

## What is a Document Based Question (DBQ)?

A DBQ is simply a question whose answer is to be grounded in a set of pre-selected documents. Just as we have been analyzing primary source documents in class, so you will be asked to analyze a set of documents on your own. The difference is that you will be asked to answer a particular question, or discuss a particular thesis, using the documents as evidence.

Typically, the DBQ:

- 1) contains 8-10 documents, including not only written texts, but possibly maps, paintings, advertisements, photos, charts, and cartoons. These are often arranged chronologically. Note the dates.
- 2) focuses on topics we have discussed in class.
- 3) is specific about the information required, so read the question very carefully.
- 4) presents a question that will require both close reading of the texts AND outside information from the course and secondary sources.

### Preparing for a DBQ

Begin by studying the historical context. The biggest unknown for you in doing a DBQ is how much you know about the historical context. The other ways to prepare for DBQs are to establish good skills. The first skill you need is the capacity to read primary sources and glean as much information from them as possible. Who is the speaker? What is your point of view? How does your tone suggest your biases? For whom is the quote intended? What is the author's politics? --- Prepare by practicing reading between the lines when you study primary sources in class or for homework. The next skill is essay writing. In all your written work, practice creating clear thesis statements, using coherent organization, providing topic sentences, historical support, quotes and thorough analysis. Finally, an important skill is making an argument. The best DBQs do not list or describe, but *explain*. Practice the art of making compelling arguments in debates and discussions and homework.

### Establishing an argument

The most common mistake students make when approaching a DBQ is to begin writing too soon. Read the question and instructions carefully. Some DBQs supply a statement that asks for a response; others a question and others merely ask you to recount a particular narrative from history. In all cases, you should write down a provisional response/answer/argument based on your own knowledge *before* looking at the documents. The reason for this is to remember that you are creating an original argument to explain a historical phenomenon, not stitching a set of documents together. *The thesis, not the documents, should drive the essay*. That said, you must accommodate the documents that have been provided. Therefore, after jotting down a provisional thesis, you should quickly peruse the documents and adjust your argument to use the sources effectively. Indeed, a survey of the documents may show you that you have misinterpreted the question/statement and must adjust your argument considerably. After looking at the documents, establish a thesis that addresses the statement. You may agree or disagree with the statement, in whole or in part. Whatever position you take, be sure to address the who, what, when and especially the *why* in your response. Be sure to address the counter-argument, what historians might say in opposition to your thesis.

### Planning the essay

Before you start writing, make a quick outline. A sketch outline is invaluable. The outline serves several purposes. First, an outline permits you to plan which points to support with documents, which with outside factual material and which with both. Second, an outline permits you to pace your writing in a timed situation. Third, it helps you keep track of your arguments as you write and to remember which sources and factual support you planned to apply in which sections (hopefully avoiding the "asterisk and arrow" phenomenon when you realize you have omitted an important point and must squeeze it in in the margins or on the back of the paper!). At the same time it is important to limit the time you spend on the sketch outline. You should spend no more than 2-3 minutes on an outline for a 45-50 test. The introduction should include some *brief* background to the question, definitions of terms used in the thesis, the counter-argument and thesis. Quickly check that your topic sentences for each paragraph all connect to the thesis, that you will use a sufficient number of the sources provided (at least 4) and that you will also demonstrate mastery of the historical period(s).

### Letting the argument lead

The most common mistake in writing DBQ essays is to begin paragraphs with the phrase: "In Document B." *Do not to list documents* but, rather, let your thesis drive the organization. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence that connects back to the thesis statement and advances the argument in a logical fashion. (One test you may use is the "three sentence test." There should be no mention of a specific document until at least three sentences into the paragraph). Use documents only in the service of an argument, as evidence. The goal is **not** to explain each document, but to construct a narrative that uses quotes or paraphrases from the documents as support.

## Using the documents

Some students will make a point and then say, "as can be seen in Document C," without showing the reader *how* the document supports the point. You should show exactly how the document supports or advances your argument. This is the central task of the whole DBQ process. But there are a few ways to do this. You may paraphrase the document, using your own words to distill the meaning of the author or speaker. This is particularly necessary with visual documents, such as paintings, that require verbal representation and explication. You cannot "quote" a painting, therefore, put what you think the painter intended in your own words. Paraphrasing is also appropriate when you feel you can say what the author has said more efficiently or effectively. After paraphrasing, you should still then *explain* the significance of the document and show how it relates to your own argument or story.

Another strategy is to quote from the document. This is often the most effective way to use DBQ sources, as it shows that you have read the material carefully and that the support for your argument is in the actual documents. But it is not necessary to quote the *full* document. Choose only the sections that are relevant to the argument you are making at that moment. Use ellipses(...), those three periods that denote the removal of sections of the quote, but do not change the meaning of the quotation in the process. You may also combine paraphrasing and direct quotation, condensing more turgid sections but pulling out pithy quotes for effect.

Finally, it is crucial that you establish a system for citation. The most effective system I have found is to introduce the quote or paraphrase by identifying the author and title, i.e.:

In his now famous 'Long Telegram,' of 1946 (Document G), diplomat and Soviet expert George Kennan argues that...

Placing this information (author, author's position, title, date and document letter) in the text is the most fluid and professional manner to cite in a DBQ, but there are many strategies for including such information. If the flow of the paragraph requires it, another approach is:

George Kennan argues that "At bottom of Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity" (Document G, George Kennan, The Long Telegram, 1946).

There are several ways of including such information. As long as the document letter, author, author's position, document title and date are included, and you are consistent, the form of the citation is not critically important.

## Using Historical Information

Using historical support is as important as using the documents provided. You are expected to bring factual context to the DBQ essay from your own experience. Dates, names, definitions, secondary source interpretations, ideas from class discussion--- all are necessary to place the documents in a historical and conceptual context. It is important for you to demonstrate your mastery of the actual history. This context, along with your own analysis, is what permits the documents to speak to the DBQ question or statement.

## Good Essay Form

The DBQ essay is first and foremost an *essay*. As such, it must follow the rules for essays.

Here are some other tips you might find useful:

## SUMMARY: TIPS FOR STUDENTS

- 1.) Use a black pen (or type if it is a take home).
- 2.) Remember that you have time to plan, so don't panic.
- 3.) Read the question and note the time period. Do not include information unless it fits chronologically or is directly relevant to events during the period.
- 4.) List all the information about the time period that you can recall--events, names, terms, etc.
- 5.) Write a thesis sentence on top of a scratch sheet of paper. Make sure that it directly answers the DBQ question or responds to the DBQ statement.
- 6.) Now look at the documents and try to decide how you will use them to support your thesis. If your thesis does not accommodate the documents provided then adjust your thesis accordingly. Think about why a teacher might have included each document.
- 7.) Outline your essay, remembering good essay form and topic sentences.
- 8.) Each document does different things, so try to use a variety of documents.
- 9.) Analyze the documents. Why are they significant? What do they show? Do not quote extensively from them, but do include short quotes when appropriate.
- 10.) Link brief descriptions to the names you use. For example: Alexander Stephens, a Whig senator from Georgia, noted in the Southern Literary Journal (document C) that. .
- 11.) Coverage of the documents is important, but the inclusion of outside information is critical. Strive for balance, because only a balanced essay will receive the highest scores
- 12.) A possible approach: Write an introductory paragraph setting the scene and demonstrating that you have some outside knowledge. Then state your thesis clearly and directly, before moving on to support it with a nice balance of specific information from both the documents and outside sources. Conclude with a brief restatement of your thesis and a discussion of the significance of your answer for later history.

### DBQ Dos & Don'ts

Do the following things with a DBQ	Don't do the following things with a DBQ
Read carefully and make sure you understand the question being asked.	Respond to a question that isn't asked.
Quickly jot down the major themes/events/people you associate with this topic or question.	Use "I" statements such as "I think that Document A portrays..."
Read over the documents, noting the year and author/source of each one. If the document seems to support or oppose a possible perspective or opinion on the question, note that in the margin.	Summarize the documents. The reader knows the content of the documents and is interested in how you view the document relating to the question.
Write out a preliminary thesis and outline of your major points.	Quote long passages from the documents. Use an ellipsis "..." if you need to quote.
As you begin to write, remember to weave the documents into your answer, always focusing on the thesis.	Try to impress the reader with big words that are used incorrectly. This has the opposite effect of what is intended.
Include your knowledge of the era along with your analysis of the documents.	Spend so much time reading and underlining the documents that you have to rush your writing.
Be sure to include your own analysis/perspective on the question.	Begin writing your answer until you have a good sense of your thesis and how you want to approach the question.
If you can knowledgeably quote or refer to an historian who has a perspective on this question, include his or her perspective.	Write "I ran out of time" on the bottom of your essay. You had as much time as every test-taker in America.
Keep an eye on the clock so that you can have time to re-read your essay for any obvious technical errors.	
Be as specific as possible when you include historical information.	
Be assertive and forceful in making your points.	