**Bridging the Gap in Document Analysis Using S.A.M.O.A.**

One of the greatest difficulties students have in analyzing texts or images is falling into the trap of literal interpretation. Without considering the context of a text or image, students can walk away with a very misguided (or even entirely false) interpretation of the resource. SAMOA is a tool students can use to contextualize, analyze, and interpret literary or historical resources. Here it is in a nutshell.

**S**etting: Determine the year (or time period) and place this document originated. This step is fundamental in making sense of the resource being analyzed. *Guiding Questions*: When was this document or image written/composed/created? Where was this document written/composed/created? How might the time and/or place of origin influence what you are about to read?

**A**uthor: Determine the person who wrote the document. This step "humanizes" the document. It is important for students to recognize that documents don't speak, *people* speak through them. *Guiding Questions*: Who wrote/composed this piece? Were they a man or a woman? Were they old or young? What was their nationality/ethnicity/race? What was their profession? Did they have a political or religious affiliation? What was their socioeconomic status?

**M**essage: It becomes easier to determine message when students have a firm understanding of the text's origin and author, which may require additional information to be presented to the students prior to the analysis of the text. After determining the setting and author, it's time to shift the student's focus to the content of the document. The message is the point the author is attempting to convey to his/her audience. *Guiding Questions*: What is the author/artist expressing in the piece? Did the author/artist express a particular emotional tone (e.g. was it inspiring, serious, comical, sarcastic, angry, depressing, apologetic, etc.)

**O**pinion: It is the student's task, in this step, to objectively determine the opinions surrounding the text (this includes both the author's opinion ***and*** the opinions of those who may oppose it). This is the most difficult step of document analysis, as it necessitates the most critical level of thinking and a workable knowledge of the previous three steps. Opinion requires the student to break away from the source and think abstractly about how it fits into their understanding of the material. In theory, it allows the student to bridge the gap between "practice" and "prescription" and establish the opinion of the author and how it fits against differing opinions. It is useful for establishing point of view - or thinking about how people from a different time or place thought. For example, if the text is a sermon given by a Catholic priest, dating to 1650, and the message is that "neighbors should never gossip because spreading rumors is a sin," this is not an indication that no one spread rumors in 1650. Rather, this text is prescriptive, as it establishes an *ideal* circumstance by which people shouldlive. The student then must ask *why* the priest wrote a sermon deriding gossiping. Naturally, the answer is that a significant enough number of people gossiped to warrant him writing a sermon about it. This is indicative of practice, or the *actual* circumstances surrounding the text. Identifying opinions, especially those opposed to the text, is essential in verifying the credibility, biases, strengths and flaws of the document being analyzed. *Guiding Questions:* Why did the author write/create this piece? How might someone take an opposing stance to the author/artist's message? How might the author/artist's background influence the opinion expressed in the resource? Why is the author/artist's opinion valid or invalid in comparison to opposing opinions? Is the author's opinion representative of practice or prescription (ideal or actual circumstances in their historical context)?

**A**udience: The final step in this document analysis tool is to consider the *specific* audience the author was targeting. Responses for this step rarely include "everyone" or "all Americans" or "anyone he/she could reach." It is best to identify a specific audience based on the message and opinion of the textual piece. In the example above the answer may be "Catholic parishioners." *Guiding Questions:* Who was the author trying to reach? How widespread was the document/piece distributed? Where was the resource first published/presented? Were there political, religious, social, language, or economic constraints that limited this author/artist's potential audience?