

## Case Study: U.S. History

A curriculum by Sean Robertson, History Teacher

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# Introduction

How can U.S. history teachers help students develop core skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking? Sean Robertson, Harlem Academy's lead middle school history teacher and an eight-year veteran of the school, has taken an innovative approach to this question.

In 2011, Robertson first developed his "Junior Historians" curriculum for seventh and eighth graders. The two-year American history sequence intentionally emphasizes depth over breadth, focusing on six key turning points described in the sidebar on the next page. Unlike traditional U.S. history courses that end with World War II, this curriculum devotes extensive time to recent events, giving students relevant context to understand the world around them.

An inquiry-based approach asks students to be "Junior Historians," detectives of the past. As Robertson states, "I don't teach history, I teach my students how to investigate and interact with history." As students take on an active role interpreting and constructing historical narratives, their engagement increases. The curriculum centers on primary source analysis (including texts, political cartoons, songs, speeches, and videos), and utilizes secondary sources to connect and contextualize. With the emphasis on primary sources, students are developing key skills every lesson.

The Junior Historians field guides open:

This is not your typical history text. You will not find an analysis of events in the coming pages -- that is your job as a junior historian.

## Sean Robertson, History Teacher

Sean is the lead middle school history teacher at Harlem Academy. He is also a master teacher fellow and site coordinator for the Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History. Sean serves as the advisor to eighth grade students and the faculty advisor for the lower school service club and entrepreneur's club. He is an avid reader, Boston Red Sox fan, and enjoys collecting presidential campaign pins, drinking way too much coffee, attempting to BBQ in a tiny Brooklyn apartment, and discussing politics.



# Building Key Skills

## Reading

- Decoding challenging texts
- Developing vocabulary
- Distinguishing fact from fiction

## Writing

- Summarizing complex documents
- Using evidence from a source to support an argument
- Analyzing and interpreting sources through essays and short responses

## Critical Thinking

- Sourcing a document (understanding context, determining audience, assessing bias)
- Making connections to previous studies and prior knowledge
- Analyzing non-textual sources (images, graphs, charts, maps)
- Building empathy for different perspectives

Additionally, this curriculum fosters greater civic awareness and responsibility among students. Far from viewing history as a static and disconnected list of facts and dates, students understand the subject as a dynamic and vital means of understanding their nation’s current realities. By giving students tools, they become drivers of change. As Robertson [notes](#), “Students understand the framework of our government, how change happens in a democratic society, and that an educated, well-informed, and active populace is integral to the success of democracy.”

# U.S. History Turning Points

## GRADE SEVEN

### The Boston Massacre (1770)

When did we become Americans?

### Bleeding Kansas (1854-61)

Was the Civil War inevitable?

### The Spanish-American War (1898)

When did the United States become a world superpower?

## GRADE EIGHT

### Brown v. Board of Education ruling (1954)

How has our nation ensured civil rights for its citizens?

### The Gulf of Tonkin Incident (1964)

When did the United States change the way it went to war?

### The 9/11 Terrorist Attacks (2001)

How has global terrorism changed the world landscape?

# Guiding Students Through Primary Source Analysis

Primary source analysis is at the core of Robertson's curriculum. Here is the five-step process he teaches students to guide their analysis of each source:

1. Read the document carefully, defining any unfamiliar vocabulary as you go
2. Re-read the document and identify the main idea of the source
3. Write an attribution sentence that includes the author, title, year, and main idea
4. Select five to 10 key words or phrases from the source that best support the main idea
5. Follow the attribution sentence with a full paragraph summary integrating all of the key words or phrases, and finish with a concluding sentence

To ensure that students master these crucial skills, Robertson gives students clear scaffolding and ample practice with this process beginning in sixth grade. As students become more sophisticated in their prose, greater emphasis is placed on being succinct and precise.

These links provide examples of “before and after” primary source analysis, showing the level of student growth after just two months of the Junior Historians curriculum.

- Three pairs of [seventh-grade responses](#): pages 1, 3, and 5 are from September, while 2, 4, and 6 come from the same students in November.
- Three pairs of [eighth-grade responses](#): again, these alternate between September and November.





# Junior Historians Assessments

To test for mastery of both skills and content, Robertson has developed a set of innovative, skill-based assessments.

## Exams

Each test asks students to interpret primary sources and craft arguments through scaffolded writing prompts. While the assessments require some memorization, this is not emphasized; in fact, students use their notes for some sections, allowing them to write more sophisticated and well-supported prose. (Click for examples of [seventh-grade](#) and [eighth-grade assessments](#).)

## Writing

As students develop the necessary skills and confidence, writing assignments become longer and more challenging. They progress through different types of writing, from summary writing, to cause and effect, then problem/solution, and finally compare and contrast writing.

## Research

At the end of the first year of the U.S. history course, seventh graders participate in a research seminar. The class focuses on essential skills, including how to choose a topic, develop research questions, find appropriate sources, take research notes, draft a thesis argument, and cite sources.

To culminate the two-year curriculum, eighth graders examine whether the United States is indeed becoming “a more perfect union.” They answer this question by drawing on at least six primary sources of their choice and referencing material from throughout the course – particularly the nation’s founding documents. Past projects have explored topics ranging from marriage equality to conflict in the Middle East.

## Teaching

Eighth graders choose a current event and develop their own lesson plan around the topic. They choose a Do Now, the teaching point, investigation question, primary source document, review question, and the exit ticket, all the piece that make up a usual Junior Historians lesson. Two students are selected to present and lead their lesson during the final week of class. Past topics have included Syrian civil war, Boston bombing, Islamophobia, 9/11 museum, and health effects on EMS after 9/11.

# Junior Historians Website

Robertson has developed his own website to share information as it is developed. It opens:

Students approach US history through the prism of a two-year document based question: How have we progressed towards the founding ideal of forming “a more perfect union?” Our ingenious 238-year experiment in democracy is not without flaws and certainly not a guarantee. Students utilize our founding documents – the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble of the US Constitution – as a rubric to evaluate the successes and failures of our nation.

For more information, visit [juniorhistorians.com](http://juniorhistorians.com).



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HISTORIANS

# Rational and Evidence for this Approach

In 2011, research fellows from the Klingenstein Center at Columbia University, Teachers College surveyed 24 selective secondary schools for Harlem Academy to determine key factors associated with a student's success. Rather than any specific content knowledge, administrators highlighted critical thinking (14 schools) and writing (10 schools) as the two most important determinants of success.

Outside research confirms the value of this approach. Sam Wineburg and others have [extensively explored](#) the value of using thoughtful primary source activities to prepare students for the Common Core, teach them sophisticated historical thinking, and help them move “beyond the bubble” of simple multiple choice tests.<sup>1</sup> Further, [research](#) on college readiness suggests that K-12 schools should focus more on skills and less on seat time or content covered.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, this approach aligns strongly with Common Core [standards](#) for grades six through eight English and history students – particularly the following:

- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.
- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.
- Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).
- Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

## Challenges

### Selecting content.

One challenge familiar to any history teacher is that exploring material in greater depth means cutting some content. While the Junior Historians program might not offer an in-depth understanding of Andrew Jackson's Bank War, for example, the approach gives greater payoffs in terms of skill-building, student engagement, and retention. To guide curriculum choices, Robertson considers which topics will be most relevant for his students and uses backward planning principles from Understanding by Design to craft thought-provoking essential questions.

### The most challenging texts come first.

Since the seventh and eighth-grade history program proceeds chronologically, younger students must grapple with more challenging primary sources than their older peers. Teachers can do two things to address this: (1) choose, excerpt and annotate sources more carefully, and (2) spend more time breaking down these sources with younger students.

<sup>1</sup> “Beyond the Bubble in History/Social Studies Assessments” by Joel Breakstone, Mark Smith, and Sam Wineburg in Phi Delta Kappan, February 2013 (Vol. 94, #5, p. 53-57), <http://pdk.sagepub.com/content/94/5/53.full.pdf+html>

<sup>2</sup> “Beyond the Rhetoric: Improving College Readiness Through Coherent State Policy” (2010, June). The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education & The Southern Regional Education Board. Retrieved November 20, 2014, from [http://www.highereducation.org/reports/college\\_readiness/CollegeReadiness.pdf](http://www.highereducation.org/reports/college_readiness/CollegeReadiness.pdf)

## Conclusion

As Junior Historians, students take an active role in investigating American history. As they explore primary sources, unravel different perspectives, and develop their own analysis of events, our students develop as readers and thinkers. By emphasizing depth over breadth, students are more engaged and leave with greater comprehension of how and why our nation has

evolved. With a focus on critical turning points in our country's history, students learn that individuals have power to drive change, and gain a foundation for thoughtful citizenship. A variety of strong online resources can help teachers integrate these strategies in their classes, and a growing body of evidence shows the value of this approach to middle school history.

## Resources

Below are several helpful resources for using primary sources in the U.S. history classroom:

- Robertson's official [Junior Historians website](#) provides further insights into his philosophy and approach.
- The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History has a searchable database of vetted [lesson and unit plans](#) and over [60,000 primary sources](#).
- The [Avalon Project](#) through Yale Law School has hundreds of primary sources related to U.S. History.
- Georgetown's [September 11th Sourcebooks](#) has hundreds of documents on 9/11 and many other national security issues.
- [docsteach.org](#) lets teachers create lesson plans and interactive activities around primary sources.
- The Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) Reading Like a Historian curriculum has [71 document-based lesson plans](#) spanning 11 units.
- The [World Digital Library](#) has a database of over 7,000 primary sources searchable by date, location and theme.
- The [Library of Congress](#) and [PBS](#) also have helpful resources.

