

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

The West Paradise, or Paradise Lost?

After the Civil War, the huge trans-Mississippi West was opened for settlement, conquest, and development.



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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):

“Our romantic image of the ‘Wild West’ of the late 1800s is not entirely a myth.” 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.

The West: Paradise, or Paradise Lost?

In 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner presented his famous “frontier thesis.” It claimed that steady westward settlement was what made America a unique land of liberty and equality. Turner saw the frontier as a “safety valve” enabling the poor to leave crowded cities to seek a better life out west. This eased deep class divisions that caused such suffering in Europe. On the frontier, “rugged individualism” was the ideal. It was an ideal that stressed liberty, equality, hard work, and individual responsibility.

Turner also noted that the frontier was a thing of the past. Citing 1890 census data, he announced that no real frontier line existed any longer. The nation would have to learn to live in a closed space. Could its democratic ideals and practices survive this change? Turner was not sure.

Whatever the truth of Turner’s thesis, it is no surprise that the frontier was a big issue for people in the late 1800s. In the 35 years following the Civil War, the entire trans-Mississippi West was conquered, settled, and altered forever. It was fully tied into all of the key social, economic, and cultural networks of the United States as a nation.

Settlement took place in stages. First came fur trappers who lived among and traded with the Indians. These settlers were followed by miners in search of gold and other minerals. They were followed by the cowboy and the great cattle drives (1866 to about 1890). Finally, farmers arrived by the millions. From 1870 to 1900, acres of land under cultivation in the U.S. more than doubled.

Those heading west often imagined a pristine land of unlimited opportunity. Anyone who worked hard had a chance at success and the American dream. For millions that dream was just to put down roots and set themselves up as independent, property-owning farmers. Were their dreams realistic? Was their image of the

West accurate? Turner's ideas seem to suggest it was. Yet Turner also knew that the West and the individualism it fostered had a darker, more selfish side.

First of all, the frontier was never truly an empty, “pristine” wilderness. It was filled with native peoples who fiercely resisted anyone taking their traditional lands. In other words, the West was not so much “settled” as it was conquered. The harsh treatment of the conquered tribes is a key part of the story of the American West.

As for frontier equality and individualism, some historians say this, too, is partly myth. In each wave of settlement (miners, cowboys, farmers), a similar pattern held. At first, individuals arrived with limited supplies and equipment seeking to make a mark. Some did strike it rich or set up successful farms. Yet many others soon ended up as struggling employees for the large corporations whose money and machinery gave them great advantages in mining, fishing, timber, and agricultural. Also, in the rush to develop the region's land, water, mineral, and timber resources, these businesses often did great damage to the West's fragile natural

On the other hand, other historians say that for all its problems, this pattern of development was a beneficial one. Large-scale business and agribusiness gave millions a chance to work and get ahead. The tragedy of the final Indian Wars and the problems of ecological damage were real enough. Yet the West did offer millions a better chance. In time, a conservation movement arose to protect its natural resources. The West was no paradise, but “paradise lost” is not a fair label either.

Now you can use the documents for this lesson to decide with which of these groups of historians you agree most.

The West Time Line

1862

• • •

The Homestead Act gives 160 acres of free land to each homesteader who lives, builds a home, improves, and farms the land for five years.

1864

• • •

Cheyenne chief Black Kettle agrees to peace, but a volunteer force massacres nearly two hundred men, women, and children at Black Kettle's Sand Creek encampment in Colorado.

1866

• • •

The Lakota, angry about a fort along the Bozeman trail to Montana mining country, annihilate a patrol led by Captain William J. Fetterman. Also, the era of the long-range cattle drives on the open range begins. The drives will last until 1885.

1867–1868

• • •

Treaties establish separate reservations for various Plains Indian tribes in parts of Oklahoma, Wyoming, Montana, and Dakota Territories.

1869

• • •

The first transcontinental railroad is completed. Others follow. Many are financed with huge grants of land to sell. To do this, the railroads promote western settlement vigorously.

1872

• • •

The Yellowstone Act sets aside part of northwest Wyoming as a public park.

1874

• • •

Mennonite immigrants bring a new strain of drought-resistant wheat to Kansas. Officials estimate hunters are killing three million buffalo a year. Joseph Glidden receives a patent for barbed wire. Together these things transform the Plains from the "Great American Desert" it was once thought to be into a fertile land of farms and ranches.

1876

• • •

Gold is discovered in the Black Hills of Dakota. Prospectors disrupt these sacred Lakota lands, triggering the Lakota War. During it, George Armstrong Custer's force is wiped out, but the Lakota lose the war.

1877

• • •

After a 1400-mile flight, Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce surrender.

1887

• • •

The Dawes Severalty Act creates a system of private land ownership for American Indians. This gives individual Indians farms, but it also divides up the reservations and weakens Indian cultures.

1889

• • •

The Oklahoma Land Rush takes place (see Visual Source Document 3).

1890

• • •

Federal troops massacre Lakota Chief Big Foot and 350 followers at Wounded Knee Creek on the Pine Ridge Reservation. This is the last real battle of the Indian Wars.

1891

• • •

The Forest Reserve Act allows land to be set aside as public forests to preserve a timber supply.

1893

• • •

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner declares the frontier closed.

1902

• • •

The Newlands Reclamation Act authorizes federal construction of dams and reservoirs.

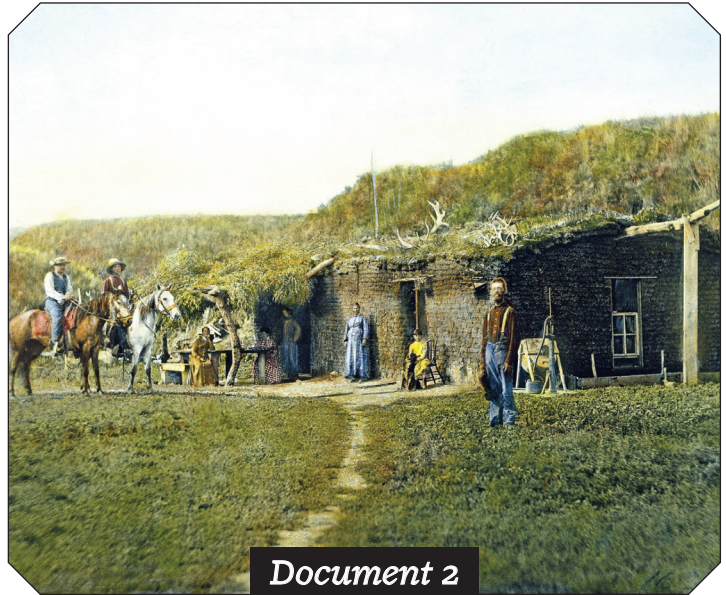
DOCUMENTS 1 & 2

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. *The Great West*, 1881.
An American lithograph, with scenes of farming, mining, hunting, and river life in the American West.

Document 2. A pioneer family alongside their sod house near Coburg, Nebraska, in 1887. (Oil over a photograph.)