

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

The "Grand Compromise" and the Making of the Constitution

Was the compromise, with its three-fifths clause, the best the founders could do, or was it too high a price to pay?



Debating the
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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.

INTRODUCTION

★ *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):

Was the “Grand Compromise” the best the nation’s founders could do? Or was its “three-fifths clause” too high a price to pay for the new federal union? Explain your answer.

- 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.

INTRODUCTION

★ *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 “Grand Compromise”

From May 25 to September 17, 1787, 55 delegates from 12 states met, talked, argued, and finally wrote the U.S. Constitution. It is still the supreme law of the land today.

Some historians see these founders as a like-minded group of wealthy, powerful white men. Just a small slice of American society seeking to protect its own power and shape the nation for its own purposes. There is some truth to this view. Yet the delegates to the Constitutional Convention did not all agree. In fact, they argued bitterly about many matters. It was not even certain they would reach any agreement at all. At many points, they were ready to give up trying.

What kept them going was a very strong spirit of compromise. This spirit has been a key aspect of American political life ever since.

The convention was held due to widespread discontent with the Articles of Confederation, the first set of rules for the U.S. government. Convention delegates like George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison felt the articles were far too weak. They pushed hard to hold the convention, and they worked hard in it to create a strong national government. Other delegates did not quite agree. They wanted to strengthen the articles somewhat. (Officially, that is all the convention was supposed to do.) Yet they did not want to weaken the existing state governments in any major way.

There were other differences, two in particular. Delegates from “large states” (that is, states with large populations) differed from those from “small states.” And Northerners disagreed with Southerners over economics and, above all, over the highly charged issue of slavery.

Because of an ability to compromise, these men were able to agree on an entirely new, complex system of government. It was a “federal” system in that it created a strong national government while allowing state governments to keep many powers.

The national government was strong yet strictly limited, in that its three branches (executive, legislative, and judicial) had the ability to check and limit one another’s power.

The key compromise, known as the “Grand Compromise,” settled the all-important question of how the new national legislature was to be organized. As Madison put it, this one issue caused “greater alarm for the issue of the convention than all the rest put together.” That’s because it pitted large states against small states, and it pitted slave states against states with no or few slaves.

In the “Grand Compromise,” the large states won a House of Representatives in which membership was based on population. The small states won a Senate in which each state had two Senators.

Slavery entered the picture in deciding how to measure each state’s population, and thus its numbers in the House. Southerners wanted each slave counted as one whole person for this purpose, in spite of the fact that slaves would have no rights as citizens whatsoever. At first, the North refused, saying slaves should not be counted at all.

The founders agreed to count three-fifths of all slaves for purposes of both representation and direct taxes. This is the infamous “three-fifths clause,” once part of Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution. It would take the Civil War to get this clause removed and grant the former slaves complete citizenship. Yet if the Constitution itself had not been agreed to, this might never have occurred. That is, the South might never have joined the union to begin with. So, was the “Grand Compromise,” with its three-fifths clause the best the founders could do, or was it too high a price to pay for the new federal union? The sources in this booklet will help you debate this question.

The “Grand Compromise” Time Line

1775

- • • With the 13 colonies at war with Great Britain already, the Declaration of Independence is signed.

1781

- • • The last major battle of the Revolutionary War takes place. The 13 states set up a federal government under the Articles of Confederation.

1786

- • • At the Annapolis Convention, five states discuss trade issues. They appeal to all the states to meet to discuss broader reforms.

1787

- • • **February 21.** Confederation Congress calls for a convention in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation.

May 25. Constitutional convention assembles in Philadelphia.

May 29. Edmund Randolph proposes the Virginia Plan, based on James Madison’s ideas. It calls for a strong government with representation in both chambers of the legislature based on each state’s population. It is favored by the larger states.

June 15. William Paterson offers the New Jersey Plan. It calls for one vote per state regardless of population in one legislative body. It is favored by the smaller states.

June 18. Alexander Hamilton presents a plan calling for a powerful president to be elected for life. Most delegates object to this. Hamilton soon leaves the convention.

July 13. Congress passes the Northwest Ordinance. Among other things, it bans slavery in the Northwest Territory (the Ohio River Valley). Some historians suggest this may have helped convince anti-slavery delegates in the convention to accept Roger Sherman’s “Grand Compromise.”

July 16. The convention adopts the “Grand Compromise,” calling for a two-house legislature. In the upper house, each state is to have two members. In the lower house, each state’s representation is to be based on population. This compromise also includes the 3/5 formula for counting slaves for the purposes of representation and taxation.

August 6. The first draft of the Constitution is presented to convention.

August 25. The convention adopts the Committee of Eleven report. It says that Congress cannot ban the slave trade until 1808.

September 12. The Committee on Style and Arrangement presents the completed draft of the U.S. Constitution.

September 17. Delegates sign U.S. Constitution. Only three delegates refuse to sign. The Constitution is soon sent to the states, where at least nine of them must ratify it for it to go into effect.

1788

- • • The Constitution wins the approval of nine states and goes into effect.

1790

- • • George Washington is elected first president of the United States under the new Constitution. John Adams is vice president.

DOCUMENT 1

Written Primary Source Document 1

Information on Document 1

These are notes on a statement made by New Jersey delegate William Paterson at the Constitutional Convention on Monday, July 9, 1787. The passage is from James Madison's notes on the convention. No outside reports on the convention were permitted. Madison's daily notes are the best of only a few sources on what was said in it. Patterson had earlier offered the so-called "New Jersey Plan" to counter the "Virginia Plan" drafted by Madison. In the New Jersey Plan (a "small states" plan), all of the states would get an equal number of representatives in both houses of Congress. In the Virginia Plan (a "large states" plan), each state's number of representatives would be based on its population. Paterson later accepted the Connecticut Compromise, otherwise known as the "Grand Compromise" (representation based on population in the House but two Senators per state in the Senate).

For this primary source and others in the booklet (except the ode on page 14), we have changed certain abbreviations to complete words. We have also changed some capitals to lowercase letters, and we have simplified some of the punctuation.

Document 1

Mr. Paterson . . . could regard negroe slaves in no light but as property. They are no free agents, have no personal liberty, no faculty of acquiring property, but on the contrary are themselves property, and like other property entirely at the will of the master. Has a man in Virginia a number of votes in proportion to the number of his slaves? And if negroes are not represented in the states to which they belong, why should they be represented in the general government [that is, the national government]? What is the true principle of representation? It is an expedient by which an assembly of certain individuals chosen by the people is substituted in place of the inconvenient meeting of the people themselves. If such a meeting of the people was actually to take place, would the slaves vote? They would not. Why then should they be represented? He was also against such an indirect encouragement of the slave trade, observing that Congress [under the Articles of Confederation] . . . had been ashamed to use the term "slaves" and had substituted a description.