

# Using the Big Paper Exercise

## The Purpose of the Big Paper Exercise

In the big paper exercise, the students collaboratively examine a primary document by silently exchanging written comments. This “written conversation” encourages the students to focus their thoughts and gives them more time for a careful consideration of the document.

In groups of two or three, the students examine the primary document that you provide by *writing* their thoughts and analyses on a large piece of paper.

After about 10 minutes, the “big papers” are displayed around the classroom. The students then walk around the room silently reading the comments and analyses of their peers.

The exercise concludes with a class discussion about the primary documents.

## Materials You Will Need to Prepare Ahead of Time

- large sheets of paper, such as newsprint (one sheet per group) to which you will attach the primary source documents
- printed copies of a primary source document (make two to three extra copies of each document in case some of your students are unable to easily view the document in the center of the large paper)
- dark-colored markers (for easier reading when the papers are displayed)
- a roll of masking tape

Take a large sheet of paper and tape a copy of the primary document in the center, leaving ample room around it for the students to write their comments. Prepare one “big paper” in this way for each group.

## The Big Paper Exercise in Steps

1. Divide the class into small groups of two or three.
2. Provide each small group with one of the prepared large papers.
3. Give each student a marker. Instruct the students to write their names on the back of their large paper.
4. Explain to the groups that they are to read the source document and then have a silent conversation about it with one another. Further explain that a silent conversation takes place by writing their thoughts, and their responses to the other students’ written thoughts, on the large paper. They are not to speak aloud during the exercise.
5. After 10 or more minutes, tape the papers up around the classroom.
6. Ask the students to walk around the room and silently read each group’s comments.
7. Once the students have read the comments, lead them in a conversation about the primary source document.
8. At the end of the class, collect the papers so you can evaluate them.

