

# A Slow Walk to Oblivion – A Source Analysis Tale

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For most social studies students, writing a source-based response is an experience comparable to receiving oral surgery without anesthesia from an unwashed cocker spaniel – not exactly Sunday afternoon at the park. It is for this reason that Alberta junior and senior high teachers are coordinating their efforts much better to scaffold the process of source-based writing to prepare students for their greatest challenge: the white whale that is the grade twelve diploma exam.

There are several different types of source-based assignments; I will not describe each one in detail, as you are probably reading this article as an escape from your miseries, not as an addition to them. Arguably the most challenging one at the university-route level is Type 2, where students must analyze the perspective of three different sources and compare them with each other (e.g. “To what degree does each source support immigration?”). They also need to provide evidence, the more social studies-specific the better, to support these interpretations. When teaching grade nine social studies, I scale this back to give them just one or two sources, including the sinister one below by N.H. Hawkins. What statement is Hawkins making about immigration?

In case you have trouble with illustrations, the message is stated plain as day in the caption at the bottom. The year also provides context – this is right in the heyday of Canada’s Chinese head tax, back when systemic racism was written overtly into government policy as a selling point. Indeed, Hawkins would have been a deserving nominee of the “Racist Cartoonist of the Year” award for 1907. As a student, you would want to describe the details of the cartoon, including the caption, that make the cartoonist’s message clear, such as the tidy appearance of the white immigrants versus the demonic faces of Asian immigrants and beautiful Mother Britain supervising the proceedings. If a caption is not already included with a cartoon, it is common practice for a teacher to insert a few words to provide a bit of extra context.

Much to my surprise, only about half the grade nine students interpreted the source accurately. Could it be that my grandmother was right, and that I was doomed to be a failed teacher? While the kids understand that discrimination is taking place in the cartoon, they claim that the cartoonist is criticizing or mocking the legislation rather than supporting it. There are two most likely reasons for this misunderstanding: 1) Students are more familiar with modern-day cartoons that are much more sarcastic and critical rather than positive and supportive, and 2) Some students have trouble coming to terms with a source that is promoting a racist point of view – after all, it’s hard to reconcile that someone who drew lovely pictures could be evil (all you historians at home are eagerly raising your hands right now, but don’t be shouting “Hitler” too enthusiastically or the neighbours might get the wrong idea).

Having taught this course a number of times, I still enjoy using this cartoon to challenge the students, but I want to give them a fair chance. I originally did not include the year with the caption. This is an important piece of context, as a cartoon espousing such views today would have a cat’s chance in a violin factory of even being published anywhere other than through a far-right outlet. In preparing students for this type of assignment, we examine several examples of historical and contemporary political cartoons, noting how the former tend to be more blunt than ironic. One of the beautiful things about these assignments is that you can analyze them to death together afterward, but the only thing that students can take with them to the next one is how to approach it; all the advice in the world will ultimately not compensate for weak reading comprehension.



Figure 1. “The same act which Excludes Orientals Should Open Wide the Portals of British Columbia to White Immigrations.” Cartoon by N.H. Hawkins, Saturday Sunset (1907).

I learned quickly not only to scale down the number of sources in grade nine, but also to be easier on the summative assessment side. On a scale of limited-poor-satisfactory-proficient-excellent, I will typically score each category about a point higher than I would at the high school level. I give three of these assignments throughout grade nine, worth a total of about 20% of their overall grade, but I drop the lowest of those three marks at the end of the year. Before I chose to go this route, some of my high achievers were incredibly stressed by the relatively low marks they received to the point where they lodged a series of completely unrelated, out-of-context complaints about me to administration, before eventually admitting that they were just unhappy with their marks. I want to challenge my students but not to the point where they want my head on a platter!

The early stress pays off later. A number of my former students have visited me, thanking me for making the transition to high school social studies much easier. It is extremely gratifying, so long as this preparation can be done without putting undue stress on students.