

ANALYZING HISTORICAL IMAGES

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This lesson asks students to engage in critical thinking and examine primary source materials to see what they can discover just by looking closely, asking questions and working together. This lesson may take one class session.

STANDARDS

- United States History National Standards: Era 5, Civil War and Reconstruction (1850 – 1877); Standard 2
- Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts, grade 8: Writing, 9; Speaking and Listening 1, 2, 4; Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 2
- College, Career and Civic Life Framework: Dimension 2. History 13, 6-8

Note to teachers: If you are studying the Civil War, focus on the Maryland Campaign of 1862. If you are not studying the Civil War, research the historical context for the images you share (i.e. where is South Mountain, when was this battle fought, etc.). For more ideas and inspiration about using images as the basis for discussion, see [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) and [Docs Teach](#) from the National Archives.

PROCEDURE

1. Discuss and define “primary sources.” Primary source materials are original documents that have not been filtered

by interpretation. For example, first hand accounts like diaries, letters, photographs, art, objects, or census records. Secondary source materials interpret or analyze primary sources (i.e. accounts written after the fact, textbooks). Historians analyze primary sources to better understand how people may have experienced historical events. What can we discover by looking closely at primary source materials?

2. Split students into small groups and distribute copies of images suggested in the **Content Resources** (one per group). Consider giving each group a different image or have multiple groups looking at the same image to see if they come up with similar or different conclusions.
3. Ask students to look quietly at the image for 60 seconds and consider the following questions (write these on the board where all students can see): What is the first thing you see? What else do you notice? What do you think is happening in the image? Students make notes, individually.
4. In small groups, students discuss the image using the Reading an Image worksheet as a guide. Depending on student needs, you may consider modeling the approach with the whole class before asking students to work in small groups.
5. Share with the whole class and discuss student observations. Let students lead the discussion. Add in points of information (from **Content Resources**) as context if needed.

EXTENSIONS

If possible, visit South Mountain in Maryland and see some of the landscapes featured in these primary resources. Learn more about the battles of Crampton's Gap, Fox's Gap and Turner's Gap, and walk the [South Mountain State Battlefield](#). And remember, you can reference the Reading an Image worksheet questions on your field trip location. What do students see in the images and what do they see at the site itself?

CONTENT RESOURCES

A collection of images can be found on the [Crossroads of War website](#)

Favorites

- "Fighting at Crampton's Gap"
- "Battle of South Mountain, Sunday September 14 1862"
- "Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart soldiers burning the Catoctin Bridge"
- "Union Soldiers marching through Middletown"

Background information on the Battle of South Mountain


- Text from *A Collection of Commentaries* flipbook: [chapter 5, pages 122 - 125](#)
- Video clip from the flipbook on [intense fighting](#)
- Video clip from the flipbook about [the surprise battleground](#)
- Clip from Maryland's Heart of the Civil War film: [15:48 - 18:50](#)
- Text from [Crossroads of War website](#)
- [South Mountain State Battlefield website](#)

The battle's impact on civilians

- Clip from the film: 19:26 - 20:30
- Text from the flipbook: chapter 6, pages 138 - 142
- Video clip from the flipbook on civilians on the battlefield
- Video clip on carnage in the Cumberland Valley
- Video clip on burial of the dead

READING AN IMAGE WORKSHEET

Take a close look at your image and consider the following questions. If you are working in a group, let everyone take a turn adding to the discussion. One student should serve as note-taker to record everyone's contribution.

1. What do you think is happening in this picture? What makes you say that?
2. Who is featured in this image, and what are they doing? Why might they be there?
3. What might be the relationship between the figures portrayed in the painting? 
4. Who is not represented?
5. Why do you think this image was created? Was it created for a particular purpose? Who do you think might have created it?
6. In your opinion, what is the main message of this image? What is it trying to convey? And who the intended audience?
7. Anything else that we should consider about this image?

Note: It's helpful to remember that news traveled much more slowly during this time. Rather, sketch artists brought their work

to the newspapers and magazines via courier where it was duplicated with a woodcut for printing. Additionally, there were no instant action shots to share in the news or on social media. Photography technology at the time required long exposures so people had to pose for a long time. Does knowing this additional historical context make you see things in a new light? If so, how?

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