

KENT STATE

FOUR DEAD IN OHIO

BY DERF BACKDERF

BOOK INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio, written and illustrated by Derf Backderf, tells the story of the events leading up to the tragedy of May 4, 1970, when the National Guard shot and killed four unarmed college students and wounded nine more during campus protests at Kent State University. Set during the tumultuous final years of the Vietnam War and the height of the Cold War, the graphic novel opens four days before the shootings take place and follows the stories of the four students who were shot and killed—Allison Krause, Jeff Miller, Sandy Scheuer, and Bill Schroeder. Even as readers get to know these students and their plans for the future, an ominous shadow hangs over the events of the book as we watch them gradually move toward their tragic fates.

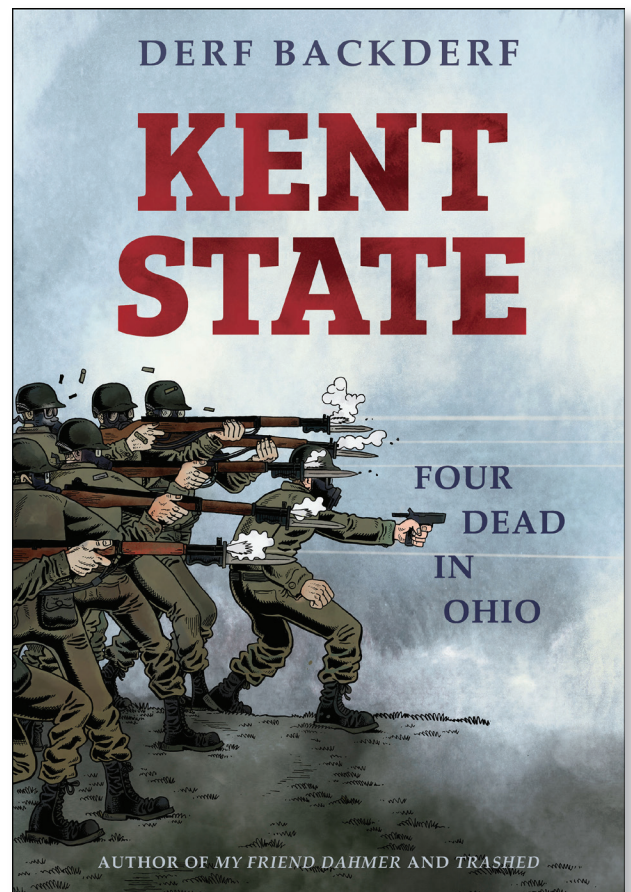
Reconstructed from oral histories, extensive firsthand interviews, photos, news reports, and all of the various Kent State archives, the story that unfolds throughout *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* is thoroughly researched by Backderf. The author leaves no stone unturned in showing how a toxic combination of political maneuvering, ignorance, fear, bias, inexperience, and bungled decision-making led to one of the most shocking American events in the 20th century. Eerily reminiscent of events and divisions we still face today, this story is a timeless reminder of the perils of prejudice, bias, and forceful repression by our own government.

KEY SETTINGS

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY in the early 1970s is a fast-growing and diverse campus located in the small town of Kent, Ohio. Boasting more than 20,000 students, Kent State is one of the largest universities in Ohio. Backderf provides a map of the university, accurate to the way it appeared in 1970. Important campus landmarks in *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* include:

- **The Commons:** The site of many protests on campus, and where students gather throughout the day on their way to and from classes. This and the nearby Prentice Hall Parking Lot are where students are shot on May 4, 1970.
- **The Prentice Gate:** A gathering point at the edge of campus where students meet and regroup during protests.
- **The ROTC Building:** For the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), a group of students at Kent State training to become commissioned officers for the U.S. Armed Forces. The ROTC Building is burned down partway through the book in an act of protest against the Vietnam War.
- **The Practice Field:** Where the National Guard find themselves on campus just before the shootings take place, and where the infamous “huddle” happens prior to the shootings.

THE CITY OF KENT, OHIO, in the early 1970s is a powder keg of diverging ideals and beliefs. Divided between the younger, liberal-leaning students on campus and the primarily conservative townspeople surrounding them, Kent’s political and social divisions come to a violent head in the days leading up to May 4, 1970. Important city landmarks in *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* include:



- **The Water Street Strip:** A collection of clubs and bars in the center of Kent. A popular hangout near campus and downtown, this strip brings together a mix of students and youth from all over the area. It is the site of the riots on May 1, 1970, that fuel the mayor's decision to call in the National Guard.
- **Student Neighborhoods:** The southern part of Kent is where many of the characters live. When the National Guard arrives, the streets in this part of town become occupied and a curfew is strictly enforced.

KEY CHARACTERS

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS portrayed in the book include:

- **Bill Schroeder**, a 19-year-old student and member of the ROTC program. As a future member of the armed forces, he struggles to compromise his personal beliefs with his future career.
- **Allison Krause**, a 19-year-old student planning to leave Kent State in the summer for the Northeast with her boyfriend, Barry Levine.
- **Jeff Miller**, a 20-year-old musician and psych major. A reluctant protestor at first, the events in the book spur a renewed passion for activism.
- **Sandy Scheuer**, a 20-year-old speech therapist who is beginning a new relationship with Jeff Miller just as the graphic novel opens.

MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL GUARD portrayed in the book include:

- **Adjutant General Sylvester "Tony" Del Corso**, the commander of the Ohio National Guard throughout the events of the graphic novel.
- **Brigadier General Robert Canterbury**, the top field officer under Del Corso. At a pivotal moment on May 4, 1970, he hands off control of Guard troops to Major Harry Jones with tragic consequences.
- **Major Harry Jones**, an officer under Canterbury. He violently disperses the peaceful sit-in on Main Street on May 2, 1970, and later takes over Troop G on May 4, just before the shootings take place.
- **Frank Karlovic**, a member of the National Guard. Physically exhausted, sleep-deprived, lacking sufficient equipment, and working with distorted information, Karlovic represents the stress and ignorance that members of the National Guard were operating under leading up to May 4, 1970.

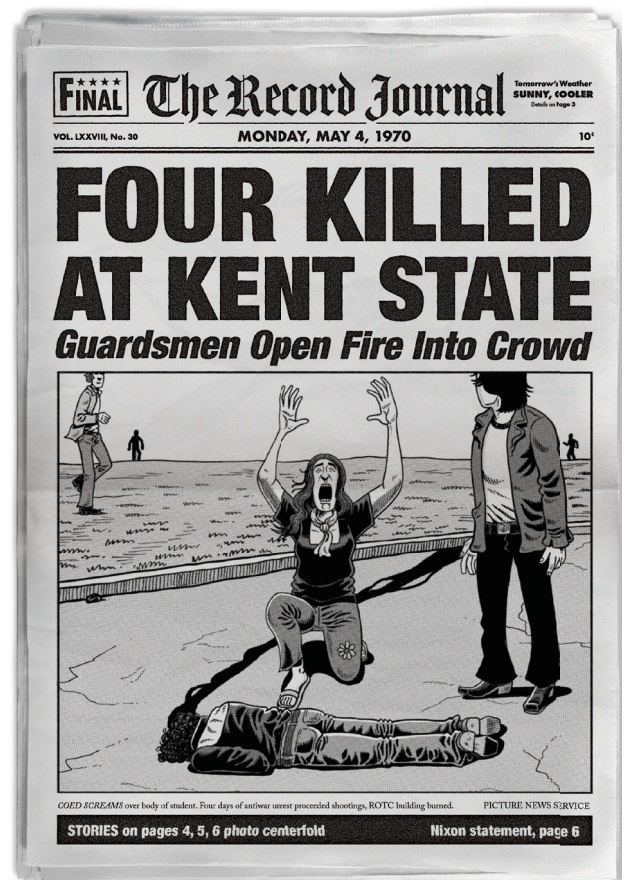
Terry Norman, a Kent State student working for local law enforcement and the FBI to keep tabs on protesters. He attends rallies and protests so he can take photos of his fellow students and report back to the FBI. He is well-known as a "narc" around campus.

Leroy Satrom, the city of Kent's mayor. He is responsible for initially calling in the National Guard to Kent after riots on the Water Street Strip on May 1, 1970.

Jim Rhodes, the governor of Ohio and commander in chief of the state's National Guard. He is responsible for sending the National Guard to Kent on May 2, 1970. His "law and order" style of governance is on full display during the graphic novel, further heightened by an upcoming election he is likely to lose.

Robert White, the president of Kent State University. His indifference to the events happening around campus, especially the day of May 4, 1970, allow the situation to escalate.

Richard M. Nixon was elected in 1969 as the 37th president of the United States. After promising to bring troops home from the Vietnam War, his announcement that the U.S. had invaded Cambodia sets off a wave of renewed protests and activism on college campuses. Nixon's authoritarian tactics to quell these protests across the country, including at Kent State University, contributes to the violence and mayhem that ensues.



KEY THEMES

- **Persistence and Activism** in the face of unjust political and social forces threads its way throughout the graphic novel. As students across Kent State speak out against the Vietnam War, they face increasingly despotic efforts to tarnish and extinguish their voices and actions. Their tireless efforts to stand up for what they believe in, regardless of the consequences, is a powerful message about the struggle and sacrifice that are required to enable true change.
- **Prejudice and Paranoia** are key themes and affect multiple events throughout the book, always for the worse. Townspeople, members of the National Guard, and politicians alike throw out wild theories about students being communists, terrorists, or worse. Their fear of the unknown and the “other” leads them to make shortsighted and irrational decisions based on ignorance, leading to further violence.
- **Repression and Control** are the central conflicts within the book, showing the tremendous toll that repressive measures can have on a community. Whether it be the military draft, enforced curfews, or the martial law imposed on Kent, the characters that enact these measures in the name of safety seek silence, fear, and obedience—values that are inherently un-American. Alternatively, the characters that protest against these oppressive forces represent values like free speech and liberty.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- **Protests Throughout History:** The United States of America has a long history with public protest, which extends into present day. Take note of any protests throughout America’s history that you are aware of and determine if you can find any common themes. Then, do some brief research into the laws surrounding protests in the United States, such as the First Amendment to the Constitution that reads:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Which protests do you think have been most influential in shaping American society throughout history and in present day? Why?

- **Historical Context:** Research the political and social climate around 1970. What events do you think were important in shaping the social discourse in the United States? What events had a hand in shaping the thoughts and actions of college students? What events influenced the thoughts and actions of older generations at the time? If you were living in the U.S. during that time, how do you think you would have felt about the Vietnam War?
- **Current Events:** Conduct research into modern-day protests, beginning with 2014’s protests in Ferguson, Missouri, up to and including the recent Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. How have local governments, police units, and the national government responded to these protests, specifically in an effort to control the protesters? What has the public discourse looked like surrounding these protests? What have the nation’s leaders said and done in response to these protests?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Backderf begins the book with his own experience seeing the National Guard? How does this help set up the events of the book?
2. Based on his research, Backderf alleges that different government agencies were working to infiltrate protest groups. What was their aim in doing this? Do you think this still occurs? Why or why not?
3. The draft is no longer in effect, but it could come back one day. How would a draft change the way you viewed war and politics? Would it change your thinking on current conflicts throughout the world the U.S. is involved in?
4. The reader knows how the story is going to end throughout the entire book. How does this affect your reading experience? Did it make you think differently about the characters in the book?
5. Although the book takes place in 1970, many parallels can be drawn between then and modern day. Why do you think Backderf chose to tell this story now? What implications can be drawn about the relationship between history and modern day?
6. Before reading *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, how familiar were you with the Vietnam War protests and the shootings at Kent State University? Do you think this is an important story for modern youth to be aware of? Why or why not?



7. The history of ROTC and its presence on college campuses is discussed throughout the book. ROTC is still prominent in high schools and colleges across the country. Do you think the public's perception of ROTC programs has changed? Do you think high schools and colleges should continue to provide ROTC programs? Why or why not? What benefits and drawbacks might there be to having ROTC programs?
8. Throughout the book, many people, especially those unconnected to the university, are depicted as paranoid or scared of militant youth. Why do you think older individuals, as well as military and government officials, felt this way? What events in their life might influence these views?
9. Backderf describes different activist groups such as Students for a Democratic Society and the Weathermen. What lessons from these groups, their actions and reactions to them, can be learned about effective activism?
10. This graphic novel is interrupted by informational pages that provide further context on the individuals and events that show up throughout the book. Why? Can you think of any other books, movies, or other stories that feature a similar narrative structure? How is this different from traditional exposition?
11. On page 35, a single bottle being thrown is what lights a larger conflict in downtown Kent. Why? Can you think of other examples throughout history and in current events where a single action led to unexpected consequences?
12. Page 53 is a callback to the first page of the graphic novel. What is different about this scene after reading this far, compared to the earlier version without text?
13. With all their resources, why do you think people like the National Guard members and police chief are so misinformed as to what is happening in Kent? What does this tell you about their biases?
14. Throughout the book, Backderf develops many different characters, yet no single character is featured as the protagonist or antagonist. Who do you think are the main characters in the book? Is the focus of the book on individual characters, or the groups and factions that they make up?
15. Backderf gives a detailed, play-by-play account of the events of May 4, 1970, including multiple images and diagrams depicting the National Guard's strategic movements across Kent State's campus (pages 196 and 199). What are these images reminiscent of? Why do you think Backderf chose to show the events in this way?
16. After reading this graphic novel, what message(s) do you believe Backderf is trying to convey through this graphic novel? Why do you think that?
17. After thorough research, Backderf chose to tell this story in a graphic novel format. How would the story change if it was told in prose? How would that change the impact of the story on the reader? Were there any images that you found particularly moving? Why?
18. *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* ends with an epilogue told in comics, placed after Backderf's extensive appendix of notes and source materials. Why do you think Backderf chose to place the epilogue here, after his notes? What should the reader take away from this page and the appearance of then-president Richard Nixon and his chief of staff?

PROJECT IDEAS

- **ROLE PLAY** – Imagine that you are a leader in the Kent State saga, such as Ohio's governor, Kent State's president, Kent's mayor, or a leader in the National Guard. How would you respond to the escalating events leading up to the Kent State shootings? If the shootings at the end of the saga had still occurred, how would you respond? What laws or policies would you put into place to ensure that the same type of incident never occurred again? Create a written explanation of your prevention plan, and then your response if the plan were to fail. For context, research any actual laws that may have been put into place on the federal, state, and local levels following the events of May 4, 1970.
- **TIMELINE OF EVENTS** – Backderf's account of the events leading up to May 4, 1970, are incredibly detailed. Working individually or in groups, distill the events detailed in the book into the 10 events that you find most notable or influential leading up to the shootings. Then, create a timeline detailing the events that you chose. Finally, compare your timeline to those created by other students. Discuss the similarities and differences in your timelines and why you chose the events that you did.
- **HISTORICAL CLASH COMIC** – Research another important protest or event from history where two or more opposing sides clashed. Create a comic that, like this graphic novel, shows the events leading up to the climax. Consider creating a map, appendix, and other supplemental materials that might help the reader better understand the progression of events.
- **HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF** – In this two-part project, you will conduct research and take action. First, after reading *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, make a thorough list of similarities and differences that you see between the events of the book and modern day protests/current events. Your comparisons should include a well-researched range of information, such as visual imagery, eyewitness accounts, news coverage, political responses, and so on. After noting similarities and differences, decide for yourself if action should be taken in response to current events. If so, choose a person in power (such as a government official) and write them a letter with your findings, why you see a need for change, and your suggested actions. If you do not think action should be taken in response to current events, write an essay explaining your conclusion.



FURTHER READING AND PAIRING SUGGESTIONS

ONLINE SOURCES

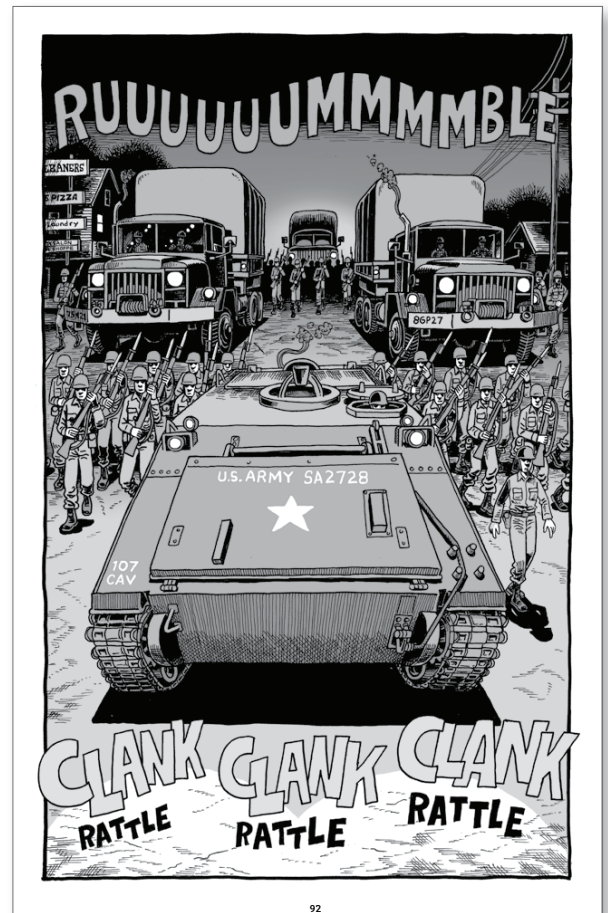
- *Daily Kent Stater* digital archive
- May 4 Collection at Kent State University
- *Beacon Journal* Kent State digital photo archive
- Yale University Archives of Kent State Shootings

BOOKS

- *Blood of Isaac* by Charles A. Thomas (e-book)
(Kent State University Press, 2005)
- *Kent State: Death and Dissent in the Long Sixties*
by Thomas M. Grace (University of Massachusetts Press, 2016)
- *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, by James A. Michener
(Fawcett, 1982)
- *Mayday, Kent State* by J. Gregory Payne
(Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co, 1981)
- *Thirteen Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State*
by Joe Eszterhas and Michael D. Roberts
(Gray & Company, 2012)
- *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*
by Thi Bui (graphic novel) (Abrams, 2017)
- *The Communist Manifesto: A Graphic Novel by Karl Marx
and Friedrich Engels* adapted by Martin Rowson (graphic novel)
(SelfMadeHero, 2018)
- *The Kent State Coverup* by Joseph Kelner and James Munves
(iUniverse, 2001)
- *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien
(Mariner Books, 1990)
- *The Truth About Kent State: A Challenge to the
American Conscience* by Peter H. Davies
(Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1973)
- *Vietnam: The Real War: A Photographic History*
By Pete Hamill and The Associated Press
(Abrams, 2013)
- *Watchmen* by Alan Moore (graphic novel)
(DC Comics, 1995)
- *67 Shots: Kent State and the End of American Innocence*
by Howard Means (Da Capo Press, 2016)

PLAYS

- *May 4th Voices* by David Hassler



RECORD ALBUMS

- *May 4th Voices* by David Hassler

FILMS

- *The Day The '60s Died* by Anna Bowers
and Jonathan Halperin (documentary)
- *Across the Universe* by Julie Taymor, Dick Clement,
and Ian La Frenais (musical film)
- *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola and John Milius
- *Full Metal Jacket* by Stanley Kubrick, Michael Herr,
and Gustav Hasford
- *Nixon* by Oliver Stone, Stephen J. Rivele,
and Christopher Wilkinson

ALSO BY DERF BACKDERF

- *My Friend Dahmer* (graphic novel)
- *Trashed* (graphic novel)



COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

The reading of this graphic novel in combination with a thoughtful analysis through writing, presentation, or discussion (such as the projects within this guide) can promote the teaching or reinforcement of the following History/Social Studies Common Core Standards, as well as various Reading, Writing, and Speaking & Listening Common Core standards.

READING: LITERATURE	
GRADES 9 AND 10	GRADES 11 AND 12
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.5 Analyze in detail how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.7 Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's <i>Landscape with the Fall of Icarus</i>).	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.9 Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).	N/A



This Educator's Guide was created by Pop Culture Classroom © 2020



READING: INFORMATIONAL TEXT

GRADES 9 AND 10	GRADES 11 AND 12
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2 Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3 Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.5 Analyze in detail how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.9 Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), including how they address related themes and concepts.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.9 Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.



HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES

GRADES 9 AND 10	GRADES 11 AND 12
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3 Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.5 Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6 Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7 Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.8 Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9 Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

