DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints in Primary Source Documents

Democracy and the Railroads

Friends or Foes?

In the late 1800s, rail lines linked every part of a growing nation. What impact did the railroad have on American society?

Contents

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.

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):

Did the railroads, in their wasteful competition, exploit farmers and workers? Or did they make a better and freer life possible for millions?

- 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.

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.

Democracy and the Railroads: Friends or Foes?

In 1869, a golden spike was driven into the ground at Promontory Summit in Utah. It joined the rails of the Union Pacific Railroad and the Central Pacific Railroad to form the nation's first transcontinental line.

The moment was as dramatic for its day as the first landing on the moon was in 1969, one hundred years later. As the spike was driven in, the hammer blows sent telegraph signals across the entire nation. Suddenly, a journey of about one hundred days (from New York, around Cape Horn at the tip of South America, up to San Francisco) now took just six to eight days by train across the continent.

Soon, four other transcontinental lines tied parts of the Pacific coast states to the rest of the nation. And many shorter lines linked up with larger trunk lines to create a vast network connecting every part of the United States together. From 1865 to 1895, the total mileage of main line track went up five times, from about 35,000 miles to 180,000 miles.

Railroads were perhaps the key industry in these years when the United States surged ahead to become the world's number-one industrial nation. The railroad was itself an enormous consumer of iron, steel, and coal. It therefore gave a big boost to the growth of those other key contributors to America's industrialization. By offering fast transportation of all sorts of goods, it knit the nation into one mass market. This gave an advantage to the new, giant factories and corporations that could sell huge quantities at low cost to this enormous market.

Rails seemed to hold out the promise of re-uniting the recently divided nation as nothing else could.

Was the promise of the railroad fulfilled? That is not an easy question to answer. It is clear that Americans expected a great deal from the railroads. After all, towns, states, and especially the federal government loaned railroads millions of dollars and gave them millions of acres of public land to sell to help pay for their roads. This enabled the railroads to play a key role in developing the vast area west of the Mississippi. With all that land to sell, the railroads actively encouraged millions of farmers (native and immigrant alike) to buy land and establish homesteads throughout the West.

By fostering America's industrial growth and the settlement of the West, the railroads helped provide a better life for millions of ordinary citizens. Yet the railroads were also the largest, most powerful businesses of their day. Many of them misused their power. Government loans and land grants often made problems worse by encouraging waste, corruption and the overbuilding of roads, some of which soon went bankrupt. Some historians say the land grants were essential to getting the roads built at all. Yet one transcontinental line, James J. Hill's Great Northern, was built largely without land grants or subsidies. It was one of the most profitable railroads of all.

Major conflicts also arose over the issue of the rates railroads charged. Rates were often low for long hauls, where two or more railroads competed, but high for shorter hauls. Rates varied in many other ways that often seemed unfair, especially to farmers who came to depend on the railroads heavily in the late 1800s.

In time, the government began to regulate the railroads and set their rates. Some say this was a good way to check their abuses. Others say the railroads themselves came to welcome this as a way to control competition and satisfy their critics. Did these critics have a strong case against the railroads? Perhaps these documents will help you decide.

Democracy and the Railroads Time Line

1856 Henry Bessemer in England develops the Bessemer converter to produce inexpensive steel.

1857 George Pullman invents his famous sleeper car. It is much more comfortable than other railroad sleeper cars designed for overnight passenger travel.

1869 The Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads join up to form the first transcontinental rail line. It is one of five transcontinental railroads built between 1869 and 1893. All but one of them get major federal aid in the form of huge land grants and monetary payments for each mile of track. Also in this year, George Westinghouse gets a patent for his air brake, which allows trains to stop accurately.

1873 The Credit Mobilier scandal is the biggest of several scandals that tarnish the reputation of large railroad companies in the late 1800s, especially those receiving public assistance. Also in 1873, Eli Janney patents his automatic "knuckle" coupler. This device locks as the cars come together. It replaces the "link and pin" coupler, which was a major cause of injuries and death among railroad workers.

1877 The "Great Railroad Strike" triggers labor violence across the country. Loss of life and damage to property are extensive.

1883 The railroads put the "General Time Convention" into effect. It replaces local time with the standard time zones still in use today. The railroads establish this system in order to simplify train schedules.

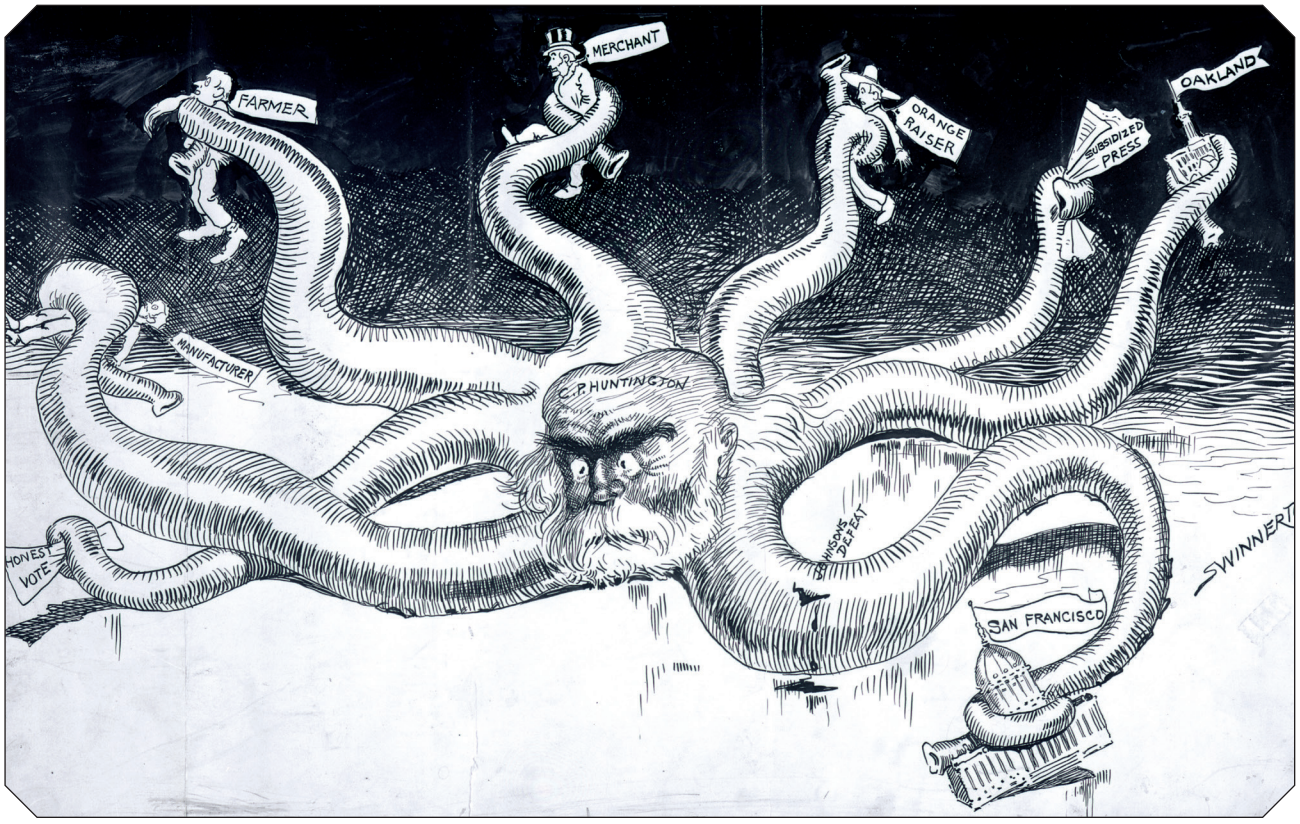
1887 Congress passes the Interstate Commerce Act in response to railroad rate increases and discriminatory rate setting. This act gives an Interstate Commerce Commission power to control many aspects of the railroad industry, the first industry in America to be regulated this way by a federal government agency.

1893 James J. Hill's Great Northern is completed. Unlike other transcontinental lines, this one is built without federal assistance. Also in 1893, the Federal Railway Safety Appliances Act sets up requirements for a number of safety devices.

1894 When wages are cut, thousands of Pullman Palace Car Company workers go on strike in Illinois. In sympathy, other railroad workers stop Pullman cars from moving. The strike is marked by violence. Federal troops are sent in to end it.

1904 A Supreme Court ruling forces the break up of the Northern Securities company. This company was a large trust controlling the Northern Pacific Railway, the Great Northern Railway, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, and others. This case is one of the first examples of President Theodore Roosevelt's "trust-busting" efforts.

Visual Primary Source Document 1



Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California

Information on Document 1

This 1896 cartoon in the *San Francisco Examiner* shows Collis Huntington as a huge octopus. Huntington was president of the powerful Southern Pacific Railroad. In 1868, the four top owners of the Central Pacific Railroad (including Huntington) acquired the Southern Pacific. They expanded this railroad by purchasing other lines and linking them up to create a huge transcontinental network. In time, this system connected New Orleans and other southern cities to various points throughout the West Coast.

Like other large lines, the Southern Pacific received millions of free acres of public land which it could sell to help pay for its growth and to settle future customers along its routes. Critics said the railroad often dealt harshly with farmers who bought or settled on its lands. Frank Norris's novel *The Octopus: A California Story* is a fictional account of one episode in which this sort of conflict led to violence—though not all historians agree that the railroad deserved all the blame for this incident.