

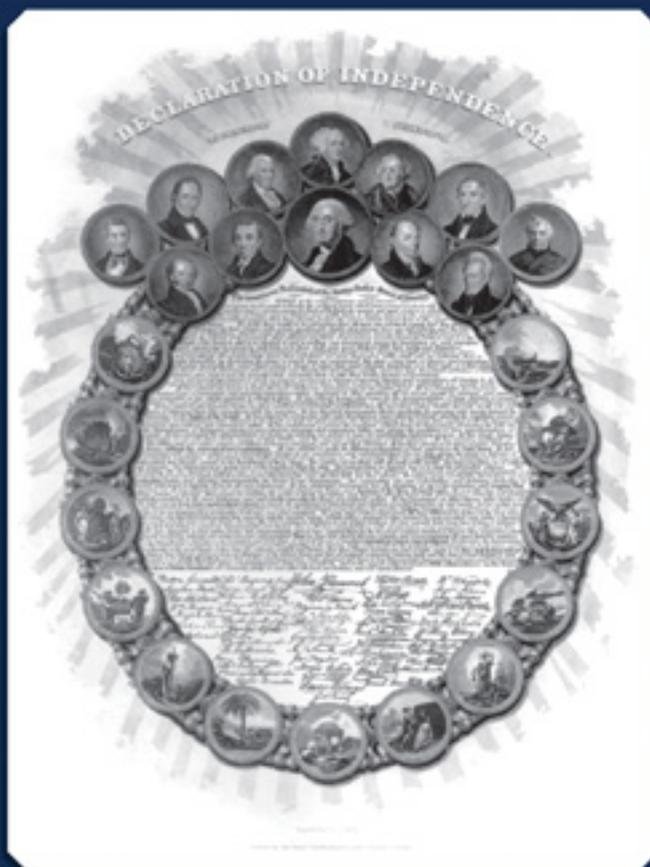
DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

"We Hold These Truths"

The Meaning of the Declaration

What are the natural-rights principles on which the nation's government is based as formulated in the Declaration of Independence?



Debating the
DOCUMENTS

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“We Hold These Truths” The Meaning of the Declaration

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the nation’s government is based as formulated in 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 Declaration did more than explain the break with Great Britain. It clearly defined the principles on which any free government must be based.” 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. 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 DBQ is on page 20.

The Declaration's Self-Evident Truths

On July 2, 1776, colonial leaders met in Philadelphia as the Continental Congress. That day, they voted to separate from Great Britain and form a new nation—the United States of America. If they had left it at that, the decision would still have been a big one in the history of that new nation. Because they did not leave it at that, their decision became a turning point for the entire world.

That's because these leaders also wanted to explain why they were taking this step. In June, they set up a committee to write an explanation. On the committee were John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman and Robert R. Livingston. Jefferson did most of the writing. On July 4, Congress approved the document they came up with—the Declaration of Independence.

Most of the Declaration is a list of abuses of the colonies by Britain's King George III and an account of efforts to get Great Britain to stop these abuses. These sections make the colonial "case" for independence.

Yet they are not what made the Declaration so history-changing. What did that are its first two paragraphs. In these two paragraphs, Jefferson's moving phrases sum up the new nation's deepest beliefs and its basic ideals of liberty and limited government.

The Declaration's ideas were those of the Enlightenment, especially those of philosopher John Locke. Locke claimed that all individuals are born with "natural" rights. Then with his "contract theory," he said a just government is one that men form freely in order to better protect those rights. That is, government is based on a "contract" between it and its citizens.

In the Declaration, Jefferson rested these ideas on religious faith. The Declaration, after all, speaks of the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God." It says

that the individual's rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are endowed by a "Creator," not by any man-made power. It insists these are self-evident "truths," not opinions. In putting it this way, the Declaration is saying that our rights do not come from any human source. Therefore, no human source—that is, no government—can take them away.

These soaring phrases are fine. But did they truly guide the founders? And do they guide the nation now? In other words, what is the real meaning of the Declaration for America and the world? The primary sources in this booklet can't deal with every aspect of the Declaration. However, they will help you discuss and debate a few of the most important questions about it.

For example, how could a flawed society that allowed slavery in 1776 make such sweeping claims about liberty and equality for all? In the 1850s, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas dealt with this issue. The two passages by them in this booklet are not actually primary sources for the time of the Declaration. Yet they do focus debate in a very sharp way on the meaning of its most famous phrase, the one that says "all men are created equal."

Another broad question has to do with the idea of basing government on the consent of the governed. How is "consent" to be given? And what place is there for tradition or custom in deciding who has a right to rule? Here our two primary sources are from the time of the Declaration. They show how some Americans at that time differed over these matters. Their views can help you clarify your own on this issue—and on the Declaration's general meaning, both in the past and the present.

One final point: To get the most out of the sources in this booklet, read the entire Declaration itself. It will be time well spent.

“We Hold These Truths” Time Line

1215

Powerful nobles force British King John to sign the Magna Carta (the “Great Charter”). It limits the monarch and begins to establish the principle of the rule of law and the rights of English citizens.

1689

In the “Glorious Revolution,” the English Bill of Rights makes Parliament supreme and limits the power of British monarchs to interfere with it.

1763

At the end of the French and Indian War, England moves to tighten control over its empire in North America, just as the colonists are seeking greater freedom to grow and expand westward.

1764

At a Boston town meeting, James Otis declares “taxation without representation” unjust and a violation of the rights of Englishmen. In July, he publishes “The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved.”

1765

The Stamp Act crisis leads to protests and violence in the colonies.

1773

Bostonians protest a tea tax and the special rights given to the British East India Company. Colonists dressed as Mohawk Indians dump East India Company tea into Boston’s harbor.

1774

In the spring, England passes the Coercive Acts to punish Boston for the Boston Tea Party. In September, the First Continental Congress meets in Philadelphia to protest the Coercive Acts. A Declaration of Rights claims that the colonists are “entitled to all English liberties.” Colonial militia, called minutemen, begin to organize.

1775

On April 19, colonial minutemen fight the British at Lexington and Concord. On May 10, the Second Continental Congress opens and begins to act as if it is a government.

1776

In January, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* is published. It calls on Americans to demand independence. On May 15, the Virginia Resolution asks Congress to declare independence. On June 7, the Congress in Philadelphia receives Richard Henry Lee’s resolution asking Congress to declare independence. On June 11, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston are chosen to draft a declaration of independence. The American army fighting the British retreats to Lake Champlain from Canada. On June 12, the Virginia Declaration of Rights passes. It is used as a model for the Declaration of Independence. On July 2, Congress declares independence as the British fleet and army arrive at New York. On July 4, Congress adopts the Declaration of Independence.

DOCUMENT 1

Written Primary Source Document 1

Information on Document 1

The words in italics below are one of the most important sentences of all in the Declaration of Independence. Document 1 is actually the passage beneath that sentence. It is *not* a primary source from the time of the Declaration. Yet it and the next document both deal with the sentence from the Declaration shown in italics. These two documents can help you better understand this key aspect of the Declaration's meaning.

This document is a comment by Stephen Douglas made just before the Civil War. He made it during one of his debates with Abraham Lincoln in the 1858 Senate campaign in Illinois. Speaking earlier in Chicago, Lincoln had claimed that the Declaration granted the same equal rights to black slaves as it did to whites. In the passage below, Douglas strongly disagrees with this view, which he calls Lincoln's "Chicago doctrine."

Document 1

"We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

I tell you that this Chicago doctrine of Lincoln's—declaring that the negro and the white man are made equal by the Declaration of Independence and by Divine Providence—is a monstrous heresy. The signers of the Declaration of Independence never dreamed of the negro when they were writing that document. They referred to white men, to men of European birth and European descent, when they declared the equality of all men. I see a gentleman there in the crowd shaking his head. Let me remind him that when Thomas Jefferson wrote that document, he was the owner, and so continued until his death, of a large number of slaves. Did he intend to say in that Declaration, that his negro slaves, which he held and treated as property, were created his equals by Divine law, and that he was violating the law of God every day of his life

by holding them as slaves? It must be borne in mind that when that Declaration was put forth, every one of the thirteen Colonies were slaveholding Colonies, and every man who signed that instrument represented a slaveholding constituency. Recollect, also, that no one of them emancipated his slaves, much less put them on an equality with himself, after he signed the Declaration. On the contrary, they all continued to hold their negroes as slaves during the revolutionary war. Now, do you believe—are you willing to have it said—that every man who signed the Declaration of Independence declared the negro his equal, and then was hypocrite enough to continue to hold him as a slave, in violation of what he believed to be the Divine law? And yet when you say that the Declaration of Independence includes the negro, you charge the signers of it with hypocrisy.

I say to you, frankly, that in my opinion, this Government was made by our fathers on the white basis. It was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and was intended to be administered by white men in all time to come.