

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

Uncle Tom's Cabin

The novel about the evils of slavery that fueled the abolitionist crusade 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):

Harriet Beecher Stowe hoped that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would convince both the South and the North that slavery was wrong. Why do you think this did not happen?

- 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 Impact of Uncle Tom's Cabin

Few novels have ever altered the course of history. One that may well have done this was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*. This novel was first published in 1851–2 in 40 episodes in *The National Era*, an anti-slavery weekly. Except for the Bible, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to be the best selling book in the world for the entire 19th century.

The novel tells the stories of three slaves—Uncle Tom, Eliza, and George. Eliza flees Kentucky with her little boy and is reunited in Canada with George, her husband. Abolitionists help them escape the South's slave system. Uncle Tom remains trapped in that system and in the end is doomed by it. Tom is a deeply religious slave whose well-meaning owner, Mr. Shelby, sells him to pay some debts. At first, Tom is sold to another kindly master, Augustine St. Clare, and finally to the cruel Simon Legree. A key part of the story is played by St. Clare's daughter Little Eva, whom Tom saves from drowning. Eva is as saintly and as devout a Christian as Tom. Her best friend is Topsy, a mischievous young slave girl who was abused as a child. Eva seeks to reform Topsy, who finally agrees to change only as Eva is wasting away and dying. Eva's death is one of the novel's most dramatic and sentimental scenes. Later, St. Clare is killed in an accident. Tom is sold to Simon Legree, a Northerner who has become a brutal plantation owner. In the novel's most tragic moment, Legree beats Tom to death just as Shelby's son arrives, too late to free him.

Harriet Beecher was born in Connecticut in 1811 and grew up in a family of well-known clergymen and social reformers. When she was 21, she and her family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. Then in 1834, she married Calvin Stowe, a theology professor. Cincinnati was just across the river from the slave state of Kentucky, and Harriet

became familiar with stories about slavery and runaway slaves passing through the area. Her family's abolitionist beliefs led them to become active in the "underground railway," the secret network that hid and gave aid to runaways.

In 1850, Harriet and her family returned to Boston just as protests were breaking out there over the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. This law required Northerners to aid in returning runaway slaves to their owners. In this setting, Harriet began writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She hoped to awaken the entire nation to the evils of slavery and the need to end it. The work was published in book form in March 1852. Within a year it broke all records, with sales of over a million copies in the U.S. and England. Unauthorized versions of the novel and many theater productions added to its impact.

The novel also set off a storm of controversy. Many Southerners were outraged. They said Stowe had her facts wrong and presented too harsh a view of slavery. In the North, Stowe's vivid and emotional tale gave the growing anti-slavery movement a big boost. However, some Northerner reviewers sided with the Southern critics. At the same time, a few abolitionists said Stowe was too easy on the South and was wrong to expect black slaves to be as humble and meek as Uncle Tom. They also objected to her support for "colonization," the idea of giving blacks a land of their own back in Africa.

None of the critics could do much to limit the book's success and appeal. President Abraham Lincoln later suggested how huge the novel's impact had been. During the Civil War, he is said to have greeted Harriet Beecher Stowe with this remark: "So this is the little lady who brought on this big war."

Uncle Tom's Cabin Time Line

1811

• • • Harriet Beecher is born on June 14 in Litchfield, Connecticut. Her father is a famous Congregational minister and abolitionist.

1831

• • • Nat Turner leads a slave revolt in Virginia. Also, abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison begins publishing his fiery newspaper *The Liberator*.

1832

• • • T. D. Rice dances as "Jim Crow" in New York. This figure becomes a popular and highly insulting stereotype for blacks. Harriet Beecher moves to Cincinnati with her family. Slavery is thriving just across the border in Kentucky.

1833

• • • The Female Anti-Slavery Society is organized in Philadelphia by Lucretia Mott. The American Anti-Slavery Society is organized by Theodore Weld and Arthur and Lewis Tappan.

1836

• • • Harriet Beecher marries Calvin Stowe, a professor of Biblical Literature at Lane Theological Seminary and a clergyman opposed to slavery. They will have seven children. Anti-abolitionist riots take place in Cincinnati.

1846-48

• • • The Mexican War begins. Southern Democrats are key supporters of the war, which they hope will add new slave territories to the nation. As a result of the war, the U.S. does acquire vast new lands.

1848

• • • The Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention meets and calls for equal rights for women. Many of the women involved in the struggle for women's rights are also deeply involved in efforts to end slavery.

1850

• • • A new and stronger Fugitive Slave Law is passed as part of the Compromise of 1850. It forces Northerners to do much more to aid Southern slave owners seeking to recapture escaped slaves. Many in the North are outraged.

1851-52

• • • *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is serialized in the anti-slavery weekly *The National Era*.

1852

• • • *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is published in book form by J. P. Jewett & Co, Boston. It breaks all records, selling half a million copies by 1857.

DOCUMENT 1

Visual Primary Source Document 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Information on Document 1

This 1852 lithograph by Louisa Corboux was printed and published by Stannard & Dixon of London. It is titled “Eva and Topsy,” and it shows these two characters from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* seated on the floor. Beneath the title are these words of Eva’s from the novel: “I love you because you haven’t had any Father, or Mother, or Friends—because you’ve been a poor, abused child!” Little Eva is the saintly daughter of one of Uncle Tom’s more

humane slave owners. Her black friend, the mischievous Topsy, says at one point, “Never was born! . . . never had no father, nor mother, nor nothin’. I was raised by a speculator, with lots of others.” Eva’s wasting away and death is one of the more emotional moments in the novel, a moment that was commented on often by reviewers and by the many others who were so strongly moved by it.