

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

How the War Changed America

World War II forced a Depression-battered nation to mobilize for a titanic struggle. This had a major long-term impact on American society.



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Contents

Teacher Introduction	1
Suggestions to the Student	5
Introductory Essay	6
World War II Time Line	7
First Group of Documents	8
Study the Documents	10
Comparing the Documents	12
Comparison Essay	13
Second Group of Documents	14
Study the Documents	16
Comparing the Documents	18
Comparison Essay	19
Document-Based Question	20
Visual Primary Sources	21

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):

“The war against German and Japanese militarism changed America in many ways, largely for the good.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?

- 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.

How the War Changed America

In 1939, after a decade, the Great Depression still held the nation in its grip. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs had changed many things. Yet eight million people were still out of work. As Europe plunged into war, however, Americans shifted their attention from problems at home to the terrible dangers abroad. The German Nazi conquest of much of Europe in 1940 left only Great Britain standing fully against a terrifying foe. Japan was on the march in Asia. On December 7, 1941, its attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States fully into the war.

World War II left entire societies in ruins in many parts of Europe and Asia. Death, destruction, and social and cultural upheaval were everywhere. Moral codes seemed to have collapsed. Spiritual grief and horror left people bewildered and in despair. Six million Jews and millions of others perished in the Holocaust. Forty million others died in the war.

American soldiers experienced or witnessed a good deal of this horror. At home, however, most Americans knew the war in a different way. They lived through the battles only from news reports, newsreels, and the letters and stories of GIs overseas. Fears and anxieties were high, but many Americans were able to maintain a somewhat normal way of life.

Still, the war changed life in many ways. A different America emerged from World War II.

For one thing, the U.S. became the great "arsenal of democracy" for the Allies. To harness its industrial system, government control over the economy grew enormously. The War Production Board (WPB) regulated economic life in a far greater way than all the New Deal programs ever had. It controlled raw materials and fuel, and it tightly directed businesses producing for the war. The federal Office of Price Administration (OPA) kept prices and rents low and rationed certain goods.

Millions of men went off to war. Workers were suddenly hard to find; jobs were plentiful. Unemployment rates plummeted to unheard of lows. Millions of women took jobs in factories. After the war, the economy, for the most part, stayed strong. The war may well have helped to save the New Deal reforms and make them a permanent part of American life.

In the war, Americans seemed to pull together. Their sacrifices helped unite them. In order to shift production to wartime needs, Americans at home had to give up many consumer goods. The government gave them ration cards to limit their purchases of tires, gasoline, sugar, and other items. They were urged to save scrap metal, rubber, paper, and more. Campaigns to buy war bonds helped finance the war while also encouraging patriotic feelings about it.

The war did not create perfect harmony. Depression-era tensions (between rich and poor, labor and business) only partly faded away. They always lay just beneath the surface. Fears of sabotage or subversion by enemy agents were high. Racial and ethnic bigotry made itself felt. This was especially so with respect to Japanese American citizens living on the West Coast. African Americans fought bravely during the war, but they had to do so in segregated, all-black units.

At the same time, blacks were proud of their service, and this pride would flower during the civil rights movement shortly after the war. Women gained satisfaction and pride from their war production work. Many returned to the home after the war, but many others did not. For millions of women and African Americans, the war was a time of awakening.

What about others? In general, how did the war change life in America? The sources for this lesson should help you think about, debate, and decide this question.

World War II Time Line

1939

Adolf Hitler's Germany takes over Czechoslovakia. Hitler and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin decide to dismember Poland. Hitler then invades Poland, triggering World War II. Albert Einstein tells President Roosevelt it is possible to build an atomic bomb. Roosevelt signs the 1939 Neutrality Act, allowing other nations to buy arms if they pay for them in full.

1940

Germany takes over much of Western Europe. Winston Churchill becomes British Prime Minister. Roosevelt signs a law requiring men to register for a military draft. He trades 50 destroyers to Britain in exchange for leases on British bases. Defense production is stepped up. In November, Roosevelt defeats Republican Wendell Wilkie to win an unprecedented third term as president.

1941

The Lend-Lease Act is signed. It provides arms to friendly countries at war. The Office of Price Administration is set up. German submarine attacks off the Atlantic Coast increase. Roosevelt declares a state of unlimited national emergency. He sets up a commission to prevent racial discrimination in defense work. In June, Hitler turns on Stalin and invades the Soviet Union. On December 7, the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor. The next day, the U.S. declares war on Japan. On December 11, Germany and Italy declare war on the U.S.

1942

In January, Japan forces U.S. troops out of the Philippines as it proceeds to conquer many parts of Asia. The War Production Board takes over from the earlier Office of Production Management. On February 10, the last new civilian car is made. In March and April, 112,000 Japanese aliens and Japanese-American citizens on the West Coast are relocated in camps in the interior. The Battle of Midway in June gives the U.S. an early turning point victory. Gasoline rationing begins. In November, U.S. and British forces land in North Africa. At the end of the year, a food rationing program is announced.

1943

In February, the first point-rationing books are distributed. In April, Roosevelt freezes prices, salaries, and wages. In May, a strike by coal miners ends when the government seizes the coal mines. A Detroit race riot breaks out in June. In August, the Allies conquer Sicily, and the U.S. Army soon lands in Italy. Fighting in the Pacific rages.

1944

U.S. forces shell Japanese soil in February for the first time. On June 4, the Allies liberate Rome. On June 6 ("D-Day"), Allies land at Normandy, France. In September, France is fully liberated. In October, U.S. forces return to the Philippines and begin to reconquer it. In November, Roosevelt defeats Republican Thomas E. Dewey for a fourth term. The bombing of the Japanese homeland begins. In December, the Battle of the Bulge disaster delays the final triumph over Germany.

1945

On April 12, Franklin Roosevelt dies, and Harry Truman becomes president. On May 2, Berlin falls to Soviet troops. On May 8, Germany surrenders. On August 6 and 9, the U.S. drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan announces its surrender on August 14. The war is over.

DOCUMENTS 1 & 2

Visual Primary Source Documents 1 & 2



Document 1

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USE6-D-006436.



Document 2

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC2-1107.

Information on Documents 1 & 2

Document 1. A United States Office of War Information photo, dated October 1942. Nobody played hookey the day teacher Doris Jordan at Jamison Elementary School explained how every pupil can help win the war. These Roanoke, Virginia, youngsters, along with some 30 million other young Americans, were mobilized into the nation's newest home-front fighters, the junior army, to collect scrap metal and other things needed to supply the war effort.

Document 2. This is a Works Projects Administration War Services Project poster, published in Pennsylvania between 1941 and 1943. The poster urges Pennsylvanians to take up various kinds of civil defense work. It shows a family prepared to do its part. The poster says in part: "SERVICE ON THE HOME FRONT. There's a job for every Pennsylvanian in these civilian defense efforts."