The 1950s: Were they really the “Happy Days”?
United States History
Jennifer Germany
Bartow Middle School

The 1950s in America are viewed as a happy, perfect decade of economic boom and family togetherness; a decade in which fathers were the breadwinners and mothers happily and dutifully took care of the home and the children. TV sitcoms, now in syndication, have helped to create this image of perfect, peaceful suburban life.

Note to Teachers: It may be helpful to show an episode of a popular 1950s sitcom such as *Leave it to Beaver, Father Knows Best*, etc. Full episodes can be found at [www.tvland.com](http://www.tvland.com).

Directions:
1. Analyze the documents and pictures below.
2. Answer the questions about each document.
3. Complete the Wrap-up Activity described here and at the end.

Write a 5 paragraph essay, answering the question: The 1950s: Were they really the “Happy Days”? Be sure to use evidence from the documents and pictures below to defend your position.
The good wife’s guide was published in a popular women’s magazine.

1. Where and when was this article published?
2. What is the purpose of this article?
3. What three tips do find most interesting or odd?
4. If you are female, could you abide by these guidelines? If you are male, would you expect your future wife to abide by these guidelines? Provide a brief explanation of your answer.
5. How could you use this document to answer the main DBQ question?
Document #2:

Analyze the image. This is an advertisement published in major magazine publications in 1950.

1. What product is being advertised?

2. Who is the ad aimed at?

3. What does the ad promise?

4. What does this ad tell you about beauty in the 1950s?

5. How could you use this document to answer the main DBQ question?
Document #3:

Analyze the advertisement published in popular magazines.

1. What product is being advertised?

2. Who is the ad aimed at?

3. What does the ad promise?

4. What does this ad tell you about families in the 1950s?

5. How could you use this document to answer the main DBQ question?
Document #4:

Analyze the image of 50s sitcom families. Answer the questions that follow.

1. How do these sitcom images portray the family of the 1950s?

2. What lessons could families of 1950s learn from these sitcoms?

3. How could you use this document to answer the main DBQ question?
Document #5:

Read the passage below found on page 39 of Stephanie Coontz book, *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America’s Changing Families*.

..., the 1950s sitcoms were aimed at young couples who had married in haste, women who had tasted new freedoms during World War II and given up their jobs with regret, veterans whose children resented their attempts to reassert paternal authority, and individuals disturbed by the changing racial and ethnic mix of postwar America. The message was clear: Buy these ranch houses, Hotpoint appliances, and child-raising ideals; relate to your spouse like this; get a new car to wash with your kids on Sunday afternoons; organize your dinners like that—and you too can escape from the conflicts of race, class, and political witch-hunts into harmonious families where father knows best, mothers are never bored or irritated, and teenagers rush to the dinner table each night, eager to get their latest dose of parental wisdom.

Many families found it possible to put together of this way of living during the 1950s and 1960s. Couples were often able to construct marriages that were much more harmonious than those in which they had grown up, and to devote far more time to their children. Even when marriages were deeply unhappy, as many were, the new stability, economic security, and educational advantages parents were able to offer their kids counted for a lot in people’s assessment of their life satisfaction. And in some matters, ignorance could be bliss: The lack of media coverage of problems such as abuse or incest was terribly hard on the casualties, but it protected more fortunate families from knowledge and fear of many social ills.

1. Who were the sitcoms aimed at?
2. What was the message?
3. What counted for a lot in “people’s assessment of their life situation?” In contrast, what was not as important to people?
4. What made it easy for people to be ignorant of social ills of the day?
5. How could you use this document to answer the main DBQ question?
Document #6:

Read the two passages and answer the following questions.

**Friedan on Women and Tranquilizers in the 1950s**

Thus terrible tiredness took so many women to doctors in the 1950's that one decided to investigate it. He found, surprisingly, that his patients suffering from "housewife's fatigue' slept more than an adult needed to sleep -as much as ten hours a day- and that the actual energy they expended on housework did not tax their capacity. The real problem must be something else, he decided -perhaps boredom. Some doctors told their women patients they must get out of the house for a day, treat themselves to a movie in town. Others prescribed tranquilizers. Many suburban housewives were taking tranquilizers like cough drops. You wake up in the morning, and you feel as if there's no point in going on another day like this. So you take a tranquilizer because it makes you not care so much that it's pointless."

**HEROIN ADDICTS MOUNT**

**U.S., Canada and Britain Report 'Graduation' From Marijuana**

LAKE SUCCESS, Dec. 2 (AP)-- The United States, Canada and Britain today reported a sharp increase in dope addicts-- victims who have "graduated" from marijuana to heroin.

Postwar prosperity, a desire for "kicks," international tension, and a greater availability of heroin because of increased smuggling from Italy and Turkey were responsible, the United Nations Commission on Narcotics was told.

In the United States one in every 3,000 of the general population-- or an estimated total of 53,000 persons-- is a heroin addict, Harry J. Anslinger, Federal Narcotics Commissioner, reported.

"Most of them are young hoodlums," he said. "All started by smoking marijuana cigarettes."

Samuel Hoare of Britain said that 326 new drug addicts had been recorded in his country during 1949, but that the great majority were past thirty years of age.

Col. C.H.L. Sherman of Canada told the commission that never before had the heroin traffic been so prevalent, with street peddlers now selling as much as half a pound at a time instead of merely a few grains.

1. What are the two articles stating is an issue during the 1950s?

2. Does this issue match up with the image of family and home in other 1950s materials such as sitcoms?

3. What are some of the causes or reasons the issue exists?

4. How could you use this document to answer the main DBQ question?
1. What statistic does this graph illustrate?
2. What trend occurs during the 1950s?
3. What seems to be the overall trend?
4. Is there a possible explanation for this trend?
5. How could you use this document to answer the main DBQ question?

http://parentingteens.about.com/library/sp/nbirthrate1.htm
Wrap-up Activity:
Use the space below and the back of this page to complete the activity. Correct grammar and structure are necessary.

Write a 5 paragraph essay, answering the question: The 1950s: Were they really the “Happy Days?” Be sure to use evidence from the documents and pictures below to defend your position.