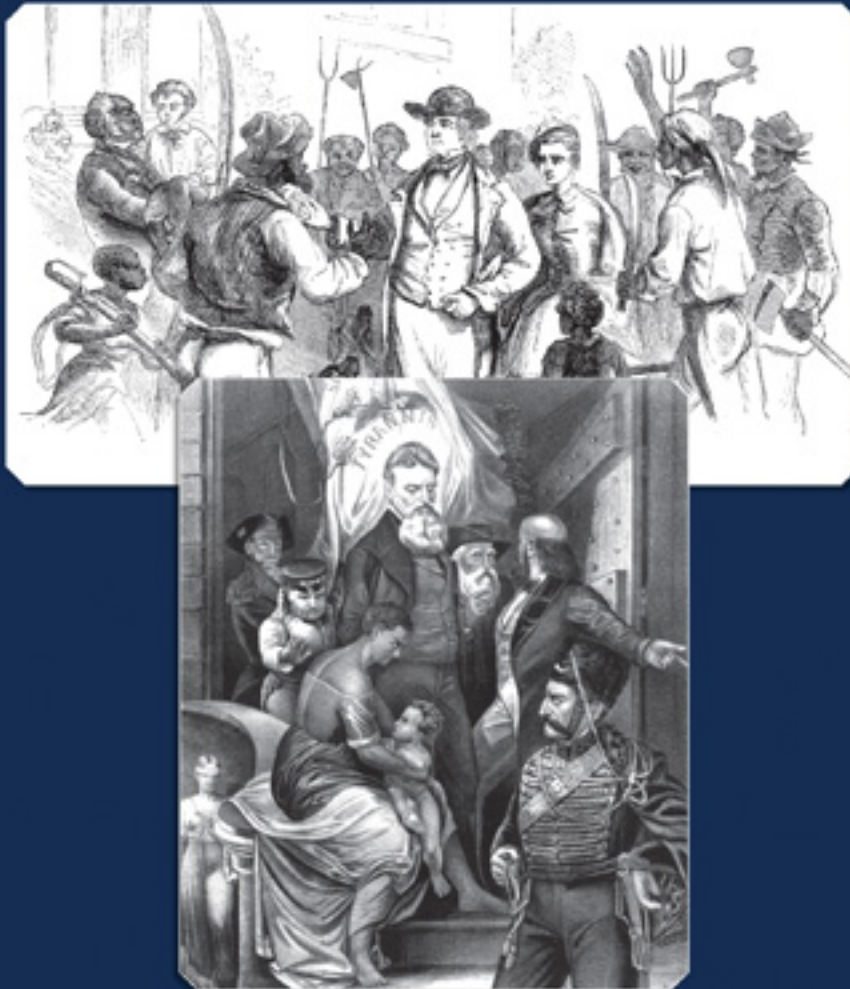


DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

Was John Brown a Hero?

*Was he a principled fighter for justice
or a fanatic and a terrorist?*



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Debating the
DOCUMENTS

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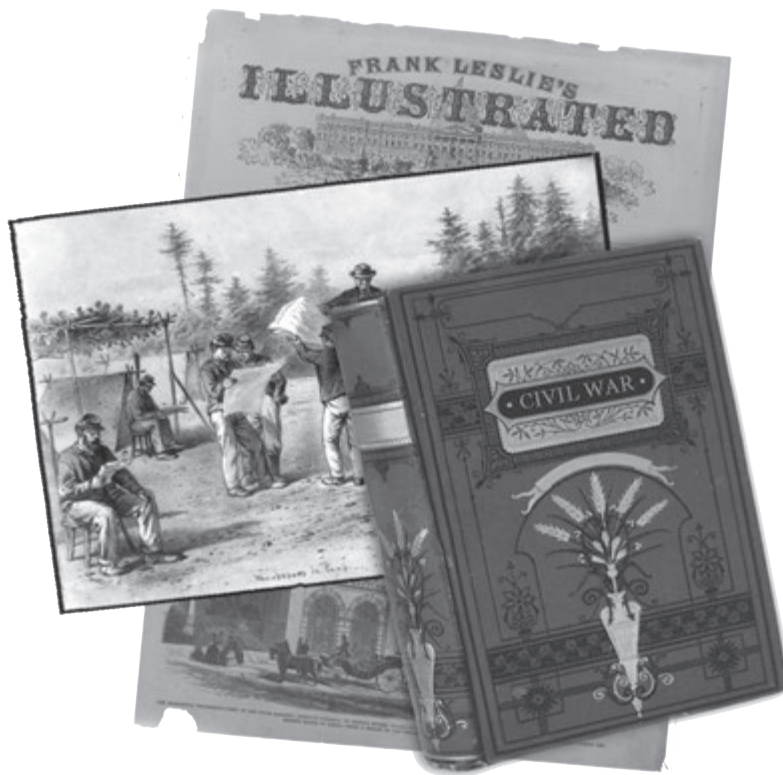
Teacher Introduction

★ 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):

Was John Brown a hero who helped to free the slaves? Or was he a terrorist who merely ended all hope of doing so in a peaceful way?

- 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.

Was John Brown a Hero?

On the night of October 16, 1859, John Brown and 21 armed followers took control of the U.S. arsenal and rifle works at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. They killed several people and took some others hostage. Their goal seems to have been to spark an uprising of slaves in the area and, possibly, a more general rebellion to end slavery throughout the South.

The uprising collapsed in less than two days. No slave revolt took place. Instead, citizens, local militia, and U.S. forces led by Colonel Robert E. Lee quickly subdued the rebels, killing 10 of them and capturing Brown and six others. The rest escaped. A few slaves and free blacks in the area also may have taken part in the uprising. John Brown was quickly tried and convicted of treason, murder, and inciting slave rebellion. He was executed by hanging on December 2, 1859.

If not for the loss of life, the raid would be laughable as a botched attempt to start a civil war. It might have been quickly forgotten, except that the actual U.S. Civil War did break out just over a year later. And, in the view of most Americans at the time, John Brown's raid helped make that war all but unavoidable.

John Brown was born in 1800 into a deeply religious family where he was taught from an early age to hate slavery. He was active in the fight against slavery long before the Harpers Ferry raid. For example, in 1855 he went to the Kansas Territory to aid "free-state" settlers who were fighting proslavery forces there. In one of his raids, five proslavery men were executed in revenge after proslavery forces sacked and burned Lawrence, the Kansas free-staters' capital.

No one can question John Brown's idealism or his willingness to sacrifice for his cause. He had lost one son in the fighting in Kansas, and he lost two more at Harpers Ferry. As he told the court in December 1859, when he was about to be sentenced to death:

Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life, for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children, and with the blood of millions in this slave country, whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say let it be done.

By 1859, the workings of the Fugitive Slave Law, the bloody conflicts in Kansas, the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision, and violence on the floor of the U.S. Senate had already raised levels of anger and fear to the boiling point. Reactions to the Harpers Ferry raid varied greatly. Yet overall, they only added to the deep and bitter divide over slavery.

The South united in outrage at what it saw as a threat not just to its property in slaves but to the lives of many citizens. After all, Brown had stored more than a thousand weapons near Harpers Ferry, and he encouraged the slaves among his hostages to join him. His group had earlier written their own constitution and formed a preliminary government. Their plan seems to have been to escape to the mountains to launch a long guerrilla war.

Reaction in the North was more varied. Some considered Brown an insane fanatic. Others admired his ideals and aims but rejected his use of violence. Finally, some abolitionists saw him as an inspired martyr who brought the day of liberation for the slaves closer. Once the vastly greater violence of the Civil War began, this last view came to be held much more widely in the North.

Was Brown a hero or just a 19th-century terrorist? Did he help to free the slaves, or did he end all hope of doing so peacefully? Perhaps these documents will help you decide.

Was John Brown a Hero? Time Line

1800

• • •

John Brown is born in Torrington, Connecticut, but spends much of his youth in Ohio. His Calvinist father believes slavery is a profound sin.

1812

• • •

During the War of 1812, John Brown briefly stays with a man who owns a young male slave. Brown is horrified when that man beats the slave with a shovel. He never forgets this incident.

1820

• • •

Brown marries Dianthe Lusk, who will bear his seven children.

1826

• • •

Brown moves to Pennsylvania, where he builds and operates a tannery.

1831-32

• • •

Brown's wife dies shortly after the death of a newborn child. Within a year, Brown marries 16-year-old Mary Day, who bears 13 more of his children.

1836-37

• • •

Brown moves to Ohio. He borrows money to buy land, but the economic hard times of 1837 bankrupt him. That year, at a memorial service for the murdered antislavery publisher Elijah Lovejoy, Brown publicly vows to end slavery.

1842

• • •

In a bankruptcy case in 1842, a federal court grants creditors much of the wealth Brown still has. During the 1840s and 1850s, all his tanneries, land purchases, and other business ventures fail. In the meantime, his hatred of slavery intensifies and increasingly preoccupies him. He spends time living with blacks and becomes a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, aiding escaped slaves to make their way to Canada.

1854

• • •

The Kansas-Nebraska Act sets aside the Missouri Compromise, which had limited slavery in the Louisiana Purchase territories. Now, the people of each of these territories will decide whether or not to allow slavery. Kansas territory soon becomes a bloody battle ground between free-staters and slave-staters.

1855

• • •

John Brown joins five of his sons in the Kansas territory.

1856

• • •

Slave-staters attack and burn the free-state community of Lawrence. Enraged, Brown leads six of his men, including four sons, in the murder of five proslavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek.

1857-58

• • •

Brown gets help from abolitionist leaders in New England who wish to aid the antislavery fight in Kansas. Back in Missouri, he attacks two proslavery homesteads and frees 11 slaves whom he then helps to escape to Canada.

1859

• • •

Near Harpers Ferry, Brown rents a farmhouse. He later meets with Frederick Douglass secretly at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. On October 16, Brown and his force of 21 men, including five blacks, attack the armory at Harpers Ferry. The raid is quickly contained. On November 2, a Virginia jury finds him guilty of murder, treason, and inciting a slave insurrection. On December 2, John Brown is hanged.

DOCUMENT 1

Visual Primary Source Document 1



Currier & Ives, 1863. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Information on Document 1

John Brown was convicted of murder, treason, and inciting slave rebellion. Yet during his trial and execution, he came to be seen by many Northerners as an abolitionist martyr. This imaginary scene (Currier & Ives, 1863) shows him calmly leaving the jail in Charlestown, Virginia, hands tied behind his back. The caption reads, in part: “Regarding with a look of compassion a Slave-mother and Child who obstructed the passage on his way to the Scaffold—Capt. Brown stooped and kissed the Child—then met his fate.”

The slave woman is seated on a railing with her infant, in the manner of many religious paintings of Madonna and Child. One of Brown’s guards reaches to push her away. In the foreground a soldier waits, hand on his sword hilt. Behind Brown a figure from the American Revolution, wearing a tricornered hat labeled “76,” watches with concern. The Virginia state flag with the motto “Sic semper tyrannis” flies above Brown’s head. A statue of Justice, with its arms and scales broken, stands forgotten behind the railing at left.

Visual Primary Source Document 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Information on Document 2

This drawing is from *Harper's Weekly*, November 19, 1859. The drawing ridicules John Brown's hope of sparking a huge slave uprising in the South. It shows a planter actually arming his own slaves to defend him and themselves against any trouble resulting from the Harpers Ferry raid.

Whether or not a specific episode like the one shown here ever actually took place, the fact is that slaves in and around Harpers Ferry did not rally to Brown's aid.

Harper's Weekly was not proslavery. However, it was opposed to anything that might upset peaceful relations between Northerners and Southerners. Therefore, it was harshly critical of Brown. Above all, it feared that his raid might anger both Northern abolitionists and Southern disunionists and "plunge a peaceful and contented people into the horrors of civil war."