

A Veteran Teacher's Lessons

Social Science Lessons for Secondary Teachers by Dave Forrest

A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: Harnessing the Power of Photographs in US History

"A picture is worth a thousand words," as the saying goes. It is so true, especially for social studies teachers. A single image can be a powerful way to introduce a lesson, serving as a doorway into a historical event. Photo analysis can aid in student writing. And through studying photographs students can learn empathy for others, even take steps toward civic engagement.

During my unit on the Civil War I used the famous photograph of an escaped slave, "[Private Gordon](#)", to begin the discussion of the role of African American soldiers in the Union Army. [The Private Gordon Lesson](#) starts with students making inferences and discussing the photo. Then students read an online article, "[Photography Changes the Way We Record and Respond to Social Issues](#)", by Frank H. Goodyear, III. This piece adds historical background to the photo. Think about the next unit you are teaching, is there a single photo that might be a doorway into your lesson?

Once you've modeled photo analysis with your whole class, work on helping students make photo inferences and predictions on their own. You might want to use [Lewis Hine's photographs](#), poignant images of child labor at the turn of the 20th century. The National Archives' Educational Resources page has good tips for [analyzing photographs](#), beginning with close observations of photo details. Students use my [Lewis Hine Child Labor Lesson](#) handout and read and answer questions from the National Archives webpage, [Lewis Hine: Documentation of Child Labor](#).

Like any new skill, photo analysis requires students to practice before gaining mastery. During your unit on the Progressive Era try Jacob Riis' photograph "[Five Cents a Spot](#)". In the [Five Cents a Spot Lesson](#) students dissect a photo which revealed New York City's crowded tenements and poor living conditions. In addition, they read more about Riis in Bonnie Yochelson's article, "[Photography Changes Our Awareness of Poverty](#)".

Photographers, like Hine and Riis, have been catalysts for change. Perhaps no 20th century photographer had a greater impact on defining a historical era than Dorothea Lange with her iconic photos of the Great Depression. I introduce The Great Depression by showing students [a succession of some of Lange's most powerful images in a slideshow](#). Students also learn more about Lange's work from a short PBS video segment, "[The Great Depression: Creating A Narrative Through Photography](#)".

I have found that photos can encourage strong student writing. While studying Japanese American Internment during World War II I ask my students to [write a letter back home](#), describing their experiences. They begin by [gathering details](#) from [a series of photos of the Manzanar internment camp](#). [The Letter from Manzanar Lesson](#) not only asks students to detail life in the camps, but also to imagine the feelings of a Japanese American teenager during his or her incarceration.

Photo assignments, like the letter home from Manzanar, provide opportunities for students "to walk a mile in someone's shoes." They can also show our students the power of protest and youth civic engagement. The photo and letter writing lesson, [Write Your Letter from the Birmingham Jail](#) focuses on the 1963 Children's Crusade. In the slideshow [The Nonviolent Struggle for Civil Rights](#), students analyze five photos taken by photographer [Charles Moore](#). In addition to gathering details from these photos, students also watch the award-winning student documentary, [No More: The Children of Birmingham 1963 and the Turning Point of the Civil Rights Movement](#). Once students have gathered details, it is time to write. The assignment, [Write Your Letter from the Birmingham Jail](#), asks students to imagine that they were a teenager in the Children's Crusade.

As you plan your US History units, be sure to harness the power of photographs to tell part of the story.