Documents can illustrate abstract concepts—for example, the constitutional separation of powers.

Many documents suggest cross-curricular connections—for example, geography and government.

Signed documents can often personalize history for students.

Primary source documents often appear in a familiar format. The familiarity encourages students to build upon their prior knowledge.

When the significance of a document is not obvious, its clues prompt students to conduct further research.

The date of a document can focus student attention on turning points in history.

Documents can enable students to make connections between seemingly unrelated information—for example, a patent drawing and Article I of the U.S. Constitution.

Documents can serve as models of effective communication for students. In some letters, students witness the exercise of First Amendment rights and the power of the written word.

Analyzing multiple documents related to a similar topic allows students to compare different points of view.

When documents reflect human emotions, students empathize with historical figures.

Some documents are treasures. Learning about them, and the ideas they embody, connects students to a collective national heritage.

Subtle references in a document can pique student curiosity and encourage critical thinking.

Unique markings on a document capture student attention.

Graphical materials, such as photographs, maps, and posters, challenge students to draw upon visual data to learn historical content.

Primary sources make students question where information comes from and encourage students to consider their original use.

*Developed by the education staff of the National Archives, Lee Ann Potter, Daniel Rulli, and Kahlil Chism, January 2005.*