DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints in Primary Source Documents

Should Wilson Have Kept Us Out of War?

Wilson hoped World War I would be a "war to end all wars." He would be badly disappointed.

Contents

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.

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):

"World War I was disastrous. Yet it would have been even more disastrous for the U.S. not to have joined with the Allies in fighting it." Do you agree or disagree? 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.

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.

Wilson and the Great War

In August of 1914, the most powerful and modern nations of Europe turned their guns on one another and marched off to war. World War I would last from 1914 to 1918. From the start, a majority of Americans took the side of democratic Great Britain and France, which along with Russia and other allies faced off against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. Yet also from the start, most Americans desperately wished to avoid any direct involvement in this war.

The U.S. at first refused to take sides in the war, but it did supply huge quantities of food, arms, and other strategic goods to Great Britain. The German government used submarines (U-boats) to sink vessels trading within a war zone around Great Britain. This put Americans traveling on ships at risk. In May 1915, a U-boat sank the *Lusitania*, with 128 Americans among the 1,198 killed. Germany soon promised not to attack neutral shipping. However, in January 1917, it resumed unrestricted submarine warfare. It was this decision above all that led President Woodrow Wilson to ask Congress for a declaration of war. He did this on April 2, 1917. A few days later the Senate voted 82-6 for war, followed by a House of Representatives vote of 373-50 for war.

World War I was a modern and fully mechanized war. With soldiers dug into trenches on the Western front in France, the war settled into a horrible frozen destructiveness. Tens or even hundreds of thousands perished in huge battles that shifted the lines only a few miles either way. World War I was also a "total war." That is, each nation's entire industrial strength had to be harnessed to the needs of war. The hearts and minds of each nation's entire population had to be enlisted in supporting the war effort.

The war came as a shock to most Americans. President Wilson took office in 1912 hoping to carry out an ambitious progressive domestic program. Before taking office he had said, "It would be an irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs." In April, 1917, that irony of fate came to pass.

Thousands of American men signed up to fight. Civilians volunteered to help out in many ways. Women took jobs in factories to produce the weapons of war. A vast increase in government control took place. A draft was set up. The War Industries Board fixed prices and controlled war-related production. The War Labor Board managed relations between workers and employers. The Committee for Public Information hired writers, artists, and film-makers to write articles, make movies, and create posters depicting the Germans as brutal enemies and urging Americans to sacrifice.

In some ways, Wilson's progressive idealism was transferred to the war effort itself. His dream of making the world safe for democracy gave Americans high hopes for what victory might mean. Perhaps that's what it took to get them to accept the sacrifices they had to make. Yet this also set them up for great disappointment when the peace settlement turned out to be as flawed as it was.

U.S. troops were a major factor in turning the tide for the Allies in 1918. On November 11, 1918, Germany signed an armistice agreement based on terms Wilson had earlier outlined as his "Fourteen Points." The final 1919 Treaty of Versailles, however, was far harsher, leaving a legacy of bitterness among the Germans.

World War I marked a key turning point of the 20th century. The rise of fascism and communism, the collapse of the European empires, World War II, and the Cold War—all followed from the wreckage of World War I and its flawed peace settlement. Today, in many ways, we still live in the shadow of "the Great War." Was the U.S. decision to take part in it wise? The sources in this booklet are meant to help you answer this question.

Wilson and the War Time Line

1914

On June 28, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife are assassinated in Sarajevo. By August, a series of mobilizations and war declarations triggers World War I. Germany invades France via Belgium. In September, the First Battle of the Marne halts the German advance. The first trenches of the Western front are dug.

1915

In January, Germany begins to use poison gas, at first against Russia. In February, Germany declares a submarine blockade of Great Britain. Any ship approaching England is considered a target. On May 7, a U-boat sinks the *Lusitania*. Americans are outraged and most of them turn against Germany strongly. Later that year, Germany announces a halt to unlimited submarine warfare.

1916

From February to December, the Battle of Verdun rages. It ends with no winner and with perhaps one million casualties. From July to November, the Battle of the Somme also produces about a million casualties. In November, Woodrow Wilson is re-elected president using the campaign slogan, "He kept us out of the war."

1917

On January 19, the British reveal a telegram sent by German Foreign Secretary Zimmermann asking Mexico to enter the war against the U.S. This further angers Americans. In February, Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare. On April 2, Wilson asks for a declaration of war. Meanwhile, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia has abdicated, and a new, more democratic government takes over there. In November, Lenin and the Bolsheviks overthrow that government and abandon the war against Germany. Meanwhile, in July, the first U.S. troops arrive in France. From July to November, the Third Battle of Ypres (also called Passchendaele) leaves the Western front little changed despite about 700,000 casualties for both sides.

1918

On January 8, Wilson announces his Fourteen Points. Germans launch major efforts to win before large numbers of U.S. troops are actually in the field. Allied forces stop the Germans by June. In August, Allied attacks on the Somme force the Germans to begin to retreat. Large-scale German desertions and mutinies begin to occur. On November 9, German Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicates. A German republic is founded, and on November 11, Germany and Allies sign an Armistice ending the war. On December 4, Wilson leaves for the Paris Peace conference.

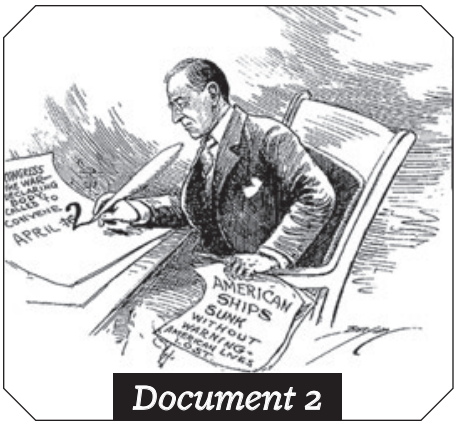
1919–1920

Millions of soldiers on all sides begin to return home. Germany is in turmoil. A civil war in Russia begins, but it will fail to overthrow the Bolsheviks. On June 28, German delegates and the Allies sign a peace treaty at Versailles, France. That fall, President Wilson campaigns for the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and its League of Nations. He collapses in September and never fully recovers. On March 19, 1920, the Senate refuses to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and U.S. membership in the League of Nations.

Visual Primary Source Documents 1 & 2

"Let her be heard!"

Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-132055.



The National Archives

Information on Documents 1 & 2

Document 1. This cartoon by Oscar Edward Cesare appeared in the *New York Evening Post* somewhere between 1915 and 1917. It shows President Wilson gesturing toward a seated woman with a sign over her head reading "Humanity." Wilson is saying "Let her be heard."

Document 2. This cartoon shows President Wilson calling Congress into special session on April 2, 1917. It was on that day that he delivered his war message to Congress in response to continued German U-boat attacks. Four days later, Congress passed the war resolution which brought the United States into the Great War.