

"I Didn't Know Anything About Voting": Civil Rights in Mississippi

Lesson Questions

Why were so few African Americans registered to vote in Mississippi during the 1950s and early 1960s?

Lesson Task: In this lesson students investigate the tactics whites in Mississippi used to prevent African Americans from registering to vote in the 1950s and early 1960s. A central goal of the lesson is for students to understand that these tactics were part of a systemic effort to disempower and disenfranchise African Americans in Mississippi. Efforts to prevent voting were connected to inequities in education and employment opportunities, and were ultimately aimed at preventing African Americans from wielding any political or social power.

Some middle school students may feel that people should have just “resisted” and tried to register despite the challenges. It will be important to help students to understand the degree of danger African Americans who tried to register put themselves and their families in. At the same time, there were many activists and acts of resistance, and these did ultimately culminate in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

As students read and analyze the documents, their notes will be organized under the following three categories, which represent the three tactics they will be reading about:

- Application of literacy laws
- Violence
- Economic Pressure

NAEP Era: 8. Contemporary America (1945 to Present)

Focal Skill: Identifying main ideas and details

Number of Documents: 4

Number of Days: 6–8

Common Core Standards

- CC reading standard: RH.6-8.2 Identify the central ideas or information of a primary source
- CC writing standard: WHST.6-8.2 Write informative/explanatory texts

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[Suggested time: ½ session]

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[Suggested time: 1–2 sessions]

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OVERVIEW

[Suggested time: 5 minutes]

Content Objectives

Students will understand the tactics whites in Mississippi used in the 1950s and early 1960s to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.

White, local government officials used an unequal **application of literacy laws**, including literacy tests and poll taxes, to allow other whites to register to vote while preventing African Americans from doing the same.

Many African Americans who attempted to register to vote faced **physical violence** from local white authorities.

Economic pressures, including the threat of being fired by white employers, prevented many African Americans from registering to vote.

Historical Thinking Objectives

- Close Reading
- Contextualization
- Sourcing

Skill Objectives

- (Reading) Identifying main ideas and details
- (Writing) Using evidence to support main ideas

Instructional Sequence

Before you begin the lesson you should share a brief agenda with students:

HOOK

Together, we will look at a graph showing the steep drop of African Americans registered to vote in Mississippi after 1867. We'll think about what might have caused this drop.

CONTEXT

We'll then review some background information about the conditions faced by African Americans in Mississippi in the 1950s and early 1960s.

DOCUMENTS

On your own, you will examine four primary source documents that look at tactics whites in Mississippi used to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.

CONNECT

We'll discuss the documents and how they connect to each other and the lesson question.

WRITE

You'll write a five-paragraph explanatory essay in which you will explain how whites in Mississippi were able to keep voter registration so low for African Americans.

Lesson Background

After the end of Reconstruction, when the U.S. government withdrew its troops and oversight of the former Confederate states, southern states began to institute laws that openly discriminated against African Americans. Starting with Mississippi in 1890 and followed over the next ten years by many others, southern states passed laws and wrote new state constitutions designed to keep African Americans in an inferior position. They mandated segregation in schools and public facilities and instituted voting procedures that made it nearly impossible for African Americans to register to vote. These new voting laws included poll taxes (which required voters to pay a fee to vote, often for consecutive years), literacy tests (which required voters to read and interpret a section of the state constitution to the satisfaction of local voter registrars), and grandfather clauses (which exempted prospective voters from poll taxes and literacy tests if their ancestors had been able to vote during the 1860s, a time when no African Americans could vote). All of these laws placed significant, usually insurmountable, obstacles in the path of African-American voters while not directly contradicting the 15th amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In addition to laws designed to restrict black voting, Mississippi and other southern states also passed a host of segregation laws restricting access of African Americans to many kinds of public places like restaurants, movie theaters, and public pools, and laws that required African Americans to be educated at separate schools from whites. Schools for black children were overcrowded and significantly underfunded.

The social system that these laws were intended to create, one where African Americans were kept in a subordinate position to whites, was buttressed by racially targeted violence. White violence against African Americans who attempted to challenge or even draw attention to segregation and injustice was swift, and it was rarely punished by the judicial system. Mississippi was known as the most deeply segregated and most violent state in the South. While local activists challenged segregation in the ways that they could, many national civil rights organizations were reluctant to try to organize campaigns there during the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1961, however, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began bringing college age volunteers to Mississippi to work with local activists to educate black Mississippians about their rights and help them register to vote. The dangers were real—SNCC volunteers and local activists experienced arrest, severe beatings, firebombings, and even death. SNCC's voter registration campaigns in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi played a key role in the eventual passage of the Voting Rights Act by Congress in 1965.

Student Background Knowledge

Students should understand that:

- Legalized segregation, restriction of voting rights, and unpunished violence by whites against African Americans was common throughout the South, not just in Mississippi, from the late nineteenth century through the 1960s.
- African Americans have always challenged and fought against segregation and injustice, in every period in U.S. history, even when it put them in great danger.

THE HOOK

[Suggested time: 10 minutes]

Voter Registration in Mississippi, 1867-1955

Purpose

To engage students with a dramatic and puzzling set of data.

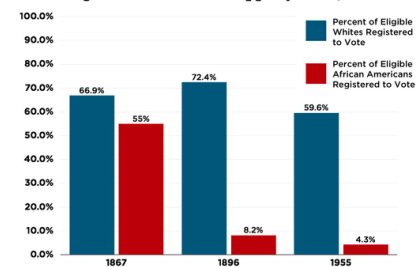
To introduce the lesson inquiry.

- At this stage of the lesson, it is OK if students do not know exactly why there was such a steep decline in voter registration among African Americans in Mississippi. The goal of the Hook is to help students see the incongruence between the 15th Amendment and the realities of voter registration, to surface students' prior knowledge about this topic, and to provide a "puzzle" that students will solve by investigating the Historical Context and Lesson Documents.

MS Voter Registration, 1867-1955

15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (Ratified 1870)
The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

Voter Registration in Mississippi by Race, 1867-1955



Process

Display the slide image and have students **read** the slide text and bar graph.

If students have not had much practice reading bar graphs in a historical context, support them in making meaning from the data. **Ask** students:

- What do we need to look at first to fully understand this bar graph?
- What is the title? What does this title tell us?
- What information is along the x-axis? The y-axis? What does the key tell us?
- Who thinks they can articulate a "big historical idea" this bar graph tells us?

Once students have understood the bar graph, **ask** them:

- How does this graph connect to the excerpt from the 15th Amendment?
- What questions do you have? What conclusions can we draw, if any?

Ask students the **Think About It** question: If the 15th amendment guaranteed their right to vote, why do you think the number of African American voters dropped so drastically in Mississippi after 1867?

Tap into prior knowledge students may bring with them: Does anyone know anything about what was happening in the South at this time?

Allow students some open discussion. The focus here should be on student thinking. You do not need to provide background historical context. It is OK if there are incomplete or even inaccurate ideas at this stage. If students make statements that they cannot support, **encourage them to frame their statements as questions**. For example:

- If we are not sure if that is an accurate statement, how could we phrase that as a question to investigate further?

- What kind of information and sources would you want to investigate to learn more about this?

After discussion, **transition** to the lesson questions. **Say** to students:

- This slide introduces a troubling puzzle. You already have many ideas and questions about what might have caused this drop. In this lesson, we’ll be investigating this very question that you have already asked: **Why were so few African Americans registered to vote in Mississippi during the 1950s and early 1960s?**

TRANSITION TO CONTEXT-SETTING

Transition students to the Context slides by letting them know that they are now going to look in a little more detail at the historical context to better understand the conditions African Americans living in Mississippi faced in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Context slides are intended to serve as a support for a relatively quick “interactive lecture” with students. The goal is to both provide essential background information and engage students’ prior knowledge and thinking.

While you can certainly slow the process down according to your students’ needs, context is not intended to be a “deep dive” into slide images. Documents in the Context slides serve the role of illustrating content, sparking quick observations and reactions, and making abstract ideas more concrete.

CONTEXT

[Suggested time: 25–30 minutes—to be completed in the first session]

Context Overview

The purpose of these slides is to provide the background information that students need in order to fully understand the conditions African Americans faced in Mississippi in the 1950s, which contributed to the violation of their voting rights.

The last two slides address the work of activists and the eventual passage of the Voting Rights Act. Students may want to draw on these last two slides in the conclusion to their essay.

The five Context slides focus on these ideas:

Mississippi Prevents Most African Americans from Voting (1890)— Outlines changes to the Mississippi constitution, including the institution of literacy tests and a poll tax. Also introduces the three categories students will use while taking notes on documents

Unequal Schooling— Shows the vast disparity of education between whites and blacks in Mississippi at this time

Occupations by Race in Mississippi, 1950— A bar graph of occupations that shows African Americans were predominantly relegated to low wage jobs with less stability

African Americans Try to Exercise Their Right to Vote— Introduces students to the actions of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

Congress Passes the Voting Rights Act— Includes a quote from President Johnson highlighting the “persistent bravery” of African Americans who fought to ensure their rights

Slide 1: MISSISSIPPI PREVENTS MOST AFRICAN AMERICANS FROM VOTING (1890)

Purpose

- To get students speculating about why whites in Mississippi wanted to restrict African-American voting at this time.
- To introduce students to the three tactics that they will read about in the documents:
 - Application of literacy laws
 - Violence
 - Economic pressure

Voting Requirements in MS State Constitution, 1890

In 1890, white legislators in Mississippi drafted a new state constitution with the specific intention of making it difficult for African Americans to vote.

*** Poll Tax** Voters must pay \$2 tax by February 1st of the year in which they want to vote

*** Literacy Test** Voters must be able to read and interpret a section of the Mississippi state constitution chosen by the local registrar

Whites also used violence and economic threats to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.

Suggested Process

Read through the slide title and text with students.

Key Point: If students are unfamiliar with the word “negro,” spend some time talking about the use of this word at this time and the ways in which language has changed and shifted. The word “negro” appears in 3 of the 4 documents students will read in this lesson.

Review what literacy tests and poll taxes were.

Ask the **Think About It** questions:

- How would these two requirements make it difficult for African Americans to vote?
- Why do you think whites were so against blacks voting?

Follow-up questions to **ask** include:

- What did the 15th Amendment protect? When was the Amendment ratified? (1870)
- Let’s think back to the graph we just looked at (Hook): Around what time did the number of African Americans registered to vote drop so suddenly? What might the connection be?
- How did the state of Mississippi change its constitution?

Preview the categories students will use while taking notes.

- **Say:** When we read the documents, there will be three categories, or tactics whites in Mississippi used, that we’ll be thinking about and that will organize our notes.
 - The first is the ways that Mississippi applied their voting laws, in particular the **literacy tests**. Literacy tests impacted everyone who registered to vote, but we will learn about the ways they were used differently with blacks than with whites.
 - The second category that you will read about was the use of **violence** to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.
 - Finally, we will read about the use of **economic threats**. We’ll be looking at the kinds of jobs African Americans had at this time and about how registering to vote affected them.

As students discuss the slide questions, **provide** the following background information:

- In 1890, congressional Republicans were alarmed at the ways that southern states were suppressing the black vote (African Americans overwhelmingly voted Republican at this time) and the resulting electoral success of Democrats in Congressional and national elections.
- They introduced a Federal Elections bill that would have expanded and strengthened the federal government's ability to enforce existing election laws and supervise southern elections.
- The bill did not pass, but it alarmed white leaders in Mississippi, who called a state convention to rewrite the state's constitution in order to put in place as many restrictions on African-American voting as they could and still be technically within the bounds of the 15th amendment.
- Several other states followed Mississippi's lead in the next ten years, writing similar laws into new state constitutions.

Slide 2: UNEQUAL SCHOOLING

Purpose

- To help students see that systemic discrimination – in this case, unequal access to education – limited power and opportunities for African Americans in Mississippi.
- The slide also asks students to think about the connection between levels of education and the **application of literacy tests**.

Suggested Process

Read through the slide title and table with students.

Help students to pull historical information from the table.

Questions you might **ask** include:

- How do we read tables? What do we need to pay attention to here?
- What information is in the rows? What is in the columns?
- What are some statements we could make about education at this time using the data on this table?

Provide the following background information, as needed:

- The total population of Mississippi at this time was about 2.2 million. 55% of the population was white and 45% of the population was African American; so, blacks made up almost half of the population.
- Schools in Mississippi were strictly segregated by race in 1950, and schools for African-American students had inferior buildings, fewer supplies and resources, and fewer teachers than schools for white children.

Rates of School Completion in Mississippi, 1950

This table shows the percentage of whites and non-whites who completed Elementary School, High School, and College in Mississippi in 1950.

	Elementary- Middle School (some or all years)	High School (some or all years)	College (some or all years)
White	41.1%	40.9%	14.4%
Nonwhite	78.9%	8.8%	1.8%

- In 1954, the Supreme Court’s *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision desegregated public schools in the U.S., although it took many years for that new law to become reality in Mississippi and elsewhere in the South, where whites resisted the ruling and found ways to undermine it.

Ask the **Think About It** question:

- Based on these different rates of school completion, why do you think Mississippi made literacy tests part of its constitution?
 - *Follow-up:* Who had higher rates of education? How might this have impacted people’s performance on literacy tests?

Extend student thinking:

- How else might unequal access to quality education have impacted African Americans at this time?
 - Help students to think, for example, about the connection between education and jobs.

Slide 3: OCCUPATIONS BY RACE IN MISSISSIPPI, 1950

Purpose

- To help students see another way that that systemic discrimination—in this case access to jobs—limited power and opportunities for African Americans in Mississippi.
- The slide further reinforces the concept of “economic pressure.”

Suggested Process

Read through the slide title and bar graph with students.

Help students to pull historical information from the graph. **Ask:**

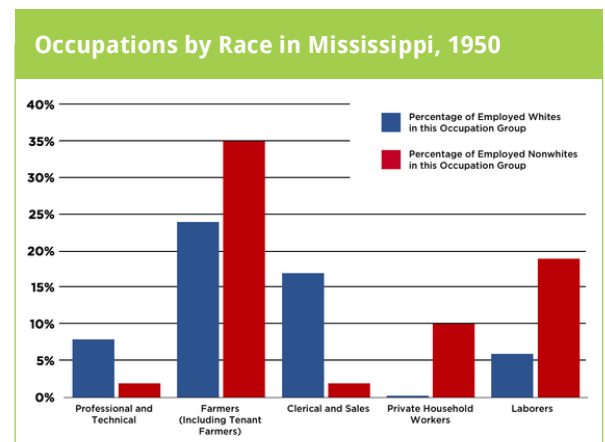
- How do we read bar graphs? What do we need to pay attention to here?
- What information is in along the x-axis? What is along the y-axis?
- What kinds of jobs are these?

Key Point: Be sure that students understand each of these job categories.

- In particular, **define** tenant farming—tenant farmers rent their land from a landowner and pay their rent by giving him a share of the crops they raise. They are not farmers who own their own land. (Students will read an oral history of tenant farmer Fannie Lou Hamer in Document 1.) Professional and technical jobs would include medicine, teaching, law, etc.

Ask: What are some statements we could make about jobs at this time using the data on this table?

Discuss the three **Think About It** questions:



- Which occupations pay more and give people more job security?
 - **Discuss** which kinds of jobs are cleaner, safer, probably require more schooling and pay better (professional/technical, clerical/sales); and, which are more physically difficult, low paying, and require less schooling (farming, domestic service, manual labor).
 - **Key point:** Some kinds of jobs (low-skilled, where you could easily be replaced by someone else) put you in a more vulnerable position where you have to depend on the goodwill of the person who is hiring you.
 - In general, whites controlled the labor force and most African Americans depended on whites for employment.
- Are African Americans concentrated in the less secure or more secure jobs?
- Given this data, how do you think whites might have applied “economic pressure” on African Americans?
 - **Say:** Let’s think about the first slide, where we read that whites used “economic pressure” to prevent African Americans from registering to vote. What does economic pressure mean? As employers, what could whites decide to do?

Slide 4: AFRICAN AMERICANS TRY TO EXERCISE THEIR RIGHT TO VOTE

Purpose

- To provide students information about the fact that, despite the success whites in Mississippi had in suppressing the African American vote, there was an active resistance movement.
 - Students may want to draw on this content in their conclusion.

Suggested Process

Read through the slide text with students.

Ask students to observe the slide image closely:

- Who do you see? What are people holding?
- What does the caption tell us?
- What is happening in this picture?

Ask the **Think About It** question: How did these SNCC actions hope to increase African American voting?

Provide additional background information about the work of SNCC:

- Clarify with students that African Americans in Mississippi had never lost their right to vote. The actions taken by the state and whites in Mississippi were intended to prevent African Americans from voting, but could not, by law, remove the right to vote.

African Americans Try to Exercise Their Right to Vote



SNCC members arrested for holding up signs urging voter registration, 1963

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was a group of college students and local black activists who:

- * educated black Mississippians about voting
- * supported those who tried to register
- * staged public protests over unfair voting laws

- Activists were working to allow African Americans to exercise their rights. Given the level of violence in Mississippi and other southern states, this was often dangerous work.
- SNCC began working in Mississippi in 1961, at a time when other civil rights organizations considered the state too violent and dangerous for civil rights workers.
- Many of the SNCC students came to Mississippi from elsewhere, and they worked closely with African-American activists in local communities, who had been fighting against segregation for decades despite facing violence and economic retaliation for their efforts to desegregate local businesses and register voters.

Slide 5: CONGRESS PASSES THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT

Purpose

- To inform students that the work of activists ultimately culminated in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which began to change the pattern of voter registration in the South.
 - Again, students may want to draw on this content in their conclusion.

Suggested Process

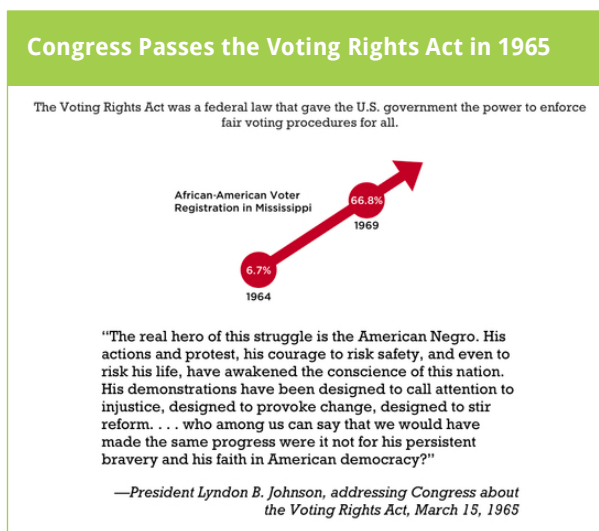
Read through the slide title, introduction and graphic with students.

Ask students:

- What was the Voting Rights Act and when was it passed?
- How did voter registration in Mississippi change after the passage of the Voting Rights Act?

Read Johnson's quote and **support** students in a close read of it.

Ask the **Think About It** question: According to President Johnson, what role did African Americans play in the struggle for equal access to voting?



Slide 6: CONTEXT REVIEW: CIVIL RIGHTS IN MISSISSIPPI

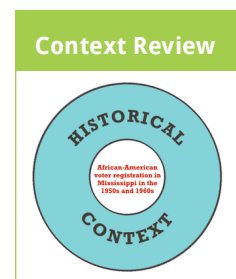
Purpose

To summarize the essential information from the Context.

Process

Look at the image on this slide.

Tell students that they will use some of the information they've just learned or reviewed to answer the lesson questions.



They will now spend a few moments to *review and take some notes*.

Guide students in remembering the most important information to answer the three **Take Notes on Context** questions:

- How did Mississippi try to keep African Americans from voting?
- How did unequal opportunities affect blacks living in Mississippi at this time?
- How did African Americans contribute to the passage of the Voting Rights Act?

If necessary, click back to past slides to jog students’ memories. Allow students to **discuss** their answers at table groups or with a partner. Each student, however, should **record** his/her own notes.

TRANSITION TO DOCUMENTS

After reviewing the Context slides say to students:

You will now read four documents on your own. This is the next step in the lesson, and the contextual information we just discussed will help you to better understand why, despite the protections of the 15th Amendment, so few African Americans were registered to vote in Mississippi in the 1950s and early 1960s.

This is also a good time to remind students of the lesson question: **Why were so few African Americans registered to vote in Mississippi in the 1950s and early 1960s?**

DOCUMENTS

[Suggested time: 4 sessions]

Documents: Overview

Students read and analyze four primary source documents in this lesson, each of which discusses tactics used in Mississippi to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.

As students read, their notes will be organized into the following categories:

- Application of literacy laws
- Violence
- Economic pressure

Some of the documents address several different kinds of tactics while others focus on just one.

Fannie Lou Hamer Tries to Register to Vote, *oral history*, 1972

Central information: Hamer describes what it was like to try and register to vote in Mississippi in 1962. Hamer describes the sense of menace at the clerk’s office, her experiences with the literacy tests, as well as her landlord’s threat to kick her off her land should she not withdraw her registration.

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report on Voting in Mississippi, *government report*, 1965

Central Information: Details the ways that African Americans in Mississippi were prevented from registering to vote. This section of the report focuses on the economic reprisals faced by African Americans from white employers.

Intimidation of Black Voters in Mississippi, pamphlet, 1964

Central information: A record of incidents of harassment kept by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) for use as evidence on support of a federal law to guarantee voting rights for all. This section lists out both acts of violence as well as economic reprisals.

Applying Voter Registration Laws Unequally, article, 1962

Central information: A report written by the Assistant U.S. Attorney General. This excerpt focuses on the inequitable application of literacy tests in Mississippi and throughout the South.

The central reading skill is to identify the central ideas or information in a primary source.

Note: Students can work on these documents independently while you circulate and support their work. (See PD Doc on supporting students during document work.)

Document 1: FANNIE LOU HAMER TRIES TO REGISTER TO VOTE

Purpose

To provide a first-person account of the intimidation and harassment of African Americans who tried to register to vote.

Key Reading Challenge

This is an oral history and Hamer tells a compelling story, much of the power of which is conveyed in the nuances of small details. It will be important to help students read the text closely and understand the ways in which an oral history differs from other kinds of historical documents.

Suggested Process

- As students read independently, move around the room to diagnose difficulties and offer coaching. When you note several students struggling with particular details or questions bring them to the attention of the class as appropriate. Discuss the document after students have read and answered the questions.
- As this is the first document of the lesson, we would suggest moving through the questions as students read the document, pausing to read and re-read as necessary.
- Use your Teacher Dashboard to scan and assess student responses to specific Document questions (such as the Big Idea question) once a majority of students have finished reading the document. This will prepare you for the class discussion.

Document 1: Class Discussion

It is critical for students to briefly discuss each document after they have read it.

Oral history, 1972



Purpose

Check for and deepen students’

- comprehension of the document
- grasp of the “Big Idea”—i.e., the tactics whites used to prevent Hamer from voting

Process

Engage students in discussing one or two key questions they have answered in the tool.

- *Zoom In* provides Source It, Read Closely, Gather Evidence, Big Idea and Think About It questions alongside this document. Depending on your class’s needs, you may choose to focus on certain question types over others.
- We strongly recommend using structures such as turn-and-talk and table group discussions as you engage students in these questions.
- Most important, be sure to follow up on student comments by *pressing for reasons and evidence*, and *for accountable talk*. Use the prompts for the extension questions below.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

Select student responses to the “Big Idea” question, and use them to guide discussion.

- Ahead of time, use the Lesson Dashboard to quickly scan your students’ responses to the “Big Idea” questions:
 - How did the state of Mississippi use a literacy test to prevent Hamer from registering to vote?
 - What is strong evidence from the document to support your answer?
 - How did Hamer’s landowner use economic pressure to try to prevent her from registering to vote?
 - What is strong evidence from the document to support your answer?
- Identify student responses that reflect understanding of the Big Idea, and good use of supporting evidence, and those that reflect confusion or misunderstanding.
- Select and project a range of student responses to the summary questions. You can choose model responses as well as responses that need development as a way to spark student discussion. (See the PD document and video on “Discussion Phase 1: Formative Assessment of Student Comprehension of Individual Documents” for more support on using students’ responses to analyze their reading strengths and needs.)

Discuss the Source It Questions

As you talk through the Source It questions, **focus** on the following points:

- This is an oral history.
 - Ask students what this means and support their answers if they are unfamiliar with oral histories.
- Help students to use the headnote to establish what time period the document refers to. **Key point:** Students are likely accustomed to dating a document by its publication date (1972). In this case, the more relevant date is the date Hamer is referring to in her retelling of past events (1962).
- There’s not a “right” or “wrong” answer to the question about Hamer’s purpose in telling this story. Students could convincingly argue “inform,” “record,” or even to “persuade” others of the importance of protecting voting rights.

Discuss the Read Closely Questions

Help students to use the text to answer the three **Read Closely** questions:

- What did Hamer learn about from her church?
- What kind of intimidation did Hamer face at the clerk’s office?
- How did Hamer show bravery?

Ask follow up questions to highlight **key points**:

- Hamer wasn’t even aware that she was eligible to vote prior to 1962. Why might this have been? What role did the church play in people’s lives beyond spiritual guidance?
- Why would “men with guns” be at a site for voter registration? How else was the environment intimidating?
- Just by showing up to register Hamer demonstrated bravery. How did she respond to her landowner? What does this tell us about Hamer?

Discuss the Gather Evidence Questions

Ask students to share the details they tagged for the **Gather Evidence** questions:

- According to Hamer, how did the registrar use the literacy test to make it difficult to register?
- According to Hamer, what economic pressure did she experience when she tried to register to vote?

Focus on key details, including:

- The registrar asking Hamer to copy precisely and “give an interpretation of” a section of the Mississippi Constitution.
- Her landowner threatening that she would have to the “leave this place” should she not withdraw her registration.

As students are discussing the details they tagged **ask** them:

- Why did you choose this detail? What does it mean?
- Does anyone else agree? Disagree?
- What impact did this have on Hamer? What impact was it intended to have?

Prompt students to put any text they quote *in their own words*.

Key Point: Take a moment to **connect** back to the historical context.

Say: Let’s think about access to education for African Americans at this time. While some African Americans attained high levels of education, why would interpreting a government document have been particularly difficult for many?

Ask: Even though the test was difficult, was Hamer successful in registering?

Discuss the Big Idea Questions

Students move at this stage from noticing the specific details in the text to articulating the Big Ideas. The first Big Idea relates to the **application of literacy laws**: *How did the state of Mississippi use a literacy test to prevent Hamer from registering to vote?*

There are many ways students could articulate the Big Idea. For example:

- The literacy test Hamer took focused on unimportant details such as where to put commas and asked her to interpret a difficult document. This test was intended to be impossible to pass so that Hamer would not be able to register.

The second Big Idea question relates to **economic pressures**: *How did Hamer’s landowner use economic pressure to try to prevent her from registering to vote?*

One way to articulate the Big Idea here is:

- The landowner threatened to kick Hamer off his land if she registered to vote. As a tenant farmer, Hamer did not have rights to the land, so losing her home would have been a huge financial hardship.

Anticipate these difficulties that students will have getting to the Big Idea:

- They may focus too much on smaller details (*The state of Mississippi made Hamer copy commas in her literacy test*)
- Or, they may articulate ideas quite generally, without staying connected enough to the document details (*Mississippi used a literacy test to try to prevent Hamer from registering to vote*)

Ask these questions to help students *identify and articulate the Big Idea*:

- Let’s think back to the details we identified. What were the Big Ideas?
- Can you make that idea more specific? How do these details connect to each other?
- How did that action put pressure on Hamer?
- What about that test was intended to make Hamer fail? Did she fail?
- Why was being kicked off her land an example of an economic pressure?

The idea here is not to push students towards the “right” answer, as there are many possible ways to articulate the Big Idea, but to push them to **engage in a rich discussion with one another** in which they have to articulate their ideas and ground their thinking in the document.

Students will only have written about one message, so it is important to help them see the range of messages the creators made.

Discuss the Think About It Question

Support students in discussing the **Think About It** question: What makes Hamer an activist?

Ask:

- What is an activist? What hints do we have here that Hamer was an activist?
- What do you think of the actions she took?

Have students revise their notes. Allow students time to revise their notes after and/or during the discussion. Students may need to be prompted to revise how they have articulated the Big Idea.

Document 2: U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS REPORT ON VOTING IN MISSISSIPPI

Purpose

To provide students with more evidence about the ways in which economic reprisals were used to pressure African Americans.

Key Reading Challenges

One challenge of this document is the use of a long quote in the middle. Students may want to cite evidence from the report itself and they may also want to cite evidence from Henry. This provides an opportunity to help students think in deeper ways about citing text and the ways in which documents can include multiple voices.

Another issue to note with students is that this document uses the word “Negro.” If students are unfamiliar with the history of this language, it will be helpful to preview this with them before they begin to read.

Government Report, 1965



Suggested Process

- As students read independently, move around the room to diagnose difficulties and offer coaching. When you note several students struggling with particular passages or questions bring them to the attention of the class as appropriate.
- Use your Teacher Dashboard to scan and assess student responses to specific Document questions (such as the Big Idea question) once a majority of students have finished reading the document. This will prepare you for the class discussion.

Document 2: Class Discussion

It is critical for students to briefly discuss each document after they have read it.



Purpose

Check for and deepen students’

- comprehension of the document
- grasp of the “Big Idea”—i.e., the role economic pressure played in preventing African Americans from registering to vote

Process

Engage students in discussing one or two key questions they have answered in the tool.

- *Zoom In* provides Source It, Read Closely, Gather Evidence, and Big Idea questions and prompts alongside this document. Depending on your class’s needs, you may choose to focus on certain question types over others.
- We strongly recommend using structures such as turn-and-talk and table group discussions as you engage students in these questions.
- Most important, be sure to follow up on student comments by *pressing for reasons and evidence*, and *for accountable talk*. Use the prompts for the extension questions below.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

Select student responses to the “Big Idea” question, and use them to guide discussion.

- Ahead of time, use the Lesson Dashboard to quickly scan your students’ responses to the “Big Idea” question:
 - What role did economic pressure play in preventing most African Americans from registering to vote?
 - What is strong evidence in the document for your answer?

Discuss the Source It Questions

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights was created by Congress in 1957 to investigate cases where civil rights and voting rights were being denied to American citizens and report its findings to the President and Congress. This report details the ways that African Americans in Mississippi were prevented from registering to vote and voting in 1965.

Help students identify and **discuss** the following points:

- The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights was created by Congress. Why did Congress see the need to create such a commission? Let’s think back to what we looked at in the Hook slide.
- The audience would have been President Johnson, Congress, and ultimately the American public.
- The information in this report and others eventually led to passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Discuss the Read Closely Questions

Ask: Why was it impossible for African Americans who registered to vote to stay anonymous?

- Students have several ways to answer this question. The most concrete answer is given in the text: names of applicants were published in local papers and officials took photographs of people.
- Some students may be able to infer that most of Mississippi was made up of small towns and in small communities, “everyone knows everyone.”

Discuss the Gather Evidence Questions

Ask students to **share** the quotes they highlighted in response to the **Gather Evidence** question: How did whites in Mississippi use economic pressure to discourage African Americans from registering to vote?

Focus on key details, including:

- The majority of African Americans had “low income” and were economically dependent. [Refer students back to the Context slides to remind them of what economic dependence meant at this time.]
- Economic reprisals (losing employment) for many meant that they might not be able to provide for the basic needs of their families.
- African Americans feared they would lose their jobs for registering to vote.

Follow-up questions you could **ask** include:

- Why did you choose this detail? What does this mean?
- Does anyone else agree? Disagree?
- What impact would this have on people?

Encourage students to articulate these quotes *in their own words*.

Discuss the Big Idea Questions

Students move at this stage from noticing the specific details in the text to articulating the Big Idea. There are many ways students could articulate the Big Idea. For example:

- African Americans risked losing their jobs if they registered to vote. Given their dependence on whites for employment, these kinds of threats put enormous economic pressure on African Americans not to register.

Ask these questions to help students *identify and articulate the Big Idea*:

- Can you make that idea more specific? How does that connect to details in the document?
- How did the economic dependence of African Americans make them more vulnerable?
- How would losing a job impact a person’s whole family?

The idea here is not to push students towards the “right” answer, as there are many possible ways to articulate the Big Idea, but to push them to **engage in a rich discussion** with one another in which they have to articulate their ideas and ground their thinking in the document. Students will only have written about one Big Idea, so it is important to help them see the range of Big Ideas in the article.

Have students revise their notes. Allow students time to revise their notes after and/or during the discussion. In particular, students may need to be prompted to revise how they have articulated the Big Idea.

Document 3: INTIMIDATION OF BLACK VOTERS IN MISSISSIPPI

Purpose

To provide students with evidence about the ways in which both violence and economic reprisals were used to deter African Americans from registering to vote.

Key Reading Challenges

This document is written as a list of separate, though related, events. It provides minimal contextual information about each event. It may be helpful to preview the structure of this document before students read it.

This document also uses the word “Negro” to describe African Americans.

SNCC Pamphlet, 1964



Suggested Process

- As students read independently, move around the room to diagnose difficulties and offer coaching. When you note several students struggling with particular passages or questions bring them to the attention of the class as appropriate.
- Use your Teacher Dashboard to scan and assess student responses to specific Document questions (such as the Big Idea question) once a majority of students have finished reading the document. This will prepare you for the class discussion.

Document 3: Class Discussion

It is critical for students to briefly discuss each document after they have read it.



Purpose

Check for and deepen students’

- comprehension of the document
- grasp of the “Big Idea”—i.e., the role violence and economic pressure played in preventing African Americans from registering to vote

Process

Engage students in discussing one or two key questions they have answered in the tool.

- *Zoom In* provides Source It, Read Closely, Gather Evidence, and Big Idea questions and prompts alongside this document. Depending on your class’s needs, you may choose to focus on certain question types over others.
- We strongly recommend using structures such as turn-and-talk and table group discussions as you engage students in these questions.
- Most important, be sure to follow up on student comments by *pressing for reasons and evidence*, and *for accountable talk*. Use the prompts for the extension questions below.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

Select student responses to the “Big Idea” questions, and use them to guide discussion.

- Ahead of time, use the Lesson Dashboard to quickly scan your students’ responses to the “Big Idea” question:
 - What role did violence play in preventing most African Americans from registering to vote?
 - What role did economic pressure play in preventing most African Americans from registering to vote?
 - What is strong evidence in the document for your answers?

Discuss the Source It Questions

Help students **identify** and discuss the following points:

- What was SNCC? Let’s go back to Context if we need a reminder.
- Why was SNCC keeping this record?
 - **Key point:** SNCC used this documentation as evidence in testimony in support of creating a federal law, what became the Voting Rights Act.
- Students could argue that this document was both intended to “inform” and “persuade.”

Discuss the Read Closely Questions

Ask: How were the victims of violence treated by law enforcement?

To further discussion, **ask** follow-up questions, such as:

- In the case of a murder, law enforcement decided not to prosecute. Who was the shooter? Why was not prosecution undertaken?

- In a number of cases there is no mention of law enforcement at all. Why might that be?
- Finally, in the arson case, the men who were arrested (African Americans working to register voters) had not committed the crime. What does this tell us about law enforcement’s connection to this kind of violence and harassment?

Discuss the Gather Evidence Questions

Ask students to **share** the quotes they highlighted in response to the **Gather Evidence** questions: How did whites in Mississippi use violence and economic pressure to discourage African Americans from registering to vote?

Focus on key details, including:

- A man active in voter registration was shot and killed by a white State Representative.
- A teacher was fired from her job for trying to register to vote (even though she wasn’t successful).
- A man was fired from his sanitation job because his wife was attending classes about registering to vote.
- Registration workers were shot and one was wounded.
- A drugstore owner—Students may notice that the man was Aaron Henry, who was quoted in the first document—had his shop windows smashed after speaking at a voter registration drive. *[Students might categorize this as ‘violence’ or ‘economic pressure’; either is OK as long as they articulate their thinking.]*
- Dogs were used to disperse a crowd.
- A firebomb was thrown at the house of a man who had applied to register to vote and three other registration workers (who were innocent of the crime) were arrested.

Follow-up questions you could **ask** include:

- Why did you choose this detail? What does this mean?
- What other details could we highlight?
- Is this an example of violence or economic pressure? Why? Could it be both?
- Does anyone else agree? Disagree?
- What impact do you think these actions would have had on the larger community?

Encourage students to articulate these quotes *in their own words*.

Discuss the Big Idea Questions

Students move at this stage from noticing the specific details in the text to articulating the Big Ideas.

The first Big Idea relates to the use of violence: What role did violence play in preventing most African Americans from registering to vote?

There are many ways students could articulate the Big Idea. For example:

- Whites in Mississippi shot at, killed, bombed, and threatened African Americans who either tried to register to vote or who were helping others to register. These actions terrorized people and would have scared many people away from registering to vote.

The second Big Idea relates to economic pressure: What role did economic pressure play in preventing most African Americans from registering to vote?

One way to articulate the Big Idea here is:

- White employers in Mississippi fired African Americans for even trying to register, or if their family members tried. The fear of losing their jobs or having a family member lose their job would have prevented many people from registering to vote.

Ask these questions to help students *identify and articulate the Big Idea*:

- Can you make that idea more specific? How does that connect to details in the document?
- What kinds of violence did we read about?
- Why were people fired?
- Did African Americans have any power to fight back through the legal system at this time? What role did law enforcement seem to play here?
- What impact would these actions have had on people?

The idea here is not to push students towards the “right” answer, as there are many possible ways to articulate the Big Idea, but to push them to **engage in a rich discussion** with one another in which they have to articulate their ideas and ground their thinking in the document. Students will only have written about one Big Idea, so it is important to help them see the range of Big Ideas in the article.

Have students revise their notes. Allow students time to revise their notes after and/or during the discussion. In particular, students may need to be prompted to revise how they have articulated the Big Idea.

Document 4: APPLYING VOTER REGISTRATION LAWS UNEQUALLY

Purpose

To provide students with evidence about the ways in which the unfair application of literacy laws were used to deter African Americans from registering to vote.

Key Reading Challenges

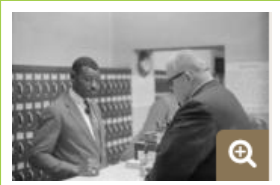
While most African Americans in the South at this time did not have fair and equal access to a quality education, some did manage to receive high levels of education. This report indicates how even highly educated African Americans faced discrimination when taking literacy tests. Students will need to infer the hardships faced by African Americans who had low levels of literacy.

As with the previous two documents, this one refers to African Americans as “Negroes.”

Suggested Process

- As students read independently, move around the room to diagnose difficulties and offer coaching. When you note several students struggling with particular passages or questions bring them to the attention of the class as appropriate.

Article, 1962



- Use your Teacher Dashboard to scan and assess student responses to specific Document questions (such as the Big Idea question) once a majority of students have finished reading the document. This will prepare you for the class discussion.

Document 4: Class Discussion

It is critical for students to briefly discuss each document after they have read it.



Purpose

Check for and deepen students’

- comprehension of the document
- grasp of the “Big Idea”—i.e., how the application of literacy tests was used to prevent African Americans from registering to vote

Process

Engage students in discussing one or two key questions they have answered in the tool.

- *Zoom In* provides Source It, Read Closely, Gather Evidence, and Big Idea questions and prompts alongside this document. Depending on your class’s needs, you may choose to focus on certain question types over others.
- We strongly recommend using structures such as turn-and-talk and table group discussions as you engage students in these questions.
- Most important, be sure to follow up on student comments by *pressing for reasons and evidence*, and *for accountable talk*. Use the prompts for the extension questions below.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

Select student responses to the “Big Idea” questions, and use them to guide discussion.

- Ahead of time, use the Lesson Dashboard to quickly scan your students’ responses to the “Big Idea” question:
 - How did the way registrars applied literacy laws prevent most African Americans from registering to vote?
 - What is strong evidence in the document for your answers?

Discuss the Source It Questions

Help students **identify** and discuss the following points:

- What is the job of an “assistant U.S. attorney general?”
- What was this report used for?
 - The federal government decided it needed to enforce voting rights and to do so, it needed to better understand how those voting rights were being violated.

Discuss the Read Closely Questions

Ask: Where in the South, in addition to Mississippi, did this report find that literacy tests were being used to prevent African Americans from voting?

- Efforts to deter African Americans from registering to vote were not limited to Mississippi. Similar actions, and low registration rates, occurred throughout the South.

Discuss the Gather Evidence Questions

Ask students to **share** the quotes they highlighted in response to the **Gather Evidence** question: According to this report, how were literacy laws used to prevent African Americans from registering to vote in Mississippi?

Focus on key details, including:

- African Americans could fail for mispronouncing words, handwriting, or trivial errors made filling out forms.
- Registrars made it deliberately difficult to pass by:
 - Reading test passages too quickly for test takers to copy them.
 - Giving African American test takers harder and longer passages to read and interpret than white test takers.
- Whites who struggled with literacy were given help in filling out application forms while African Americans were not.
- States did not provide answers, so registrars were left to determine which answers were satisfactory. Many would refuse to tell African Americans where they had made errors, while offering that help to white applicants.
- Registrants could decide to reject African Americans based on errors that they had not held against white applicants.

Follow-up questions you could **ask** include:

- Why did you choose this detail? What does this mean?
- What other details could we highlight?
- How does this demonstrate the unfair ways literacy tests were used?
- Who had the power and control in these situations?
- Why would states have decided not to publish answers to these tests?

Encourage students to articulate these quotes *in their own words*.

Discuss the Big Idea Questions

Students move at this stage from noticing the specific details in the text to articulating the Big Idea: How did the way registrars applied literacy laws prevent most African Americans from registering to vote?

There are many ways students could articulate the Big Idea. For example:

- Officials in Mississippi and other Southern states applied literacy tests in unfair ways. They required African American applicants to answer harder questions and failed them for small mistakes, while making it easy for white applicants to register. These practices prevented many African Americans from being able to register to vote.

Questions to **ask** to help students more clearly *identify and articulate* the Big Ideas include:

- Can you make that idea more specific? How does that connect to details in the document?
- In what ways were these practices discriminatory?
- What was the goal?

- What impact would these actions have had on people?

As always, **support** students in engaging in a rich text-based discussion with one another.

Allow students time to **revise** their notes after and/or during the discussion. In particular, students may need to be prompted to revise how they have articulated their answers to the Big Idea questions.

CONNECT

[Suggested time: ½ session]

Purpose

Before students write in response to a historical question, they need opportunities to talk. They need to clarify their understanding of the documents and how they connect with the larger context and the question they are answering. Your job as a *Zoom In* teacher is to create these discourse opportunities.

Cross-Document Discussion

In this discussion the main goal is to help students synthesize their learning across documents and connect back to the Context and the larger historical questions under investigation. This supports the historical thinking skills of corroboration and contextualization.

Three major moves should happen here:

- Re-engage students in the historical inquiry
- Support students in comparing Big Ideas and details across documents
- Support students in articulating their own thinking, while listening and responding to their peers

A) Re-engage students in the historical inquiry

Begin by reminding students of the lesson questions and the larger historical context. Do an initial informal assessment of what “big picture” students have walked away with. **Say** to students:

- Before we look at the tactics that we read about in these documents and how they impacted African Americans, let’s remind ourselves of what Mississippi was like at this time?

Turn-and-talk or table group questions:

- What were whites in Mississippi afraid of and why?
- How did Mississippi change its laws?
- How did Mississippi limit power and opportunity for African Americans at this time?

Prompt groups to look at the Context slides and their notes. Let groups discuss and then share their responses.

B) Support students in comparing big ideas and details across documents

Display the Connect Tab.

Say: Given what was happening, let’s think more deeply about why there was that steep drop in voter registration.

Connect will display a chart labeled “Application of Literacy Laws,” “Violence,” and “Economic Pressure” that displays student notes on the Big Idea questions, and their supporting evidence. You can choose one student’s work to project to guide the discussion, or you can project notes you’ve “starred” while using the Teacher Dashboard to review students’ Big Idea notes.

An example of student work in the chart format is shown below:

CONNECT

Application of Literacy Laws
Document: Applying Voter Registration Laws Unequally
Big Idea:

- Registrars applied literacy laws to African Americans unfairly.

Evidence:

- In one example, a registrar spoke too fast for an applicant to be able to copy down his words accurately.

Document: Fannie Lou Hamer Tries to Register to Vote
Big Idea:

- Local government applied literacy laws differently for whites and blacks.

Evidence:

- Fannie Lou Hamer was asked to interpret a very difficult part of the Mississippi State Constitution.

Violence
Document: Intimidation of Black Voters in Mississippi
Big Idea:

- Violence made people too afraid to register to vote.

Evidence:

- A black voting rights activist was shot and killed by a state representative, who went unpunished.

Economic Pressure
Document: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report on Voting Rights in Mississippi
Big Idea:

- People were afraid they would lose their jobs if they registered to vote.

Evidence:

- Black teachers were intimidated by local whites.

The Connect tab will also display the key discussion questions:

- Why were so few African Americans registered to vote in Mississippi during the 1950s and early 1960s?
- Why do you think whites in Mississippi used tactics like these?
- What needed to happen to ensure voting rights?

Engage students in the Connect questions.

We recommend that you give students time to discuss these questions with each other in small groups or turn-and-talks before engaging with them as a whole group. Follow-up questions you could **ask** include:

- What support from the documents do you have for your thinking? Let’s go look, what did it say here? What did this mean?
- How would these tactics have impacted people? How were they designed to make people feel?

- What risks to themselves and to others did African Americans take by registering to vote? Why would people avoid these risks?
- What was the goal of most whites in Mississippi at this time? Why do you think this was their goal?

This part of the discussion is intended to support students in both synthesizing the documents and reflecting on their larger historical significance.

Give students time to **edit** their responses in *Zoom In* based on class discussion.

C) Support students in articulating their own thinking

Finally, be sure to allow students time to speak with each other about their own thinking. This can happen at any stage of the discussion through turn-and-talks or small group discussion. Questions to support this kind of thinking include:

- What needed to happen to ensure voting rights? From ordinary people? From the government?
- What actions did African Americans take?
- What are your thoughts and reactions?
- How does what we read in these documents connect back to what we looked at in the Hook? What more have we learned?
- What about voting rights today? Who has the right to vote and who does not? How do state and local elections laws and policies impact voting today?

WRITING

[Suggested time: 1–2 sessions]

In this five-paragraph essay, students must describe why so few African Americans were registered to vote in Mississippi in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Teacher’s Roles During Writing

As students are writing, support them in these key ways according to their needs:

- Circulate and observe students’ progress through the template or outline. Take some notes to help you think about mini-lessons in writing you may want to teach to the whole class.
- Conference individually with students on their writing. Support their development through asking probing questions:
 - You seem stuck; where might you find that information?
 - If you don’t remember what that quote means, where can you go?
 - Tell me why you introduced that evidence that way? What more do you think the reader might want to know?
 - Can you tell out-loud what the Big Idea is here? OK, how could you put that into writing?
- If you see patterns, pull together small groups of students for mini-lessons, or to review instructions.
- Support students in being peer editors.
- Help students move on to polished writing.

Preparing Students to Write

Tell students that the next stage of the lesson will be their writing. Remind them they will be writing a five-paragraph explanatory essay. The key elements of historical essay writing you will help them with are:

- Describing the historical context.
- Citing details from the documents to support their explanation of the tactics that deterred and prevented many African Americans from registering to vote.

Project the Essay Outline View. Use this to review the writing prompt and preview the essay structure with students. Review explicitly each part of the essay and the role it serves in developing an answer to the historical question. Making these elements of the essay explicit for students will help them to develop the skills to construct essays more independently down the road.

Essay Outline View

Prompt: Write a five-paragraph essay that answers the question: Why were so few African Americans registered to vote in Mississippi in the 1950s and early 1960s?

Use historical context to describe the conditions faced by African Americans at this time and why Mississippi wanted to limit their ability to vote. Cite details from the documents to support your discussion of the tactics that deterred and prevented many African Americans from registering to vote.

Paragraph-by-paragraph guidance: In your essay you must have the following sections:

- **An introduction in which you describe Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s**
 - Provide a topic sentence that tells the reader the main subject you will be writing about.
 - Provide historical information about the conditions faced by African Americans at this time, and why Mississippi wanted to limit their ability to vote.
 - Introduce your thesis.
- **A first body paragraph in which you describe one tactic whites in Mississippi used to prevent African Americans from registering to vote**
 - Provide a topic sentence that introduces the main topic of your paragraph.
 - Provide 1–2 supporting details from one or two of the lesson documents.
 - > Introduce the source(s).
 - > Provide quotes from the documents.
 - > Explain how this detail shows how whites used this tactic to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.
- **A second body paragraph in which you describe a second tactic whites in Mississippi used to prevent African Americans from registering to vote**
 - Provide a topic sentence that introduces the main topic of your paragraph.
 - Provide 1–2 supporting details from one or two of the lesson documents.
 - > Introduce the source(s).
 - > Provide quotes from the documents.
 - > Explain how this detail shows how whites used this tactic to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.

- **A third body paragraph in which you describe a third tactic whites in Mississippi used to prevent African Americans from registering to vote**
 - Provide a topic sentence that introduces the main topic of your paragraph.
 - Provide 1–2 supporting details from one or two of the lesson documents.
 - > Introduce the source(s).
 - > Provide quotes from the documents.
 - > Explain how this detail shows how whites used this tactic to prevent African Americans from registering to vote.
- **A conclusion in which you summarize and extend your thinking**
 - Restate your main ideas.
 - Extend your conclusion by connecting to related historical content.
 - End strong! Why is the violation of and fight to protect voting rights important?

Setting the Level of Writing Support

Using the Teacher Dashboard, you can set the level of students' writing support. (*Note:* Do this before they begin drafting their essays.) *Zoom In* offers two levels of writing support. *High Support* (the default) gives all students sentence-level tips, optional sentence-starters, and guidance in selecting and using evidence. As students show progress as historical writers – especially in using evidence from documents to support their ideas – teachers can set writing support for individual students to *Low Support*. The system will provide these students with paragraph-level tips only, meaning students will shape and support their essays substantially on their own.

Preparing Students to Write with Low Supports

If most of your students are writing with Low Supports (meaning with outline only, rather than the detailed Writing Template), you may wish to give them more up-front preparation to write their historical essays. The following outline may help.

Overview

- Let students know that the next stage of the lesson will be their writing.
- Remind them that they will be explaining why so few African Americans were registered to vote in Mississippi in the 1950s and early 1960s.
- Their final product will be a five-paragraph explanatory essay.

Introduction

- Remember, what is the purpose of your essay? Right, you are going to explain why so few African Americans were registered to vote in Mississippi in the 1950s and early 1960s.
- What do the sections of this essay need to be? [Review the overarching structure of the paragraphs.]
- What's going to go into this introduction?
- How will you start this essay?
- What background information will you need to provide? Your reader will need to know why whites in Mississippi wanted to prevent African Americans from voting and what life was like for African Americans in Mississippi at this time.

Body Paragraphs 1-3

- OK, now that we have a sense of what needs to go into the introduction, let’s think about the three body paragraphs.
- What would the main topics of this essay be? Right, examples of the discriminatory application of literacy tests, the use of violence, and economic pressures.
- In each paragraph you will need to use details from the documents to provide evidence of how whites used this tactic to suppress voter registration. Remember to introduce your source and to explain how your evidence connects back to the Big Idea you are writing about.

Conclusion

- Finally, let students know that they will end the essay with a conclusion in which they summarize the Big Ideas, extend their thinking, and conclude with their own ideas about these changes.

Allow students *time to ask questions* for clarification before they move on to independent writing.

Sample Student Essay

In the 1950s and 1960s only a small percentage of African Americans who were eligible to vote in Mississippi were registered. At that time, African Americans did not have equal access to a good education and worked mostly in low paying jobs where whites were in control. In 1890 Mississippi changed its constitution to make it harder for African Americans to be able to register to vote. Whites in Mississippi wanted to prevent blacks from gaining any political power. Whites used many strategies such as applying literacy laws in racist ways, violence, and economic pressure to prevent blacks from registering to vote.

One of the ways that whites in Mississippi prevented African Americans from registering to vote was in the racist ways that they used their laws. Mississippi had laws that required people to pass literacy tests and to pay a tax if they wanted to register to vote. According to a report written by the Assistant U.S. Attorney General of the United States, “Negroes were required to read and write more lengthy and difficult constitutional sections, the procedures resulted in easier tests for white applicants, and a higher literacy level was required of Negroes.” This means that whites used the literacy laws in ways that were unfair to blacks and made it impossible for them to pass tests to be able to vote. According to the same report, “eminently qualified Negroes are compelled to play a humiliating, futile game with registrars who set their own standards and who often refuse to tell unsuccessful applicants where they made a mistake. Conversely, white applicants usually get all the help they need, from each other and from the registrars to fill out the form.” This means that whites in charge of registration could choose to apply the law differently to blacks in order to prevent them from registering.

Another way that whites in Mississippi prevented African Americans from registering to vote was through violence. Whites threatened blacks with bombs and dogs, and even shot and beat up people who tried to register to vote. According to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which documented acts of violence, “Three registration workers were attacked with gunfire on U.S. Highway 82 just outside Greenwood. The shots were fired from a 1962 white Buick. The car in which the workers were riding was punctured by 11 bullets. One worker, James Travis of SNCC, was wounded in the neck and shoulder.” This means registering to vote was life threatening to African Americans.

Finally, whites used economic pressure to prevent African Americans from registering. People might lose their jobs or their homes if white employers or landlords found out they were trying to vote. According to an oral history of Fannie Lou Hamer, who was a leader of the voting rights movement in Mississippi, “when we got back I went on out to where I had been staying for eighteen years, and the landowner had talked to my husband and told him I had to leave the place. The landowner said, ‘Well, I mean that, you’ll have to go down and withdraw your registration, or you’ll have to leave this place.’” This means that the landlord threatened to kick her off her land if she registered to vote. According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, which was investigating civil rights violations in the South, “In some areas of Mississippi Negro teachers want to register and vote but fail to do so because they fear they will lose their jobs. The intimidation of Negro teachers is particularly significant because in the absence of any large group of Negro lawyers, doctors, accountants, or technicians in Mississippi, teachers account for a disproportionately large segment of the group which most often provides community leadership.” This means that people feared they would lose their teaching jobs if they voted and teaching jobs were important to the community.

Whites in Mississippi used many tactics to prevent blacks from voting. They used their laws in ways that discriminated against blacks, threatened people’s lives and used economic pressure to prevent blacks from registering to vote. They did not want blacks to have equality or any power in their state. Even though they were prevented from registering, African Americans continued to fight for their right to vote. People risked their lives to protect their right to vote and eventually the federal government passed the Voting Rights Act, which made the actions Mississippi was taking illegal. Even today people have to continue to protect their rights to vote.

Assessing Student Writing with the Essay Rubric

For information on assessing student writing, see these resources:

- “Zoom In Essay Rubric” (PDF)
- “Assess Student Writing” (Video) <http://zoomin.edc.org/teachers/watch-videos>