DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints in Primary Source Documents

# The Scopes Trial

*The trial was not just about evolution and the schools—it dramatized a cultural clash dividing America in the 1920s.*

*Debating* the DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints in Primary Source Documents

# The Scopes Trial

***The trial was not just about evolution and the schools—it dramatized a cultural clash dividing America in the 1920s.***

MindSparks®

CULVER CITY, CALIFORNIA

HS480 v2.0

# Contents

# Teacher Introduction

## *Using Primary Sources*

Primary sources are called "primary" because they are first-hand records of a past era or historical event. They are the raw materials, or the evidence, on which historians base their "secondary" accounts of the past.

A rapidly growing number of history teachers today are using primary sources. Why? Perhaps it's because primary sources give students a better sense of what history is and what historians do. Such sources also help students see the past from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, primary sources make history vivid and bring it to life.

However, primary sources are not easy to use. They can be confusing. They can be biased. They rarely all agree. Primary sources must be interpreted and set in context. To do this, students need historical background knowledge. *Debating the Documents* helps students handle such challenges by giving them a useful framework for analyzing sources that conflict with one another.


*"Multiple, conflicting perspectives are among the truths of history. No single objective or universal account could ever put an end to this endless creative dialogue within and between the past and the present."*

From the 2011 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

## *The* Debating the Documents *Series*

Each *Debating the Documents* booklet includes the same sequence of reproducible worksheets. If students use several booklets over time, they will get regular practice at interpreting and comparing conflicting sources. In this way, they can learn the skills and habits needed to get the most out of primary sources.

### Each *Debating the Documents* Booklet Includes

- **Suggestions for the Student and an Introductory Essay.** The student gets instructions and a one-page essay providing background on the booklet's topic. A time line on the topic is also included.
- **Two Groups of Contrasting Primary Source Documents.** In most of the booklets, students get one pair of visual sources and one pair of written sources. In some cases, more than two are provided for each. Background is provided on each source. *Within each group, the sources clash in a very clear way*. (The sources are not always exact opposites, but they do always differ in some obvious way.)
- **Three Worksheets for Each Document Group.** Students use the first two worksheets to take notes on the sources. The third worksheet asks which source the student thinks would be most useful to a historian.
- **One DBQ.** On page 20, a document-based question (DBQ) asks students to write an effective essay using all of the booklet's primary sources.

## *How to Use This Booklet*

### 1. Have students read "Suggestions for the Student" and the Introductory Essay.

Give them copies of pages 5–7. Ask them to read the instructions and then read the introductory essay on the topic. The time line gives them additional information on that topic. This reading could be done in class or as a homework assignment.

### 2. Have students do the worksheets.

Make copies of the worksheets and the pages with the sources. Ask students to study the background information on each source and the source itself. Then have them take notes on the sources using the worksheets. If students have access to a computer, have them review the primary sources digitally.

### 3. "Debate the documents" as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Urge students to follow these ground rules:

- Use your worksheets as a guide for the discussion or debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the significance of each primary source document.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the primary sources.
- Listen closely to all points of view about each primary source.
- Focus on the usefulness of each source to the historian, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with that source's point of view.

### 4. Have students do the final DBQ.

A DBQ is an essay question about a set of primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, students write essays using evidence from the sources and their own background knowledge of the historical era. (See the next page for a DBQ scoring guide to use in evaluating these essays.)

The DBQ assignment on page 20 includes guidelines for writing a DBQ essay. Here are some additional points to make with students about preparing to write this kind of essay.

**The DBQ for this Booklet (see page 20):**

"The Scopes trial was less about the theory of evolution and more about a social and cultural division in the America of the 1920s." Explain why you do or do not agree with this statement.

- Analyze the question carefully.
- Use your background knowledge to set sources in their historical context.
- Question and interpret sources actively. Do not accept them at face value.
- Use sources meaningfully to support your essay's thesis.
- Pay attention to the overall organization of your essay.

## *Complete DBQ Scoring Guide*

Use this guide in evaluating the DBQ for this booklet. Use this scoring guide with students who are already familiar with using primary sources and writing DBQ essays.

### Excellent Essay

- Offers a clear answer or thesis explicitly addressing all aspects of the essay question.
- Does a careful job of interpreting many or most of the documents and relating them clearly to the thesis and the DBQ. Deals with conflicting documents effectively.
- Uses details and examples effectively to support the thesis and other main ideas. Explains the significance of those details and examples well.
- Uses background knowledge and the documents in a balanced way.
- Is well written; clear transitions make the essay easy to follow from point to point. Only a few minor writing errors or errors of fact.

### Good Essay

- Offers a reasonable thesis addressing the essential points of the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least some of the documents and relates them to the thesis and the DBQ.
- Usually relates details and examples meaningfully to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some relevant background knowledge.
- May have some writing errors or errors of fact, as long as these do not invalidate the essay's overall argument or point of view.

### Fair Essay

- Offers at least a partly developed thesis addressing the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least a few of the documents.
- Relates only a few of the details and examples to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some background knowledge.
- Has several writing errors or errors of fact that make it harder to understand the essay's overall argument or point of view.

### Poor Essay

- Offers no clear thesis or answer addressing the DBQ.
- Uses few documents effectively other than referring to them in "laundry list" style, with no meaningful relationship to a thesis or any main point.
- Uses details and examples unrelated to the thesis or other main ideas. Does not explain the significance of these details and examples.
- Is not clearly written, with some major writing errors or errors of fact.

# Suggestions to the Student

## *Using Primary Sources*

A primary source is any record of evidence from the past. Many things are primary sources: letters, diary entries, official documents, photos, cartoons, wills, maps, charts, etc. They are called "primary" because they are first-hand records of a past event or time period. This *Debating the Documents* lesson is based on two groups of primary source documents. Within each group, the sources conflict with one another. That is, they express different or even opposed points of view. You need to decide which source is more reliable, more useful, or more typical of the time period. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, you will be able to learn something about the past from each source, even when the sources clash with one another in dramatic ways.

## *How to Use This Booklet*


### 1. Read the one-page introductory essay.

This gives you background information that will help you analyze the primary source documents and do the exercises for this *Debating the Documents* lesson. The time line gives you additional information you will find helpful.

### 2. Study the primary source documents for this lesson.

For this lesson, you get two groups of sources. The sources within each group conflict with one another. Some of these sources are visuals, others are written sources. With visual sources, pay attention not only to the image's "content" (its subject matter) but also to its artistic style, shading, composition, camera angle, symbols, and other features that add to the image's meaning. With written sources, notice the writing style, bias, even what the source leaves out or does not talk about. Think about each source's author, that author's reasons for writing, and the likely audience for the source. These considerations give you clues as to the source's historical value.

### 3. Use the worksheets to analyze each group of primary source documents.

For each group of sources, you get three worksheets. Use the "Study the Document" worksheets to take notes on each source. Use the "Comparing the Documents" worksheet to decide which of the sources would be most useful to a historian.

### 4. As a class, debate the documents.

Use your worksheet notes to help you take part in this debate.

### 5. Do the final DBQ.

"DBQ" means "document-based question." A DBQ is a question along with several primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, write an essay using evidence from the documents and your own background history knowledge.

# *The Scopes Trial*

*"Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee, that it shall be unlawful for any teacher . . . to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals."*

In the 1920s, several states had laws like the one quoted above. These laws made it illegal to teach Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. In 1925, the Tennessee law led to one of the most famous legal showdowns in the nation's history: the Scopes trial.

The trial took place in tiny Dayton, Tennessee. John Scopes, a biology teacher and football coach, agreed to let himself be put on trial for teaching evolution. People opposed to the law had convinced Scopes to do this in order to test the law in the courts. They expected Scopes to be found guilty. However, they were sure the Supreme Court would overrule this decision and declare all anti-evolution laws unconstitutional. Some of them also hoped national attention to the trial would give Dayton a boost and help the town grow.

They certainly got national attention. In part, that was due to the way the trial pitted famed lawyer Clarence Darrow against three-time Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. Darrow, a religious skeptic, defended Scopes. Bryan, who opposed the teaching of evolution, aided the prosecution. Meanwhile, a huge press corps attended the trial. Most of them supported Scopes and evolution. The best-known columnist at the trial was the bitterly sarcastic H. L. Mencken. His daily reports ridiculed the anti-evolution forces as simple-minded, ignorant, and fear-ridden country bumpkins.

It was true that many tradition-minded rural Americans opposed the teaching of evolution. For many of them, however, their views on evolution reflected a much broader sense of danger. That is, they feared many changes—big-city life with its ethnic diversity, greater freedom for women, fashionable new ideas in psychology, jazz music, jarring new artistic styles, and many other trends at work in modern urban society. All these were seen as endangering religion and the nation's traditional way of life.

For these people, the theory of evolution seemed to undermine all basic values. After all, even many of the theory's supporters insisted that it deprived human beings of any special place in the natural order. They said that evolution proved that man was nothing more than an accidental result of purely random material forces. Human beings were just one possible outcome among millions in life's constant struggle for survival.

The theory itself need not actually lead to such bleak views. But in the 1920s, skeptics like Mencken mocked religious belief in a way that made the idea of evolution itself seem irreligious. The scientific details of the theory took second place to a heated cultural battle. In this contest, rural defenders of tradition stood against urban cultural elites and the supposedly more modern-thinking Americans who looked up to them.

In the end, the jury found Scopes guilty, and the judge fined him $100. But the state supreme court overturned the verdict on a technicality. There was no ruling against the anti-evolution laws, as pro-Scopes forces had hoped there would be. In any case, the trial's importance does not lie in its specific arguments for or against evolution. It lies in the way it dramatized a deep conflict of social and intellectual values in 1920s America.

The documents here will help you better understand this clash of values and the way it was expressed during the Scopes trial.

# The Scopes Trial Time Line

**1859**

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* is published. Its theory is that over millions of years, species evolve from one another as environmental conditions change, making some variations in species more likely to survive than others. This theory of natural selection challenges the idea that each species was created separately at a single moment of creation, as is suggested by a literal reading of the Bible.

**1870s**

A set of ideas known as "social Darwinism" grows in popularity. It begins with Herbert Spencer, who uses the phrase "survival of the fittest" to apply Darwinian theory to human society. Social Darwinism suggests that natural selection rightly chooses hard-working creative people for success, while dooming others to poverty and failure.

**1922**

William Jennings Bryan starts speaking out against Darwinian theory for justifying a competitive and aggressive social order, as social Darwinists seem to do.

**1925**

**March:** On March 21, the Tennessee governor signs the Butler Bill into law. It outlaws the teaching of "any theory that denies the divine creation of man and teaches instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals."

**May:** The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) offers to pay the court costs of any Tennessee teacher willing to challenge the Butler Law in court. Meeting in a drugstore in Dayton, Tennessee, science teacher John Scopes agrees to be the ACLU's defendant. William Jennings Bryan agrees to be a special prosecutor at the Scopes trial. On May 25, a grand jury indicts John Scopes for violating the Butler Law.

**July:** On July 10, the Scopes case comes before Judge John T. Raulston. Defense attorney Clarence Darrow tries to convince the judge to declare the Butler Law unconstitutional. Judge Raulston refuses to do this, and the trial continues. The judge also refuses to allow the defense team's scientific experts to testify before the jury. On July 20, the heat and the size of the crowd lead the judge to move the court outside, under some trees. Bryan testifies as an expert on the Bible and is subject to Darrow's intense and mocking questioning. On July 21, the jury returns in minutes with a verdict of guilty. Scopes is fined $100. Five days later, Bryan dies in his sleep.

**1927**

On January 15, the Tennessee Supreme Court rules the Butler Law constitutional, but it overturns Scopes's verdict on a technicality. The court says there is nothing to be gained by "prolonging the life of this bizarre case."

# Visual Primary Source Document 1


Courtesy of the Library of Congress

## *Information on Document 1*

The caption for this cartoon from *Life* reads, "Right on the job, by heck!" It is dated July 2, 1925, about a week before the Scopes trial was to open. The cartoon shows a policeman labeled "Tennessee" stopping an auto labeled "science" in order to allow a crowd of people in ancient or medieval clothing to cross in front of it. Many of these figures are armed or carrying signs.