

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

Bryan's Cross of Gold

William Jennings Bryan lost the election of 1896, but his famous "Cross of Gold" speech would have an impact for decades to come.



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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 Bryan a far-seeing reformer or an ignorant demagogue?

- 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.

Bryan's Cross of Gold

William Jennings Bryan arrived at the Democratic Party's convention in 1896 as a little-known former congressman from Nebraska. His "Cross of Gold" speech electrified the delegates and convinced them to make him their candidate for president. Bryan's speech was a ringing call for the unlimited coining of silver along with gold as a way to increase the money supply and generate inflation, or a general rise in prices.

Bryan lost the election to Republican William McKinley. McKinley favored a pure gold standard. The unlimited coining of silver was not adopted. Yet Bryan's speech is still seen as one of the most important in the nation's history. Why?

The cry for a silver-based inflation arose in the late 1800s as overall prices were falling. Silver coinage was mainly favored by farmers in the West and South. Prices for the goods farmers had to sell were dropping faster than other prices. Meanwhile, the debts farmers had remained fixed in value. Farmers often went deep into debt to pay for land, farm implements, and other expenses. If inflation could force up the prices they earned, the farmers could pay off their debts more easily.

This demand for silver was actually a part of a much broader agrarian protest movement starting in the 1870s. It depicted the farmer as a victim of ruthless railroads, grain elevator operators, and other powerful businesses that charged high prices to farmers. It was a protest also against banks, Wall Street, and international financiers, many of whom were said to be Jewish. A belief in a vast conspiracy against the hardworking farmer pervaded this protest thinking.

The high point of farmer protest came with the rise of the People's Party in the 1890s. Also known as the Populists, this party called for a graduated income tax, government ownership of railroad, telegraph, and telephone systems, and a call for many other forms of government aid to farmers—along with the free and unlimited coining of silver. In 1890 and 1892, voters elected several Populist congressmen and governors.

In 1896, the Populists were so impressed with Bryan's Cross of Gold speech to the Democrats they also nominated him for president. That is, he ran as both the Populist and the Democratic Party candidate. Some Populists were unhappy about this since their program was about much more than silver. When Bryan lost, the Populists also went into a rapid decline.

Many historians view the Populist protests as realistic responses to real grievances. They also sympathize with the Populist view of an America split in these years between a tiny number of greedy, corrupt businessmen and a huge mass of poor and oppressed farmers and industrial laborers.

There may be some truth to this view. Yet other historians are skeptical. They say farm prices in the late 1800s did not fall much faster than other prices. In fact, average real income for farmers and workers rose modestly but steadily in those years. These historians say the basic cause of low farm prices was not a conspiracy, but an international market for farm goods. This put American farmers into competition with millions of farmers all over the world. In the U.S. itself, land in cultivation doubled from 1860 to 1890. In a way, the farm problem was that there were just too many farmers.

Nevertheless, Bryan's speech set the tone and defined many specific goals for future reform movements. Its soaring, Christian rhetoric also gave it great power and appeal. The documents here will help you better explain and debate this speech's lasting impact and importance.

Bryan's Cross of Gold Time Line

1867

- • • Local chapters of the Grange form, at first to overcome the boredom and isolation of farm life. In time, the Grange becomes more political.

1873

- • • Congress decides that silver is no longer to be part of the money supply. Western silver mine owners, farmers, and other debtors later refer to this as the "Crime of '73."

1876

- • • The National Greenback Party forms to fight for additional greenbacks (a form of paper currency) and the unlimited coinage of silver.

1877

- • • In *Munn v. Illinois*, the Supreme Court upholds a Granger-backed law regulating grain storage rates. The Court later reverses its support for such business regulation.

1878

- • • The Bland-Allison Act allows limited purchases of silver to mint into silver dollars. However, presidents keep silver purchases to a minimum.

1880s

- • • As the Grange fades, a Southern Farmers' Alliance and Northern Farmers' Alliance grow rapidly. They aid farmers through cooperative purchasing and in other ways. Some Alliance members develop a political program of currency expansion and greater government regulation. The Populist Party (also the People's Party) emerges from the Farmers' Alliances.

1887

- • • The Interstate Commerce Act sets up a commission to regulate railroad rates and forbid various sorts of discriminatory rates.

1890

- • • The Sherman Antitrust Act outlaws trusts and other combinations in restraint of trade. The Sherman Silver Purchase Act revives the coining of silver and requires the Treasury to issue notes backed by either silver or gold. As the price of silver drops, people exchange these notes for gold only, causing a constant drain on the government's gold supply.

1892

- • • Populists hold their first national convention in Omaha, Nebraska. Pro-gold-standard Democrat Grover Cleveland wins re-election.

1893

- • • The financial panic of 1893 is followed by a deep depression. The Sherman Silver Purchase Act is repealed. U.S. returns to the pure gold standard favored by Cleveland (even though his party is mainly pro-silver).

1895

- • • Financier J. P. Morgan lends the government enough gold to prevent federal bankruptcy. Morgan's huge profits from this loan anger farmer interests.

1896

- • • William Jennings Bryan gives "Cross of Gold" speech at the Democratic Convention and wins its presidential nomination. Republican William McKinley wins the election. Bryan will be the Democratic presidential nominee twice more (1900 and 1908) and lose again both times.

1900

- • • Republicans push through the Gold Standard Act, which establishes gold as the sole standard for all U.S. currency.

DOCUMENTS 1 & 2

Visual Primary Source Documents 1 & 2



Document 1

The Granger Collection, New York



Document 2

The Granger Collection, New York

Information on Documents 1 & 2

Document 1 is an 1888 cartoon by C. Jay Taylor. It shows an ordinary farmer seeking some help from some wealthy people at a banquet. The diners are being served from the “Congressional Kitchen.” The farmer is identified by the caption as “The Political Poor Relation—An Unwelcome Guest.”

Document 2 is a campaign poster for William Jennings Bryan. Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” speech won him the nomination as the Democratic Party candidate in 1896. Bryan ran again in 1900 and made the same vow to increase the money supply by coining silver at a ratio to gold of 16:1. This poster is from that 1900 campaign.