Overview
The Analyzing Floor Debates collection related to the theme Critical Thinking is designed to take students through a step-by-step exploration of the argumentation process used in Congress. Students will examine the main components of an effective, thoughtful argument, analyze historical and modern examples of Congressional debates, and learn how to present a case on a particular issue using the Congressional procedure.

This lesson plan provides teachers with an outline of the content of this collection as well as extension activities to support the learning of the content.

TPS Resource
- Multi-media assets including video, audio, slideshows, and student interactive activities
- Found at: http://www.tpscongress.org/teachers/activities.php?id=4

Target Audience
Grades 8–12

Instructional Time
1–2 class periods

Big Ideas
- The legislative process comprises complex systems put in place to prevent hasty and ill-considered decisions.
- Floor debates concerning legislation in the House and Senate are governed by internal rules of civility, content, and time.

Concepts & Key Terms
- Floor Debate
- Congressional
- Floor Statement
- Critical Analysis
Overview of Critical Thinking

Our Founding Fathers were careful to limit the power of the Legislative branch of the US government, placing numerous hurdles in their path to prevent Congress from passing bad ideas quickly in the heat of the moment. The Critical Thinking collection in Teaching with Primary Sources explores Congressional floor debates to demonstrate how Congress gives new legislative ideas careful scrutiny. Following is a brief summary of each section in this collection:

I. Critical Thinking, Section One: Introduction (video, 2 minutes)

Former Representative Lee Hamilton of the Center on Congress introduces the collection by explaining the importance of critical thinking and careful analysis in the legislative process.

A second, 9 minute, video in this section shows what an actual Congressional floor debate looks like—specifically, the June 2009 debate in the House of Representatives on regulating tobacco, shown on C-SPAN video.

II. Critical Thinking, Section Two: Review Persuasive Techniques (interactive)

Students explore the roles that thirteen types of considerations play as Members of Congress attempt to persuade their colleagues in a floor debate:

- Facts and Figures
- Examples and Illustrations
- Effectiveness of Solution
- Historical Understanding
- Connect to Core Values
- Fairness
- Long-term Consequences
- Compare to Alternatives
- Anticipate Objections
- Opinion of Experts
- Public Support
- Political Support
- Emotional Component

III. Critical Thinking, Section Three: Choose a Topic (interactive)

Through exploration of a series of multi-media resources, students analyze one Congressional floor statement chosen from the mid-1800s, the main components of the argument, and how well the Senator or Representative did in making the case. Choices include:

- The Purchase of Alaska
- The Treatment of Confederates after the Civil War
- The Transcontinental Railroad Survey
- The Need for State Land-Grant Universities

IV. Critical Thinking, Section Four: Gallery of Key Statements (interactive)

Examine eight key Congressional statements over the years, from James Madison's discussion of the Bill of Rights to Margaret Chase Smith's denouncement of the scare tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

In addition, in this section students are offered a PDF document explaining how to locate Congressional debates from 1789 to the present in the Library of Congress.

V. Critical Thinking, Section Five: Final Assignment (video instructions)

This section sets up the culminating activity, in which students select one of the topics from Section Three, choose a side, and then craft their own floor statement to take before the “committee of the whole.” NOTE: This written product is done outside the TPS site.
**Extension Activity for Floor Debate Analysis**

The Critical Thinking assets are arranged in such a way that your students can progress through them in logical order to learn how Congress conducts floor debates in a structured process. Following are two suggestions for extending that learning.

**EXTENSION IDEA ONE: CONDUCT A FLOOR DEBATE (HISTORICAL)**

1. Divide the class or have students self-select into pairs or small groups.
2. Select a historical policy or Act for the class to work on, either according to what you are covering in your core curriculum, or a topic that is of particular interest.
4. Have groups search the Library’s sources to research the policy or Act. Instruct them to make sure they know enough about the issue to choose a side. Make a list of which side each group selects.
5. Refer groups back to Section Two of the Critical Thinking collection (http://www.tpscongress.org/teachers/activity.php?id=6), and ask them to select two or three of the persuasive techniques they might use in their statements.
6. Working together, have pairs or small groups craft a floor statement of 400 words or less on one side of the debate or the other.
7. Conduct a mock debate, in which you, as chairman, call for a group’s representative to present their statement. Switch sides each time.
8. When all groups have presented their statements, call for a vote of yays and nays to determine which side “won.” Compare your class vote to the actual vote of that issue from the historical record.

**EXTENSION IDEA TWO: ANALYZE A FLOOR DEBATE (CURRENT)**

Search the C-SPAN Library website (see link in sidebar) by typing the phrase “floor debate” with parentheses, into the search box at the top of the screen. Scan recent floor debates and select one for students to analyze.

Project the video for the class to view, and then, working independently or in small groups, have student analyze ONE STATEMENT from the debate, using the same 12 questions they answered in Section Three of the collection:

1. State the issue.
2. What is the conclusion and main evidence given?
3. Do you think the speaker was biased?
4. Are any of the facts and figures questionable?
5. Do any of the claims about the benefits presented seem exaggerated?
6. Did the speaker cite the public’s view? Why is this convincing?
7. Did he/she speak about similar measures passed by Congress?
8. Did the speaker respond to possible objections to his or her proposal?
9. Did the speaker appeal to our shared values? Was this effective?
10. What sort of evidence was offered on the other side? Was it effective?
11. What did you find most and least convincing about this statement?
12. Were you convinced? How would you grade it (A–F)?

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**Time**

One class period each

**Materials**

- Computer(s) with Internet Access. (one for each teacher and/or individuals or groups)
- Optional: Projector

**Preparation**

- Extension Idea Two: Explore C-SPAN’s Video Library, found at http://www.c-spanvideo.org/videoLibrary/, and select a Floor Debate on a current topic of interest.

**Ongoing Assessment**

- Monitor the class to ensure that all students are participating in the task and/or discussion.

**Formal Assessment**

- Analyze student products or assess their presentations for completeness of answers and accuracy in facts.
- Look for evidence that students understand the critical thinking process conducted in Congressional Floor Debates.
Primary sources used in Section Three

NOTE: Teachers should preview all assets to ensure they are age-appropriate for their students. At the time of publication, all URLs were valid.

Alaska Purchase Images
Harpers Weekly Cartoon—”The Big Thing” by Thomas Nast, published April 20, 1867
http://www.harpweek.com/09Cartoon/BrowseByDateCartoon.asp?Month=April&Date=20
Map: North western America showing the territory ceded by Russia to the United States
http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm/ref/collection/cdmg21/id/2984
Check for the Purchase of Alaska (1868)
Icebergs, bay, and mountain in background, Alaska (1899)
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3g08296/

Transcontinental Railway Survey Images
“Memorial and Joint Resolution relative to a grant of Lands,” February 11, 1858
Ceremony at “wedding of the rails,” May 10, 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b07534/
Railroad Building on the Great Plains—drawing
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3c32926/

Land Grant Universities Images
Morrill Act (1862)
Iowa State University
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ia0095/
Michigan State
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/pan.6a06551/

Removing Political Disabilities Images
Engineers of the 8th N.Y. State Militia, 1861
http://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/photos/index.html
The Man with the (Carpet) Bags” cartoon by Thomas Nast, 1872
http://spider.georgetowncollege.edu/HTALLANT/COURSES/his312/jcoleman/front.htm
PDF of the Senate Report

Teaching with Primary Sources is supported by funds from the Department of Education’s Representative Democracy in Action (RDA).