

## DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints  
in Primary Source Documents

# Blue or Gray

## Why Men Fought in the Civil War

*Hundreds of thousands of soldiers died fighting in the Civil War. Why did they fight, and what was the war like for them?*



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*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):**

What led men on both sides to join up and fight in the U.S. Civil War?

- 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.



## ***Blue or Gray: Why Men Fought in the Civil War***

Is it possible to know why human beings act as they do?

Historians face this question all the time. After all, most historians want to do more than simply describe what happened in the past. They want to understand why it happened. To do that, they need to try to learn what motivates people. That is, what causes them to do what they do? What goals, wishes, dreams, and fears move them to act?

When it comes to war, this effort to know another's motives can be especially difficult. Why do soldiers decide to fight and kill other human beings and risk their own lives? Even if they have been forced to fight, they still face the question of what they will and will not do in the most desperate and terrifying situations imaginable. How can we know what moves soldiers to take on such awesome and bloody challenges in the face of such incredible danger? Their own feelings and motives may not be clear even to them in such settings. Their own words in letters and diaries may not tell us accurately what they truly felt and believed.

As for the Civil War, it was more terrifying and brutal than most. Huge battles with close fighting often resulted in thousands of casualties. Thousands more died as a result of wounds and disease in the unsanitary conditions of army life. More Americans died in the Civil War than in either World War I or World War II, and at a time when the overall population was lower. Civil War fighting pitted American against American in the greatest and most agonizing conflict the nation has known.

Not all Americans on either side agreed about the reasons for the war, or even that it was necessary at all. Political leaders on each side gave two main reasons for it: union and slavery. That is, the North said it was fighting to protect the existing

federal Union and to put an end to slavery. The South said it was fighting to protect slavery and win the Confederacy's independence. Both sides insisted their fight was a patriotic struggle for liberty.

Is that really why the men in the vast armies of the Union and the Confederacy fought and died (and in this war, it was mainly men who did the fighting)? Or was it for more complex reasons, hard to decipher or fully understand?

In explaining why they fight, many soldiers honestly offer noble and idealistic reasons. Others may only sound that way in order to cover up their blind rage, their desire for revenge, or their ambition to make a name for themselves. Some soldiers may sound courageous and daring when they are in fact terrified. Some may be responding to pressure from their peers or family and community. Others may act from a powerful sense of duty, honor, or religious conviction no matter what they feel about the reasons their leaders give them for fighting. Still others (perhaps most) fight out of deep and abiding loyalty to their regiment, their company, or just the handful of men they go into battle with day after day.

Historian James McPherson asks, in the title of one of his books, if Civil War soldiers fought for "Cause or Comrades?" Or was it for both reasons and many others as well? To help you decide, you will find two kinds of primary source evidence here. The visuals (pages 8–9 in the booklet) all depict soldiers or are directed at soldiers. The written sources (pages 14–15) are all by soldiers, two from the North and two from the South. Together, these will give you a sense of the varied and complex nature of the motives soldiers had for fighting in the Civil War.

# Civil War Time Line

1861

**January:** Several Southern states quit the Union following Abraham Lincoln's election as president in 1860. In time, eleven states form the Confederate States of America. **April:** Shots are fired on Fort Sumter, a federal fort in South Carolina. **July:** The First Battle of Bull Run takes place. Poorly prepared Northern soldiers are chased back to Washington, D.C. A naval blockade of the Confederate coastline begins to work.

1862

**April:** At the Battle of Shiloh, in Tennessee, Union troops are led by Ulysses S. Grant. Of the 110,000 soldiers taking part, 23,746 are killed, wounded, or missing. **May–August:** Several big battles take place in Virginia. The South does the best in this fighting. **September:** The Battle of Antietam includes the bloodiest single day of the war (about 5,000 killed). Antietam is enough of a Union victory that Great Britain and France decide not to support the South. It also leads Lincoln to announce his Emancipation Proclamation, which will go into effect on January 1, 1863. On that day, it will free all slaves in areas still fighting the Union. This changes the war's focus from saving the Union to freeing the slaves.

1863

**March:** The Union passes its first draft law. All men from ages 20 to 45 can be called to serve in the military, unless they pay a fee or find a substitute. **May–July:** The South wins at Chancellorsville. But it loses one of its best fighters, General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. In July, two huge Union victories take place—Grant's victory at Vicksburg, Mississippi, and the battle at Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. At Gettysburg, General George Meade's Union forces defeat Robert E. Lee's Confederates. A few days later, huge anti-draft riots break out in New York City. Irish immigrants and other poor people burn buildings and lynch several black people. Similar draft protests take place in the South.

1864

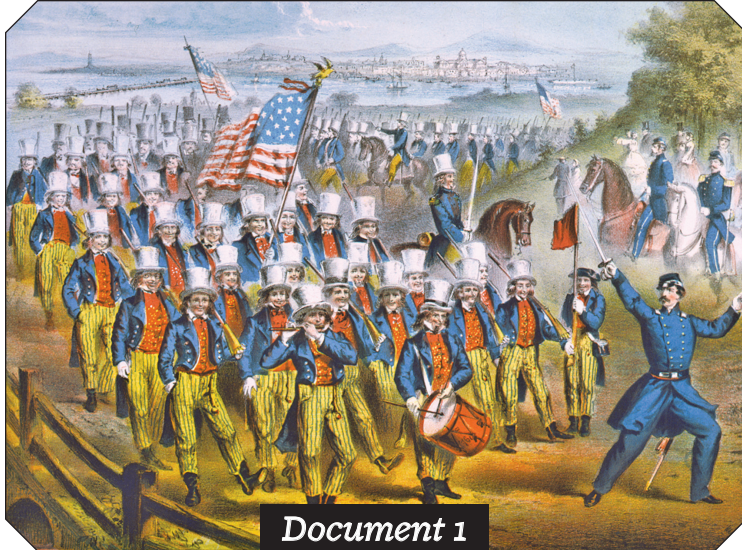
**May–June:** Grant begins a long campaign against Lee in Virginia. Several big battles are followed by a 10-month siege of the rail center of Petersburg, Virginia. **September:** Union General William T. Sherman's forces take Atlanta, Georgia, an arms center for the entire South. **November:** Sherman's victory helps Lincoln's popularity, and he wins re-election as president against Democrat and Union General George B. McClellan. Sherman soon begins his famous and very bloody "March to the Sea" through Georgia. His aim is to destroy the South's will to fight.

1865

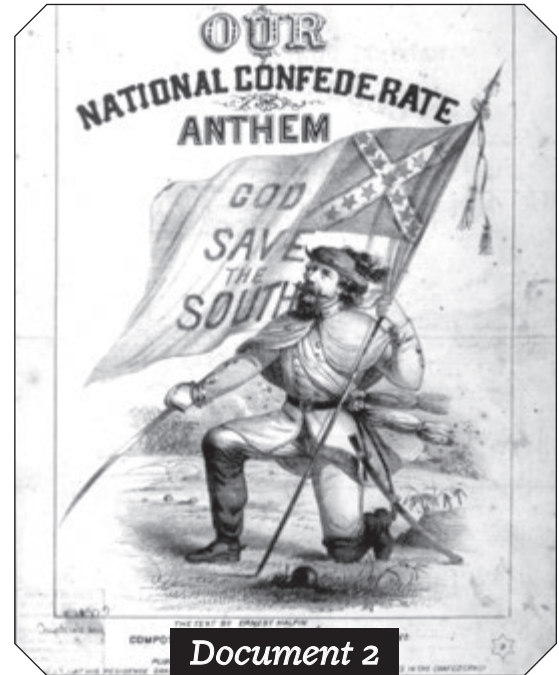
**January–April:** Both Sherman and Grant fight on in North and South Carolina, and in Virginia. In April, Grant takes the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia. Lee surrenders to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9. His men are allowed to use their horses to go home. The Civil War is basically over. (Some surrenders continue into May.) On April 14, John Wilkes Booth shoots and kills Lincoln at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C.

## DOCUMENTS 1 &amp; 2

## Visual Primary Source Documents 1 &amp; 2

**Document 1**

Lithograph by John H. Buford, 1862  
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC USZC4-1977

**Document 2**

Library of Congress,  
Prints and Photographs Division, LC USZ62-33407

**Information on Documents 1 & 2**

At the start of the Civil War, the first recruits often left to cheers and honors from crowds gathering to wish them well. Often, these crowds fully expected most of them to return victorious after only a few months of what was expected to be a short war. In the early phases of the war, both armies relied on volunteers. Only later did each side feel the need to set up a draft to get enough soldiers. Many young men did try to avoid serving. Still, both sides were able to find tens of thousands of enthusiastic recruits right up to the end of hostilities.

**Document 1.** An 1862 music cover titled "Yankee Volunteers Marching into Dixie." It shows Union forces dressed in large white top hats, striped pantaloons, and jack boots, the dress of the "Yankee Brother Jonathan," a cartoon character who stood for the North.

**Document 2.** An 1862 sheet music cover published in Richmond, Virginia. It features a Confederate cavalryman holding a large flag. A cannonball lies in the grass before him. In the distance soldiers fire a cannon toward an advancing troop of infantry.