

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

Europe's Teachers, Europe's Learners

*Medieval Europe absorbed much from other civilizations.
The teachers and the learners both played key roles.*



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Debating the DOCUMENTS

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The 2017 World History Course and Exam Description of the College Board Advanced Placement Program* lists five themes that it urges teachers to use in organizing their teaching. Each World History *Debating the Documents* booklet focuses on one or two of these five themes.

The Five Themes

- 1. Interaction between humans and the environment.** (demography and disease; migration; patterns of settlement; technology)
- 2. Development and interaction of cultures.** (religions; belief systems, philosophies, and ideologies; science and technology; the arts and architecture)
- 3. State-building, expansion, and conflict.** (political structures and forms of governance; empires; nations and nationalism; revolts and revolutions; regional, transregional, and global structures and organizations)
- 4. Creation, expansion, and interaction of economic systems.** (agricultural and pastoral production; trade and commerce; labor systems; industrialization; capitalism and socialism)
- 5. Development and transformation of social structures.** (gender roles and relations; family and kinship; racial and ethnic constructions; social and economic classes)

This Booklet's Main Theme:

- 2** Development and interaction of cultures.

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Contents

Teacher Introduction	1
Suggestions to the Student.	5
Introductory Essay	6
Europe's Teachers, Europe's Learners Time Line	7
First Group of Documents	8
Study the Documents	10
Comparing the Documents	12
Comparison Essay	13
Second Group of Documents	14
Study the Documents	16
Comparing the Documents	18
Comparison Essay	19
Document-Based Question.	20
Worksheet Answers and Guidelines.	21
Visual Primary Sources	23

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.

NOTE: If you are using these materials with an AP world history class, an honors class, or some other group of advanced and/or more knowledgeable students, you may want to make more written sources available to them on this topic. Do a basic Internet search for sources that provide additional perspectives and then add to the sources provided here.

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):

“Europe in the Middle Ages owed all that it learned about Aristotle and philosophy to teachers from other cultures, especially Islamic cultures.”
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.

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.

Europe's Teachers, Europe's Learners

In 1000 CE, Europe was definitely not the place to learn science and philosophy. Its medical knowledge was poor. Its buildings and cities were not impressive. Its trade with lands beyond Europe was limited, as was its knowledge about those other lands. In short, Europe was a backwater unlikely to add much to human learning, creativity, or accomplishment.

The great civilizations of China, India, and the Islamic lands of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain were far ahead of Europe in these things. Europe was a land of peasants, simple villages, few books, and ignorant princes often at war with one another. What learning there was took the form of schools attached to some cathedrals. Monks copied old manuscripts and stored them away in monasteries. Few knew of them, and even fewer read them.

Yet within a few centuries, Europe's science and technology, philosophy, and art would be second to none. Its trade, shipbuilding, navigational skill, guns, and military technology would enable it to explore the world, and in time dominate much of it. How did this happen?

First of all, Europe borrowed much from the more advanced cultures around it. Between 1000 and 1300 CE, these other cultures became Europe's teachers. As Europeans began to trade more with regions outside their lands, new techniques having to do with ships, maps, navigation, guns and gunpowder, horses and plows, and much more flooded in.

In knowledge and culture, the Islamic lands had preserved much of the scientific and philosophical learning of the ancient Greeks. And Muslim thinkers added their own commentaries on this learning. Islamic medical knowledge and astronomy, India's mathematics, and China's technology all far surpassed Europe's. By the eleventh century, Europeans were becoming aware of this heritage and were eager to absorb as much of it as they could find.

Until recently, many scholars thought that Europe gained its knowledge and power all on its own. To recognize that it borrowed from other cultures gives those cultures the credit they deserve. However, borrowing of this sort can itself be a great talent. It requires that one be open to learning from others. It also means being able to adapt strange ideas and techniques to new social, economic, and cultural conditions. After around 1000 CE, Europeans began to do this with incredible eagerness and imagination.

A great effort then began to translate the works of Aristotle and other ancient writers from Arabic and Greek into Latin, the language educated Europeans used. As trade and cities grew in Europe, another new institution developed: the university. In this setting, students began to read and discuss works on law, medicine, theology, and natural philosophy. Natural philosophy dealt with many topics we today think of as part of physics, astronomy, and other sciences.

The teachers of Europeans in these settings were, above all, Aristotle and his Muslim and other commentators. However, Europeans did not slavishly accept what they read in the works of these writers. A tradition of "scholastic" reasoning and debate grew up. In it, all kinds of physical, moral, even theological matters could be explored. Europeans did not challenge the basic teachings of the Christian faith. But a spirit of sharp questioning and debate did flourish, and reason and logic were used to determine the truth of all sorts of beliefs. A restless spirit of intellectual exploration was growing as Europe's learners absorbed what they could from others — and soon began to build on it in ways that would change history.

By comparing and contrasting the sources for this lesson, you will begin to understand how much Europeans of this age learned from others and why they soon took that learning much further than others had before them.

Europe's Teachers, Europe's Learners Time Line

429–322 BCE



In ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle offer the basic philosophical systems that will influence Medieval Europe the most.

Islamic Teachers

Early Abbassid caliphs Al-Mansur and Al-Mamun rule the Islamic empire from Baghdad. They launch the effort to translate ancient Greek learning, using Syrian Christian and other scholars to translate the Greek manuscripts obtained from Byzantium.

754–833 CE



900s



Cordova in Spain becomes a great center of Islamic learning.

980–1036



Lifetime of Ibn Sina (“Avicenna” to Europeans). He writes commentaries on Aristotle. His *Canon of Medicine* is based on his own medical knowledge, Islamic medicine and the teachings of the ancient Greek writer Galen. This work becomes a classic in Europe for centuries.

1058–1128



Lifetime of Al-Ghazali. He condemns efforts to adjust Islamic concepts to fit with ancient philosophy, or to use reason to comprehend the “infinite” matters dealt with by Islam.

1126–1198



Lifetime of Ibn Rushd of Cordova (“Averroes” to Europeans). He opposes Al-Ghazali and sees reason and Aristotle as compatible with Islamic teachings. He is banished for four years at one point, but is later forgiven.

Europe's Learners

1079–1142



Lifetime of Abelard. His *Sic et Non* (*Yes and No*) presents conflicting opinions by Church fathers and others on various issues. He leaves it to readers to decide how to resolve these conflicting views.

1088



University of Bologna is founded to foster the study of law. Later, the universities of Paris (1150), Oxford (1167), and others develop. They win a great deal of independence from outside political or religious authorities.

1100–1164



Lifetime of Peter Lombard. As with *Sic et Non*, his *Four Books of Sentences* sets out conflicting opinions on theological matters, but he also tries to reconcile them. The key theology textbook of the age.

1114–1187



Lifetime of Gerard of Cremona. The most famous of many who travel to Spain and Sicily in the twelfth century to translate Arabic, Greek, or Hebrew versions of ancient texts. Gerard translates ancient Greeks such as Ptolemy, Aristotle, and Euclid, and Islamic writers such as al-Khwarizmi, al-Kindi, and Avicenna, as well as many others.

1225–1274



Lifetime of Thomas Aquinas, the most famous Catholic scholastic. His *Summa Theologica* reconciles Aristotelian concepts with theology.

1265–1308



Lifetime of John Duns Scotus, a key scholastic in the tradition of Aquinas and Aristotle, though differing with them on some matters.

1323–1382



Lifetime of Nicole Oresme. He challenges Aristotle on such scientific concepts as the nature of motion, whether the earth moves, etc. His emphasis on mathematics helps lead to the mathematical approach to physical science developed fully during the age of the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century.

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. An Arabic astrolabe from the tenth century. An astrolabe is a model of the heavens. Its name comes from the Greek words *astron* for “heavenly bodies.” With an astrolabe, an astronomer or navigator could measure the position of stars and planets and determine the time of night or day, latitude, etc. While the oldest and simplest astrolabes were Greek in origin, Muslims added many features and perfected them, before passing them on to Europeans in the Middle Ages.

Document 2. These Turkish astronomers are in an observatory built by the Ottoman Sultan in 1577. Until about 1400, Islamic astronomers were far ahead of Europe’s. Islam’s first observatory was probably the one built in 1120 in Cairo, Egypt. It lasted only until 1125. The famous Maragha Observatory was built by the Mongol ruler in Persia in 1259. It was abandoned during the next century. A powerful ruling patron’s support for an observatory could vanish if that ruler died or was overthrown.