Minnesota Humanities Center

Inquiry Lens Cards

About

The Inquiry Lens Cards are a set of discipline-specific questions aligned with Minnesota's 2021 Social Studies Standards. They provide a framework for students to analyze sources using questions that mirror the thinking of historians, geographers, economists, and civic experts. Each card's content is aligned with the strand's anchor standards and includes an ethnic studies question at the top to frame inquiry, reflecting the integrated approach of the ethnic studies strand.

Designed to be printed, laminated, and used repeatedly across units, topics, and grade levels, the cards are content-neutral and work with any source. They model the approaches disciplinary thinkers use, build familiarity with disciplinary language, and gradually foster student independence—reducing the burden on teachers to create new questions for every source.

- K–2 Inquiry Lens Cards
- 3–8 Inquiry Lens Cards
- 9–12 Inquiry Lens Cards – *Coming Soon*

Repeatable Routines

Routine 1: Same Card, Same Sources

Approximate Time: 15–20 minutes

All students work with the same source (or source set) using the same inquiry lens card. This structure builds familiarity with one discipline's way of thinking by focusing attention on a shared set of questions and ideas.

Best Used When:

- Introducing the routine and building familiarity with one way of thinking
- Sources naturally align with a particular discipline (e.g., maps with geography)

Set Up: Divide students into small groups and provide each group with the same source(s) and the same inquiry lens card.

Teacher establishes norms:

- "The point of the activity is to have a discussion about the sources."
- "Use evidence from the source to support your ideas."
- "You do not have to answer every question."

Activity: Students work in small groups to analyze the source(s) using the inquiry lens card. Each group selects a question from the card to guide their discussion and uses evidence from the source(s) to support their thinking. If conversation slows, groups choose another question to continue their analysis.

After working in small groups, each group shares their thinking with the class. As students share, the teacher names the disciplinary skills being practiced, such as contextualization, causation, or argumentation.

Routine 2: Stations – Different Cards, Same Sources

Approximate Time: 25–35 minutes

Students rotate through stations where the same source (or source set) is paired with different inquiry lens cards. This structure allows students to examine the same material through multiple disciplinary lenses and compare how each lens shapes understanding.

Best Used When:

- Practicing shifting between disciplinary roles and perspectives
- Comparing how different disciplines approach the same source
- Exploring the different types of information a source can reveal

Set Up: Create stations around the room, each with the same source(s) and a different inquiry lens card.

Teacher establishes norms:

- "Engage fully in the role at your current station."
- "Use the card's questions to guide your conversation."
- "Pay attention to how the lens you use shapes what information becomes visible."

Activity: At each station, students use the inquiry lens card to guide discussion or writing about the source. As students work, the teacher circulates to support transitions and deepen analysis.

After a set amount of time, groups rotate to the next station and take on a new disciplinary lens. Students leave their previous role behind and engage with the source(s) from a new perspective.

After all groups have experienced each station, the class debriefs to reflect on how. understanding changed across disciplines and what new insights each lens revealed.

Routine 3: Jigsaw – Different Cards, Same Sources

Approximate Time: 40–50 minutes

Students become experts in one disciplinary lens and then share their insights in mixed groups. This structure highlights how different disciplines contribute unique perspectives and build interdisciplinary understanding.

Best Used When:

- Practicing becoming an expert in one discipline and sharing insights with peers
- Introducing students to interdisciplinary approaches
- Highlighting how different lenses reveal distinct types of information from the same sources

Set Up: Divide students into home groups and provide each group with the same source or source set. Assign each group a different inquiry lens card.

Prepare for students to move into mixed groups with one representative from each discipline.

Teacher establishes norms:

- "Use the questions on your lens card to uncover what this source can tell you."
- "Use evidence to support your ideas."
- "Listen for what other disciplines notice that you did not."

Activity: In home groups, students analyze the source(s) using their assigned inquiry lens card. They work toward a shared understanding and prepare to explain how their discipline interprets the source, using evidence to support their ideas.

Students then move into mixed groups where each discipline is represented. Each student shares their group's analysis while others listen, ask questions, and note insights that differ from their own.

The class debriefs by reflecting on how each lens contributed to understanding the source and discussing what might be missed if only one perspective were used.

Tips for Implementation

- **Focus on time, not task completion.** Set a fixed amount of time for discussion or writing and hold to it. When students know they need to fill the time rather than finish the task, they shift from a completion mindset to an engagement mindset. This also prevents the early finisher problems without adding extra work.
- **Let students choose their questions.** As they get comfortable with the cards, have them decide which questions to discuss and explain why. This helps build metacognitive awareness of disciplinary thinking.
- **Build in time for students to record their own questions.** The questions students generate are as valuable as the ones on the cards. Learning to notice and name their own questions is a key habit of disciplinary thinkers.
- **Use physical props for younger students.** Simple role markers—like a hat, badge, or desk card—help elementary and middle school students make the mental shift between disciplinary roles. The physical transition supports the cognitive one.