

Documents are the building blocks of historical scholarship. Analysis of documents is the starting place for all historians. Documents are evidence; their study must be mastered. History comes alive when you read a diary. You begin to understand that historical characters are human beings with human weaknesses. The struggle of a pioneer woman leaps out from this terse diary notation: “Got up a five, cut wood, cooked breakfast, cleaned stove, nine o'clock, delivered my son.” In its finest moments, history erases the years separating the experiences of human beings.

The observations of eyewitnesses to an event are termed primary sources. Primary sources do not have to be original. A copy of the Declaration of Independence is a primary source because it exists in the same wording as the original. Writing based on the study of primary sources is a secondary source. A historian investigating the evolution of municipal government (1650-1825) reads various collections of laws for the colonies and early states. On the basis of his reading of primary sources he writes an interpretation explaining how municipal government changed from being mostly interested in promoting trade to being primarily interested in providing municipal services such as police protection, sewer drainage, clean water and fire protection. The resulting book, The Municipal Revolution in America: 1650-1825, by John Teaford, is a secondary source.

Beyond the secondary source is the third level source. You are familiar with this example, a textbook. No author can read all the primary and secondary sources in American History. A historian tries to absorb as much history as possible while writing a textbook. Any textbook is by its very nature inadequate in terms of absolute correctness of all factual information. It requires time to update interpretations as new information becomes available. The advantage of this source is that it gives you a general idea of the topic you are interested in. Secondary sources give specific information. Primary sources give you the opportunity to analyze and synthesize the data for yourself.

Working with documents is exciting, provided you maintain a dash of skepticism. You must be prepared to test the credibility and authenticity of the document. Be prepared to look beyond the obvious. The first test of authenticity is to test the date of the document. The type of paper (photocopy of Declaration of Independence), literary style, corroboration of from other sources. How did the document come to be located where it is now? Documents have pedigrees, and now we have computer analysis to determine authenticity. The second test asks whether the document's author was in a position to observe. Was he knowledgeable? Biased? Does the contention match other statements made by the author. (Hitler and Jews). This is tricky as fifty campaign speeches might not mean as much as a private letter (if authentic). Some examples; newspapers (who do they write about?), a typical restored early 1800 home (why was this one restored?) Ideology (politically correct) plays a role. (propaganda vs. patriotic films).

Types of Documents

Documents and physical evidence surround us. Your personal history appears in family photos, report cards, a stuffed animal and school play program, notes to classroom friends. Society's documents range from official documents to physical remains. At a local public archive, a depository of public records, the variety of official records is astonishing: church records, court records, census records, cabinet meetings, voting records, city records, state records, police records, hospital records, legislative records, city council minutes, government surveys, governments publications, local maps, various collections of private papers.

The Document Based Question

The required Document Based Question (DBQ) differs from the standard essay in its emphasis on the candidate's ability to analyze and synthesize historical data and assess verbal, quantitative or pictorial materials as historical evidence. Like the standard essay however, the DBQ will also be judged on its thesis and argument. An essay question based on documents is a special type of essay question. It requires you to answer using document based evidence and your knowledge of the time period or the events alluded to in the question. For example, one question might involve comparing four accounts of the Battle of Lexington by four different generations (It also might have as its documents, four paintings by different generations). How and why are the accounts different?

Although confined to no single format, the DBQ that was introduced in the 1982 examination differs from those given during the preceding ten years. Significantly fewer documents are presented and greater emphasis is placed on outside knowledge. This latter format has persisted through 1993, and thus the present DBQ Format demands additional information and understanding beyond the actual documents. As in the past, the documents are unlikely to be familiar classes such as The Emancipation Proclamation or The Declaration of Independence, but their authors may be major historical figures. The documents will vary in length and will be chosen to illustrate interactions and complexities within the material. The material will include (where the question is suitable) charts, graphs, cartoons and pictures, as well as written materials. In addition to calling upon a broader spectrum of historical skills, the diversity of materials will allow students to assess the value of different sorts of documents.

Scores earned on the multiple choice and free response sections will each account for one half of the candidate's total examination grade. Within the free response section, each of the two essays written will be weighted equally. The DBQ will typically require students to relate the documents to a historical period or theme, and thus to focus on major periods and issues. For this reason, outside knowledge is substantially more important than it was in DBQs offered before 1982 and must be incorporated into the students essay.
if the highest scores are to be earned. It should be noted that the emphasis of the DBQ will remain on analysis and synthesis, not historical narrative.

Steps in answering DBQs

1. Read the question carefully. Know what the question is asking. You must be able to put the given information into a larger historical context. The College Board expects students to bring outside information into the essays. Using the documents alone will not result in a high score. One teacher suggests that you make notes on the question without first reading the documents.

2. Read the documents carefully but rapidly. Do not get bogged down in a document, get an overview and the information that pertains to the question. Take brief notes to reflect how the document contributes to your answer (thesis).

3. Use the document to draw conclusions. Underline key words and phrases that give you exactly what the question asks for. Everything you write should point toward these words or phrases. AP Readers are looking for application of the data, not summaries or paraphrases. Do not quote long passages from a document. Anything longer than ten words should be summarized in your own words.

4. Use 10-15 minutes to organize the data into the form the question is asking (e.g. compare and contrast). You will probably want to make a brief outline of your essay at this point.

5. After organizing the data develop Thesis Statement (who, what, when, where) for your essay. Your thesis is your interpretation and may be unique and original. A good thesis must involve both the topic and an attitude toward the topic. Use most of the documents in supporting your thesis.

6. Your DBQ response should be about five paragraphs. Be sure you define the terms (e.g. a liberal is...) and always deal with the issues in the question in the same sequence that the question does. Use as many facts as you can to illustrate your interpretation. The extensive and specific material you study for the multiple-choice preparation should be of help here, and of course you would use the documents. Remember that your essay should always focus on the proof of your thesis. Do not wander off course. We have all had to listen to someone who never comes to the point of a story. Focus on what your evidence proves. This will show your ability to understand and interpret historical data, not just spew out facts.

7. Organize your conclusion, perhaps restating your thesis in different words. Be sure the conclusion goes beyond a mere summary to a statement of importance. Say with confidence that you are correct in the ways you see things.

8. Budget your time and write as neatly as you can. Neatness is an intangible, but new research shows that it counts more than we previously had thought.

How to Analyze Documents

I. Visuals
   A. Pictures and Photographs
      (1) Subject; What person, event or subject is represented? (2) Time and Place; when and where is subject taking place? (3) Point of View; is artist/photographer trying to present his viewpoint? (4) Emotional Impact; what is the general impression? (5) Form of Expression; what kind of image is it? (6) Is there Symbolism?
   B. Cartoon
      (1) Who are the characters? Realistic or exaggerated? Note expressions. (2) What symbols are employed? (Uncle Sam, the flag, justice) (3) What is the overall impression of the cartoon? (4) Note title of cartoon.
   C. Poster
      (1) Publisher? For what reason? (2) Title (3) Intended for what audience? (4) Purpose of the poster or evidence.
   D. Diagrams and Flowcharts
      (1) Used to summarize an important idea and to illustrate the idea's parts (2) Check Title (3) Examine the parts (4) Labels.
   E. Maps
      (1) Maps deal with a specific time period (2) a map focuses on a specific time period, event or development, often a change over time illustration (e.g. Compromise of 1850) (3) place the subject in a specific location (4) check title (%0 check key or legend (5) remember the difference between geographic maps and electoral result maps.
   F. Charts
      (1) Usually illustrate a relationship between two subjects (e.g. time & voting, age & prohibition leadership) and this relationship increases or decreases. (2) Check title and category title (3) are numbers percentages or absolutes. the numbers are used, either absolute or per cent, to convey an idea. (4) Be careful of large numbers that are abbreviated in say thousands 62= 62,000 (5) Were the changes illustrated significant? (is a 10% increase or decrease significant?) (6) Remember the possible influence of major events on a time period (e.g. World War I on 1914-1920) (7) remember the chart illustrates a trend only for a specific time period (8) be aware of a chart with a collapsed X or Y axis (1770-75, 1784-92). It is intended to indicate that a specific time period was left out of the chart.
   G. Graphs
      (1) read the key (2) notice the title (3) look for dates (4) graphs use statistical data to present historical comparisons or changes over time (5) Pie Graph; each circle represents the total quantity (100%) Portions represent a percentage.(6) Bar Graph One usually represents a percentage or quantity and the other a time period (7) Line Graph; read both axis. Unlike a bar graph, which shows a subject at a specific time, a line graph can show trends over every part of a time period, and can show several trends at once.
II Printed Materials
A Newspapers
(1) Editorial or article? You should be aware that before the 20th Century it was hard to distinguish (2) Interview (3) Newspapers political or economic bias (urban, south?) (4) letter to the editor (4) may reflect mass opinion, or be an attempt to influence mass opinion.
B Magazine or pamphlet
(1) same check as newspaper (2) what is the magazine's audience?
C Book
(1) Is it contemporary? Eyewitness or second hand account? (2) disinterested observer or politically partisan? (3) Evidence or opinion? (4) Preface is a personal statement (5) novels can be symbolic (6) recollection of event, long after it happened? (7) Memoirs, views that are select and personal and rarely self critical.
D Poem
(1) usually use language as art rather than to give opinion (2) usually a spiritual or symbolic view of period, event or idea.

III Personal Documents
A Speech
(1) to what audience (2) rough draft? (3) official speech or informal (4) campaign speech (5) from what you know of the speaker, is this the view you would expect him to take?
B Letter
(1) official or personal? (2) to subordinate or superior (3) what is the relationship between the two people? (4) public or private (5) from an organization (6) is the date significant?
C Diary
(1) personal (2) after or before the fact? (3) diary not usually self critical

IV Political Document
A Party Platform (1) candidate may not Agree (2) often a compromise document (3) a convention declaration, such as Seneca Falls may describe present conditions, or show the organization's goals and expectations.

V Public Records
A Laws, proclamations, executive orders
(1) why was the law passed? (2) symbolic, or really expected to be enforced? (3) federal, state or local?
B Court Decision
(1) does it declare a law unconstitutional
(2) create new problems
(3) does the law represent the views of a particular group, section, party or class?
(4) was the decision enforced or obeyed?
(5) narrow or broad interpretation of the constitution?
(6) note the vote (5-4?)
(7) trial transcript.
C Legislative Debate, Congressional Record, Congressional Testimony
(1) was this for colleagues or constituents
(2) any other evidence of influence of the speaker among his peers
(3) person known for other activities
(4) what point of view does the person testifying have?
D Government Agency Report
(1) federal, state or local? (2) how does it reflect the general tone of government at the time? (3) agency reports are rarely critical of themselves (4) a report may be intended to lay a basis for future expansion in scope, powers or increased funding.
E Other Documents
(1) Diplomatic correspondence (2) official letters (3) Treaties.

Here is what I give my kids -- it comes in part from many of you!

How to answer a Document Based Question
1. Read the question carefully.
2. Note that you will ALWAYS be asked to "use the documents AND your knowledge of the time period" (meaning any knowledge NOT contained in the documents) to answer the question.
3. Before you read the documents, write out any facts that you think will be pertinent. This will give you a basis for the outside information that you will need in the answer.

4. Now that you have some outside information, begin to read the documents. Make notes on the documents as you read them, mentally thinking how you could organize your answer and about the viewpoint that you wish to take. Do NOT under ANY circumstances simply discuss each document in order (for example, "document A says this, document B says this . . ."). This is called a "laundry list" and will ALWAYS receive a low grade.

5. Group the documents logically by topic AND category of proof.

6. Begin writing your answer. As with any good essay, your introduction should set your essay in time and place, present a thesis, and provide your reader with a sense of what general categories of proof you will use (aka a "partition").

7. Be sure to pull information from the documents and your bank of outside information. The only indication you need to give for when you use information from a document is to write the letter in parentheses -- (Doc A). It is better to mention the author or source of the document, rather than say, "Document A proves . . ." Quote very sparingly from the documents, pulling key words or phrases rather than writing out full sentences or lengthy passages.

8. The BEST answers are those that are ANALYTICAL, that use the information to prove or disprove a point. Remember the concept of a REFUTATION - the writing technique of acknowledging that there are other points of view besides your own, but that your point of view is nevertheless the best. Longer essays are usually, but not always, better. Good writing and perceptive observations (drawing conclusions from the documents) are the goals to attain.

**DBO Do's and Don'ts**

1. **Do** Stress the thesis.
   *Identify aspects of the argument you will present*
   
   **Don't** Avoid a position of 100% agreement or disagreement with the statement in the question.

2. **Do** Bracket the documents where used in paper. (Doc. A)
   **Don’t** State in your paper....."Document A says".

3. **Do** Combine documents wherever possible and appropriate.
   **Don't** List the documents in the same order they are presented in the question.

4. **Do** Paraphrase, restate and analyze the documents.
   Combine document information with outside data.
   **Don't** Quote the documents without comment????

5. **Do** Acknowledge points that disagree with your thesis, but try to minimize (negate) their importance in some way.
   **Don't** Ignore points that are opposite your position.

6. **Do** Use as many documents as possible.
Don't Ignore outside source material. (One vital piece of information is always intentionally excluded from the documents)

7. Do Make a list of outside material. [elephant in closet]
Don't Read the documents before you make this list.
* helps to identify the missing piece of data (#6).