

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

The War with Mexico

*A triumph of the spirit of "Manifest Destiny" that also
unsettled the nation and helped bring on the Civil War*



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Debating the
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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):

“The U.S.-Mexican War was an utterly unjustified war whose aim was to expand slavery, plain and simple.” Assess the validity of this statement—that is, explain why you do or do not agree with it.

- 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.

The War with Mexico

On April 25, 1846, Mexican forces attacked U.S. troops in disputed territory in what is now Texas. This attack triggered a war that vastly expanded the size of the United States. Mexico accepted U.S. annexation of Texas. And by the 1848 treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the war, the U.S. paid Mexico \$15 million for lands that included present-day California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and portions of Wyoming and Colorado. For the United States, the war was a huge success. Yet today, it is still a cause of debate and even bitter controversy.

The immediate cause of the war was Texas. U.S. settlers had been flooding into Texas for decades. In 1835, they rebelled against Mexico. In 1836, they declared Texas to be an independent republic. Soon, they began calling on the U.S. to make this republic a state. Mexico refused to accept any of this, and it warned the U.S. not to annex Texas. For a time, that warning was heeded.

Then in 1844, James K. Polk was elected president on a program of vast territorial expansion. He vowed to gain control of Oregon, to annex Texas, to settle past debts owed by Mexico to U.S. citizens, and to pay Mexico for California.

Polk's election reflected a growing interest in westward settlement and a rising spirit of "Manifest Destiny," as it came to be called. That is, Americans increasingly viewed the western lands as theirs by right and by virtue of their nation's ideals and accomplishments.

In March 1845, just before Polk took office, Congress passed an act to annex Texas, and later that summer Texas agreed to this action. Mexico threatened to invade, and President Polk ordered Brigadier General Zachary Taylor to position troops near Corpus Christi. Polk still hoped to settle matters with Mexico peacefully. At first, Mexico seemed to wish this as well. But Mexico was a troubled land, and in January 1846, a more dictatorial leader took power in Mexico and sent back the U.S. negotiator. Taylor then moved his

troops further south to the Rio Grande, a move Mexico saw as an act of war.

Some of these U.S. troops were the ones that came under attack on April 25, 1846.

The specific battles and major campaigns of the war are not the subject of this booklet. But to sum things up, while the Mexicans fought with great courage, U.S. troops were overwhelmingly successful against more numerous yet less well trained, equipped, and effectively led forces.

Volunteers flocked to join the tiny U.S. army. Newspapers called for revenge against a dictatorial Mexican government that had fired the first shots. Patriotic appeals were fueled by the new spirit of Manifest Destiny. Poet Walt Whitman wrote, "What has miserable, inefficient Mexico—with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many—what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race? Be it ours, to achieve that mission!"

Yet a few fierce critics did oppose the war, especially in New England where the annexation of Texas was seen as a plot by slave-owning states to expand their control in Congress. The opponents included a young congressman named Abraham Lincoln, who said, "The act of sending an armed force among the Mexicans was unnecessary, inasmuch as Mexico was in no way molesting or menacing the United States or the people thereof."

Among historians and others, this argument is still going on. The four documents here all take sides in it. Together, they should give you a good basis for assessing and debating the views pro and con for the U.S. decision to go to war with Mexico.

The War with Mexico Time Line

1835

- • • Mexican President Santa Anna proclaims a unified nation, including Texas.
- • • However, North American settlers in Texas say they will secede rather than give up slavery, which Mexico had abolished.

1836

- • • Texans lose the battle of the Alamo but then defeat the Mexicans and capture Santa Anna. The independent Republic of Texas is declared. Sam Houston is elected as its president. The Texans seek U.S. annexation.

1843

- • • Santa Anna warns against any U.S. annexation of Texas.

1844

- • • Democrat James Polk defeats Whig Henry Clay for the U.S. presidency. Polk vows to acquire Texas, Oregon and California.

1845

- • • The U.S. annexes Texas. Polk orders U.S. army forces under Zachary Taylor to Texas. He sends John Slidell to talk with Mexican leaders about purchasing Texas, New Mexico, and California. When these talks fail, Polk orders General Taylor to move troops further south to the Rio Grande River into lands that had always been recognized as Mexican territory.

1846

- • • Mexican forces attack a fort built by Taylor's troops. U.S. forces are soon victorious at the Battle at Palo Alto. A week later, Congress declares war on Mexico. U.S. settlers briefly proclaim California to be an independent republic, but the U.S. annexes California that August. U.S. Representative David Wilmot introduces his "Wilmot Proviso," which states that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part of territories that might be acquired from Mexico." This bill does not pass. Also in 1846, a treaty sets the U.S.-Canadian border at the 49th parallel, and the U.S. acquires Oregon territory.

1847

- • • In the Battle of Buena Vista, General Taylor's 4800-man force defeats General Santa Anna's 15,000-man force. General Winfield Scott's forces take Vera Cruz on the coast of Mexico. Scott later marches into Mexico City.

1848

- • • The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the war with Mexico. The United States gains over 500,000 square miles of land in what will become California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Wyoming and Colorado. The U.S. pays \$15 million. Zachary Taylor, hero of the Mexican War, is elected president.

DOCUMENT 1

Visual Primary Source Document 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Information on Document 1

This portrait of President James K. Polk identifies him as “Freedom’s Champion.” It was published on May 16, 1846. The illustration does not refer to Polk’s leadership in the Mexican War, which was just starting at that point. Instead, it shows him signing a document labeled “Oregon,” on which the numbers 54° 40’ appear.

In 1818, the U.S. and Great Britain agreed to joint control over the Oregon Territory from the 42nd parallel of north latitude to

54°40’ north latitude. In 1844, Polk ran for president on a promise to take control of all of the Oregon Territory. His campaign slogan about this was “Fifty-four Forty or Fight!” In other words, he claimed to be ready to go to war to gain control over the entire Oregon Territory.

In fact, Polk really did not want a war with Great Britain. In 1846, instead, talks led to a treaty setting the U.S. boundary across this territory at the 49th parallel.

Visual Primary Source Document 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Information on Document 2

The caption for this 1848 Currier and Ives political cartoon reads “An Available Candidate—the one qualification for a Whig president.”

In 1848, Mexican War generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott were both contenders for the Whig Party’s nomination. Both men were regarded by most Americans as great war heroes. Both also had won strong support among many Whigs as possible presidential candidates.

The figure in the cartoon has generally been identified as Taylor. However, the flamboyant, plumed military hat and uniform are more in keeping with the way Scott dressed and the way he was usually depicted. The print may have appeared during the ground swell of support which arose for Scott as a rival to Zachary Taylor in the months preceding the party's convention in Philadelphia on June 7, 1848. On June 9, however, Taylor won the Whig nomination.