

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

Suburbia American Dream or Stifling Dead-End?

*Millions flocked to the suburbs after World War II.
Did they find a more fulfilling life or a bleak cultural wasteland?*



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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.

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★ *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.

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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 suburban lifestyle of the 1950s gets bad press these days. In fact, it gave millions a better, freer life than they had ever known before.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? 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.

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★ *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.

Suburbia in the 1950s

The 1930s and '40s were years of turmoil and crisis. By 1945, Americans were longing for a rest from depression and world war.

The 1950s are often remembered as just such a time of quiet stability. The G.I. Bill of Rights gave millions of returning war vets a chance to go to college and get good jobs. It also gave them low-cost loans to buy homes. Soon a booming post-war economy was supplying those jobs, homes, appliances, and many other consumer goods in massive amounts never seen before. Interstate highways, fast-food restaurants, motels, and all the other features of a society based on the automobile spread across the land.

The automobile especially made possible the massive growth of suburbs. A suburban middle-class lifestyle spread, making the '50s appear to be the first true age of affluence for all. As the home construction industry soared, families made their way out of central-city areas and downtowns to new suburban tracts and developments where similar or identical single-family homes could be purchased easily. In the morning, men drove off to work from these homes leaving wives to care for the children. These now comfortable families soon began to have children in record numbers. This "baby boom" generation of children and its parents saw their suburban lifestyle praised everywhere they turned—in advertising, from church pulpits, in magazines, and above all, on television shows such as *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, and *I Love Lucy*.

Yet all was not well with this suburban America. In the first place, its affluence was most certainly not "for all." Many poor people still lived in urban slums and rundown rural areas. African Americans were still segregated and thwarted in efforts to get ahead. Moreover, the growth of the suburbs had in fact left many of America's poor even more isolated and desperate than ever.

Then there was the Cold War, the long rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. This rivalry's nuclear dangers kept suburban America in a state of real anxiety. Fear of Soviet communism may well have led people to keep their thoughts to themselves and conform to a bland "American way of life." Whatever the causes, conformity was a growing concern. A mass consumer culture seemed to offer the same products, fashions, TV shows, even ideas—to all.

However, two different yet somewhat related points about this can be made. First, the prosperity of the age was real. For the first time, millions could enjoy a flood of amazing new products, ranging from silly yet delightful gadgets to goods of real value, such as the new polio vaccine that Jonas Salk announced to the world in 1955.

Secondly, there was far more intellectual ferment than is commonly acknowledged. Youthful discontent with suburban blandness helped fuel rock 'n roll music, the films of James Dean, the protests of "Beat" poets, modern jazz, and more. The civil rights movement was every bit as much a part of the 1950s as *Leave It to Beaver*. Anxieties about suburban conformity led to an outpouring of insightful social commentary, in fiction and non-fiction alike. The titles alone suggest the focus—*The Organization Man*, *The Lonely Crowd*, *The Hidden Persuaders*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Television was often called a wasteland, yet shows like NBC's *Goodyear Playhouse* made the world's best plays available to a mass audience.

Were the '50s the suburban wasteland many say they were? Were they a time when the American Dream came true? Or were they a more complex time of anxiety, stability, and creativity? The sources for this lesson may help you make up your mind.

Suburbia in the 1950s Time Line

1944

Congress passes the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (better known as the G.I. Bill of Rights). It will pay for higher education for millions of returning soldiers. It will also provide low-interest, no-down-payment home loans for veterans. The act will fuel post-war prosperity, the growth in white-collar employment, and suburban home ownership. By giving extra employment advantages to a largely male veteran population, it adds to a tendency for women to be homemakers.

1946

Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* is published. It will be the most famous guide for the parents of the huge "baby-boom" generation of the 1950s.

1947

Jackie Robinson becomes the first African American in major-league baseball.

1949

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is formed. The Soviet Union tests its first atomic bomb. Communists take over China. The Cold War rivalry intensifies. Concerns about internal communist spying and subversion grow.

1950

David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* is published. It notes with alarm a shift in society from "inner-directed" individualists to "outer-directed" conformists. The Korean War begins in 1950 and lasts until 1953. Also in 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy launches his anti-communist crusade, taking advantage of Cold War security concerns to create a climate of fear. After ruining many reputations, he is condemned in 1954 by the Senate.

1952

Dwight D. Eisenhower is elected president. "Ike," the heroic yet genial and bland general, seems to fit the mood of the age perfectly. The family-based comedy *The Adventures Of Ozzie and Harriet* begins a 14-year run as a highly popular television show.

1954

In its ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the Supreme Court outlaws segregation in schools.

1955

Rosa Parks refuses to give up a bus seat to a white man, sparking the Montgomery bus boycott. It is led by Martin Luther King Jr. Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is published. It is the story of a returning soldier caught up in the corporate rat race. In the film *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean captures the mood of frustrated teens growing up in 1950s America.

1956

Alan Ginsburg's poem "Howl" is published, a major work of the "Beat Generation" writers who rebel against middle-class norms. William H. Whyte publishes *The Organization Man*, his famous study of pressures for conformity within the American corporation.

1957

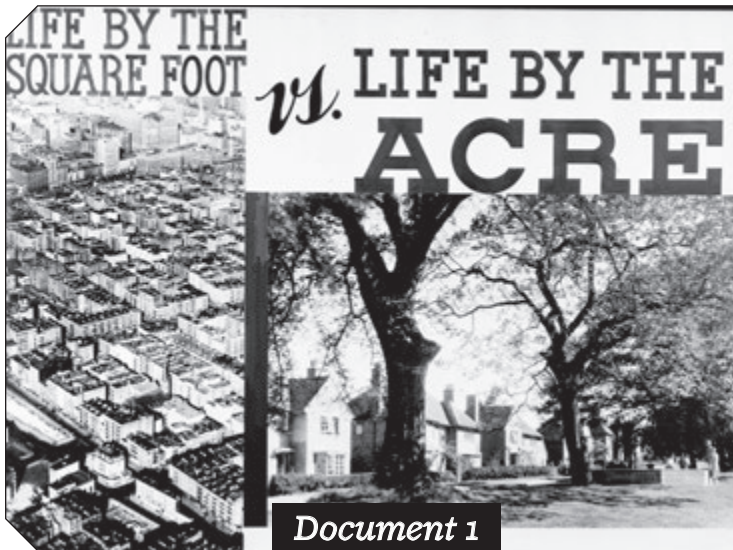
Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* is another Beat Generation classic. Vance Packard's best-seller *The Hidden Persuaders* describes the tactics advertisers use to manipulate consumer desires. The musical *West Side Story* opens on Broadway and plays 732 performances. It takes a serious and honest look at prejudice and celebrates America's ethnic and racial diversity.

1958

William J. Levitt completes the huge planned community of Levittown, Pennsylvania. It includes more than 17,000 single-family homes.

DOCUMENTS 1 & 2

Visual Primary Source Documents 1 & 2



Document 1

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USF344-001752-ZB



Document 2

The Granger Collection, New York

Information on Documents 1 & 2

Document 1 is a 1936 Resettlement Administration (RA) poster. During the Great Depression, the New Deal's Resettlement Administration built three "green towns" outside major cities. The goal was to help poor families escape rural poverty and live in Government-planned suburbs complete with shops, schools, and parks. The towns were to be surrounded by half-mile-wide "greenbelts" of forest. The RA was soon shut down and government-run suburban development did not become the wave of the future.

Document 2 is a Chevrolet automobile magazine advertisement from 1957. The ad offers an ideal image of the suburban lifestyle of the 1950s—a comfortable ranch-style home with lawn, trees, and two new cars in the garage. While the RA poster from 1936 (Document 1) also presents an ideal of suburban life, the vast majority of homes and suburban neighborhoods in the 1950s would be privately developed.