

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

Martin Luther King Jr.

and the "Black Power" Debate

Were King's integrationist goals incompatible with the aims of "Black Power" radicals?



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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):

Martin Luther King Jr. was very critical of Stokely Carmichael and other advocates of Black Power. Why? Was he right to criticize them? Why or why not?

- 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.

King and the Black Power Debate

The Civil War put an end to slavery. However, instead of blacks gaining full equality, a new system of racial segregation was soon imposed on them—especially in the South. This system was named “Jim Crow” after a well-known figure in minstrel shows. For nearly a century, Jim Crow segregation kept blacks separate from whites in many areas of public life. Poll taxes and other laws made it nearly impossible for blacks to vote in many Southern states.

It was only in the 1950s that blacks and whites forged a massive movement that was able to bring down Jim Crow laws. That movement flowered in the wake of the war against Nazi Germany. This war of racism may have convinced enough Americans to open their hearts to cries for change in America’s own system of racial injustice.

Also, at that point, the right leader appeared—one able to arouse fully the religious, spiritual, and political feelings of his people. In Martin Luther King Jr., all of America seemed to discover its voice. And, in the early 1960s, a united assault finally put an end to legalized segregation. Moreover, it confronted Americans as never before with the need to eliminate the evil of racism in all its forms.

The full force of the civil rights movement made itself known through sit-ins, Freedom Riders, and activists who went South in ever-increasing numbers in the early 1960s. The 1963 March on Washington marked a turning point after which Congress could no longer avoid the challenge.

The Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968 ended all the forms of legal segregation that had been the focus of the civil rights movement. However, the urban riots of the mid-1960s made it clear that racial divides still existed and that new struggles against them would not be easy. As the civil rights movement was turning to confront these problems, a major dispute divided it. This dispute pitted King and many of his oldest comrades against a younger and more militant

group of black activists. The dispute centered around the call by these younger activists for “Black Power.”

King had always advocated disciplined, nonviolent civil disobedience to awaken the moral conscience of all citizens, black and white. He aimed for the integration of blacks into a society that would be completely “color blind.” As he put it, his dream was that one day his children would be judged “not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” King’s views were shared by many at his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). These groups worked with whites and included them with blacks in positions of leadership.

At first, these views were also shared by the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). However, its leader Stokely Carmichael clashed with King in 1966 by adopting the Black Power slogan and calling on whites to give up leadership positions in SNCC. In doing this, he was following in the footsteps of Malcolm X and other black nationalists. Their appeal was especially strong among angry blacks in the cities. Some saw it as a call for blacks to depend more fully on themselves rather than on whites, both in the movement and in society at large. Others saw the Black Power slogan as a divisive form of reverse racism, one that could only weaken the movement.

In a way, the Black Power dispute is just one example of a longstanding debate among blacks over the best way to achieve justice: through integration into the larger society or through self-help and self-empowerment. This debate began long before the 1960s, and in many ways it is still going on. The sources for this lesson will help you take part in it.

King and Black Power Time Line

1954

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In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court declares that the concept of “separate but equal” public schooling is unconstitutional.

1955

• • •

When Rosa Parks refuses to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, she is arrested. This sparks a boycott of the city buses by blacks, which lasts more than a year. Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr. leads the boycott, gaining national attention.

1957

• • •

Reverend King invites southern black ministers to a meeting in Atlanta. There, the group forms the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). It is guided by King’s philosophy of nonviolent protest. SCLC operates as an umbrella organization coordinating the efforts of many other local groups. It organizes mass protest campaigns and voter registration drives throughout the South.

1960

• • •

In February, four black students protest segregation by starting a sit-in at the Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. In April, black college students found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC promotes the tactic of nonviolent sit-ins. It takes part in the Freedom Rides, trips by activists on interstate buses to challenge various forms of segregation in the South. Later it leads voter registration drives in the South.

1963

• • •

Civil rights protests grow and a sense of crisis deepens, especially after a Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, is bombed, killing four young black girls. In August, Martin Luther King Jr. gives his historic “I Have a Dream” speech as more than 250,000 people there march for jobs and freedom.

1964

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The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ends segregation in all public facilities.

1965

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The Voting Rights Act of 1965 prohibits racial discrimination in voting practices. This follows a major march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, led by Martin Luther King Jr. Meanwhile, tensions between SCLC and SNCC grow. On February 21, Black nationalist leader Malcolm X is assassinated. Malcolm X first became known as a national spokesman for the Nation of Islam, a black separatist religious and political organization. By 1965, he had left the Nation of Islam, but he continued to stress black pride and the use of violence in self-defense. He gave voice especially to the anger of many urban blacks.

1966

• • •

Stokely Carmichael leads one faction in taking over SNCC. The organization then ejects white members, as Carmichael calls for Black Power and stresses the need for black self-reliance and the right to use violence as a means of self-defense. Meanwhile, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton co-founded the Black Panthers in Oakland, California. The Panthers advocate the use of violence for self-defense. Their platform reads: “We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community. We believe that black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny.”

1966–68

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King continues to oppose black separatism and Black Power as a slogan. He begins to speak out against the Vietnam War and makes plans to lead a national Poor People’s Campaign to aid the poor of all races. On April 4, 1968, he is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

DOCUMENTS 1–3

Visual Primary Source Documents 1–3



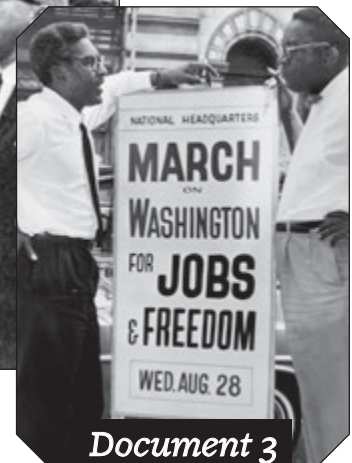
Document 1

Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Document 2

The Granger Collection, New York



Document 3

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-133369

Information on Documents 1–3

Document 1. Kivie Kaplan, President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1966–1975). The NAACP from its beginnings included white as well as black leaders, and Kaplan was actually just one of several white NAACP presidents.

Document 2. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. (fourth from right) and other civil rights leaders march against segregation from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, on March 25, 1965. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

worked closely with the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC), though King disagreed strongly with it when it began to be guided by the Black Power concept.

Document 3. On the left is civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, with Cleveland Robinson on August 7, 1963. The two are working to organize the 1963 March on Washington. Rustin opposed any use of violence in the struggle for civil rights, and criticized the views of Black Power groups.