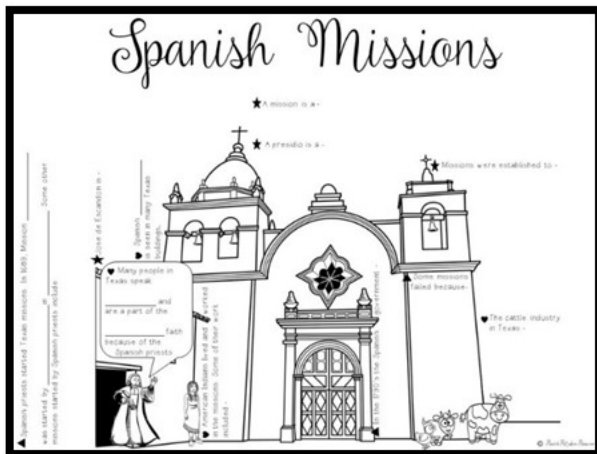
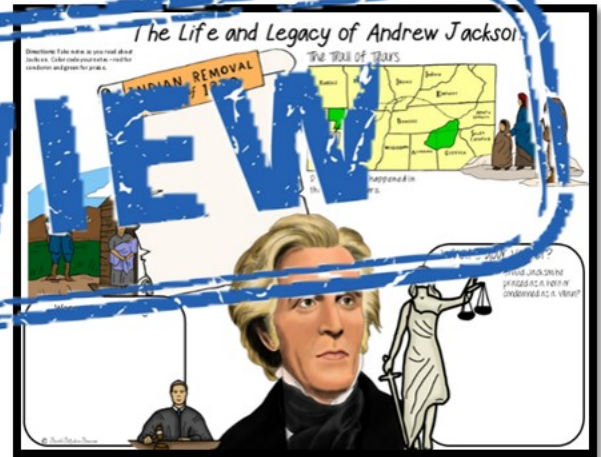
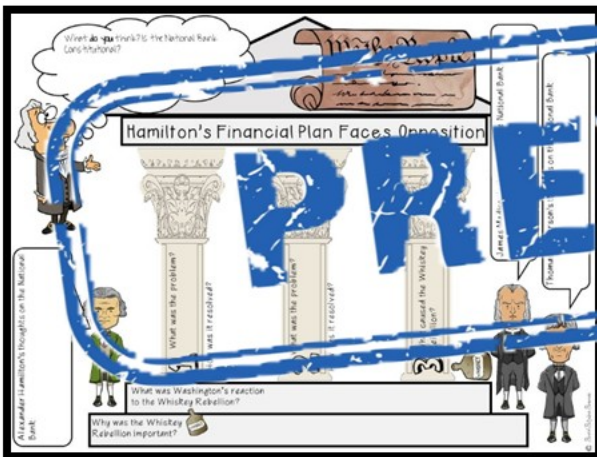
Purpose

- ✓ Identify significant historical concepts
- ✓ Represent historical understanding visually

Steps

1. Prepare Doodle Notes™ with visuals and note spaces.
2. Include graphics, symbols, or shapes to represent key ideas.
3. Have students write, label, and sketch as they learn.
4. Wrap up with a task (highlight, color-code, identify key ideas).

Example



Opinion Proof

Active
Note
Making

Purpose

- ✓ Support claims with evidence
- ✓ Justify historical conclusions

Steps

1. Set up two columns: Opinion and Proof.
2. As students read, record an opinion in the left column.
3. Add evidence from the text in the right column to support the opinion.
4. Use the chart notes to explain thinking, write, or prepare for discussion.

Example

Opinion

Proof

Abraham Lincoln was the greatest president in the United States.

- Lincoln led the country through the Civil War.
- Lincoln made great speeches.

Opinion

Proof

The U.S. should have dropped the atomic bomb.

- It helped end WWII quickly.
- Japan surrendered soon after the bombs were dropped.
- It avoided a long and deadly invasion of Japan.

Pick A Card, Any Card

After
Reading

Break it down. Piece it together.

Purpose
✓ Support claims with evidence ✓ Explain historical reasoning ✓ Communicate historical understanding
Steps
1. Prepare the Cards Create a set of response cards using discussion prompts such as: <i>I wonder...</i> <i>I learned...</i> <i>I was surprised by...</i> <i>This reminds me of...</i> 2. Form Groups Place students in small groups. Student draw two response cards. 3. Read & Respond After reading, students write a response to each prompt on a sticky note or index card, using evidence from the text when appropriate. 4. Share & Discuss Students take turns reading one prompt and sharing their response. Group members ask questions, add ideas, or make connections. 5. Reflect Students discuss how the different responses helped deepen their understanding of the reading.

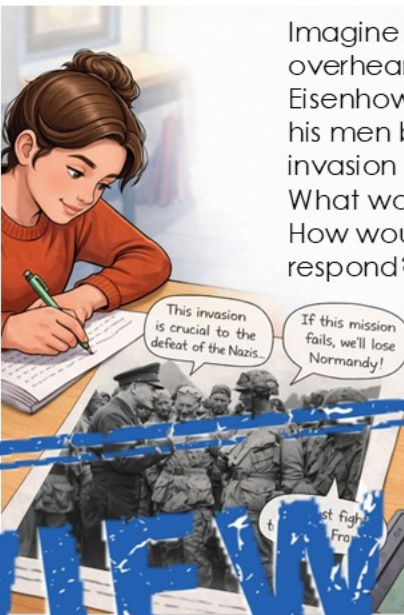
In Action
The image shows four diverse students standing together, each holding a white card with a discussion prompt. A speech bubble from the boy in the center says, 'I was surprised by how determined she was!'.
Examples
The image displays several example response cards with various prompts and cartoon illustrations. The prompts include: 'I find...', 'An interesting sentence is...', 'I really don't understand...', 'What if...', 'I can't believe...', 'What I didn't know was...', 'I think the author...', 'I was really interested that...', 'I was impressed by...', 'I like...', and 'I wonder why...'.
Benefits
✓ Encourages academic discussion ✓ Promotes collaborative thinking ✓ Builds confidence in sharing ideas

Annotated Image

After
Reading

Bring perspectives to life through quote bubbles.

Purpose
✓ Interpret visual evidence ✓ Explain historical perspectives ✓ Support observations with evidence
Steps
1. Read first Have students read a short text about a historical event. 2. Introduce the image Show an image connected to the event they just read about. 3. Model thinking (optional) Model how to add an annotation that reflects a person's thoughts or feelings. Example: "I can't believe this is happening..." 4. Annotate the image Students add text boxes or notes around the image to represent different perspectives. 5. Use key terms (optional) Have students incorporate important vocabulary from the reading into their annotations. 6. Share & discuss Students share their annotations and explain their thinking.

In Action
 Imagine you could overhear General Eisenhower speaking to his men before the invasion of Normandy. What would he say? How would his soldiers respond? This invasion is crucial to the defeat of the Nazis. If this mission fails, we'll lose Normandy! ... must fight from...
Examples
Quote Bubble Sentence Stems _____ = vocabulary term • "This _____ is affecting us because..." • "I can't believe the _____ is happening..." • "If this _____ continues, then..." • "We need to respond to the _____ by..." • "This _____ is not fair because..." • "Because of the _____ I feel..." • "The _____ is causing..." • "I think the _____ will lead to..."
Benefits
✓ Strengthens historical empathy ✓ Reinforces evidence-based thinking ✓ Deepens historical understanding

Strategy Templates & Tools

Crop-It Questions

Choose from the following questions for your students to use the Crop-It Tool.

- Crop to show what first caught your eye – Why did you first notice this part?
- Crop to show who or what this image is about. Why is this person or thing important?
- Crop to a clue that shows where this takes place. What do you think is happening?
- Crop to a clue that tells when this is happening. What helps us recognize specific times or eras?
- Crop to show the most important part of the image. Why is this part important?
- Crop to show tension or a problem in the image. Why is this important to the image or era?
- If you were to create a title for the image, what part of the image would you crop to highlight the title? What is the title you would create?
- Crop to a spot that you have a question about. What is your question?
- Crop to a spot that this image tells us about the past. How does it show the past?
- Crop to a place where you would add something to the image. What would you add and why?
- Crop to a spot that shows the emotion expressed in the image. What emotions are you seeing? Why are they important to the image?
- Crop to a spot that shows action. What action is occurring and why is it important to the image?





Crop It Tool

PREVIEW

Cut along the dotted
lines to create a frame.
Discard the center
piece.

Image Analysis

Directions: Examine the picture to answer the following questions.

Step One

Observation

Study the photograph for 2-3 minutes. Look at the picture as a whole and then examine individual items. Next, divide the photograph into quadrants (4 parts) and study each section to see what new details become visible.

Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

People

Objects

Activities

PREVIEW

Step Two

Inference

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Step Three

Questions

What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?

Where would you find answers to them?

Question Dice

Directions: Roll the dice and create questions by combining each die.

Who	had
What	did
Where	could
When	would
Why	should
How / Which	was / were

Question Dice

Directions: Roll the dice and create questions by combining each die.

Who	had
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Professional Resources

The instructional strategies in this book are informed by professional literature on social studies instruction, content-area literacy, comprehension, discussion, differentiation, and student engagement.

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The Social Studies Success Philosophy

At Social Studies Success®, I believe effective Social Studies instruction is built on a few simple, but powerful principles.

- ✓ Students need to be engaged to learn.
—Schlechty's *Design Qualities of engagement*
- ✓ All students can learn – we just need to support them in different ways. —Seidlitz's *Seven Steps*
- ✓ Students need continuous opportunities to review content through games and engaging activities.
—Himmele's *Total Participation Techniques*
- ✓ Writing is essential for learning, not just assessment.
—Daniels' *Content Area Writing*
- ✓ Vocabulary instruction must be intentional and engaging.
—Marzano *Academic Vocabulary*
- ✓ History should not be trivial pursuit – dig deeper and teach with essential questions and enduring understandings.
—Wiggins & McTighe *Essential Questions*
- ✓ Students are social – purposeful talk is crucial to learning.
—Walsh *Quality Questioning*
- ✓ Students need to read in Social Studies – reading informational text cannot be mastered without constant practice.
—Kinsella's *Considerate Text*
- ✓ “Soft skills” of collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity are essential to future success in the job market.
—Muir *Reasons Millennials Get Fired*
- ✓ The best way to improve reading comprehension and scores, is to focus on building knowledge through Social Studies instruction.
—Wexler *The Knowledge Gap*
- ✓ Heavy reliance on digital technology can weaken critical thinking, focus, and literacy – students learn best with pen and paper.
—Horvath *The Digital Delusion*



Dawn Viñas is an educator, author, and national presenter with more than 20 years of experience helping teachers create engaging, meaningful Social Studies classrooms. She has served as a classroom teacher, instructional coach, curriculum coordinator, university instructor, and professional development consultant. She founded **Social Studies Success®** with one mission: **Helping teachers develop historical thinkers through practical, engaging instruction.** Today, Dawn supports educators across the United States through classroom resources, curriculum support, and professional learning.