

Document-Based Questioning— Promoting Analytical and Critical Reasoning Skills

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

What Are DBQs?	1
High-Yield DBQ Strategies (I)	2
High-Yield Strategies (II)	3
Quick Tips for DBQ Tasks	3
Ideas for Self-Reflection	4



What Are Document-Based Questions (DBQs)?

A Message from Terri H. Mozingo, CAO

Part of our commitment in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction is to ensure that all students benefit from strategies that promote analytical and critical reasoning skills. This 7th edition of “Tips for Teachers” explores “Document-Based Questioning.” A DBQ requires students to create an essay in response to a historical or literary text, analyzing some historical issue, theme, or trend with the aid of the documents as evidence. Using DBQs involve:

➤ *Helping Students to Move Effectively Through a DBQ Process.*

Students create a strong thesis and support it in an essay with the aid of the documents provided.

➤ *Supporting Students’ Critical Response to Text.*

An essential part of the DBQ process is an emphasis upon students’ critical judgment and interpretation of text, including analyzing sources for characteristics such as author’s purpose, audience, and context.



➤ *Modeling and Coaching Students in Comparative Text Analysis.*

Typically, a DBQ assignment asks students to make connections across two or more texts (or text excerpts). It is essential that they find areas in which texts agree (comparison) and ways in which they disagree (contrast). For example, how do two authors agree and/or disagree in their perspective, assertions, point of view, and/or claims and assertions?

➤ *Revisit the Importance of Evidence to Support a DBQ Essay Thesis.*

Students engaged in DBQ essay development should understand that a thesis is the controlling idea they are presenting and defending throughout their composition. It should represent a claim or assertion that unifies

the overall essay (i.e., all topic sentences and related evidence should help to defend it).

Students also need to understand the types of evidence they can use to defend and support their thesis, including reasons, examples, illustrations, statistics, facts, anecdotes, direct and indirect quotes, and other forms of supporting detail.

➤ *Help Students to Understand the Scoring Criteria Used to Evaluate Their DBQ Responses.*

DBQ rubrics typically have four categories: (1) **Argumentation** (with a Clear and Effective Thesis); (2) **Document Analysis**; (3) **Use of Outside Evidence**; and (4) **Synthesis**: explaining broader historical events, developments, or processes immediately relevant to the question.

“The dreaded DBQ or “document-based question” is an essay question type on the AP History exams (AP US History, AP European History, and AP World History). For a DBQ essay, you will be asked to analyze some historical issue or trend with the aid of the provided sources, or “documents” as evidence. The DBQ is an unfamiliar type of in-class essay for many students, but it does not need to be a source of dread or panic.”

*Ellen
McCammon,
January 28, 2016,
AP Prep Scholar*

High-Yield Strategies for DBQs

Helping Students Understand the Importance of Document-Based Questions and Essays (Part I):

Although document-based questions and essay writing can appear intimidating to students when they first encounter them, there is enormous value in reinforcing higher-level questions, comparative text analysis, and timed essays (reinforcing the value of the thesis statement, coherent organization, a range of evidence, and analysis/critique of authors' perspectives, values, and ideologies). Here are high-yield strategies useful for students at all grade levels:

- **Revisit with Students the Value and Significance of Primary Source Documents and Artifacts (Realia):** Primary source materials provide a lively, relevant, and engaging window to the past. According to experts at the Library of Congress, such documents represent “unfiltered access to the record of artistic, social, scientific, and political thought and achievement during specific periods under study, produced by people who lived during that period.”
- **Make Analytical and Critical Reasoning Skills a Key Part of Students' Vocabulary and Repertoire:** Many state standards—including Virginia SOLs—support teaching and learning using primary sources. Part of using these documents and realia as a part of students' cognitive processing of information and skills is the need to reinforce key academic vocabulary. Analytical reasoning, for example, requires that students break down materials and resources into their key component parts—and interpret and explain how those parts form a whole (e.g., a key theme, overall presentation, insight into the human condition). Similarly, critical reasoning involves students' making and defending judgments: *To what extent is this argument valid? How effectively has this author supported his or her thesis, claims, and assertions? Is their evidence valid and reliable?*
- **Reinforcing Knowledge as a “Constructed Act”:** Students benefit from understanding that document-based questions and related essays are catalysts for them to construct knowledge. Their response to these documents should be active and engaged, moving from concrete observations and facts to questioning and making inferences about the meaning of the materials studied. The learner should continually examine and assess authors' bias, purpose(s), and points of view—especially similarities and differences expressed in identified texts.
- **DBQs as Opportunities for Metacognition and Self-Reflection:** Successful responses to DBQs and related essay development require students to monitor their own comprehension and their changing perspectives as they compare texts or artifacts (i.e., metacognition). Students should wrestle with contradictions and compare multiple sources representing competing points of view. They should be coached to base their conclusions on text-based evidence as well as prior knowledge. Self-awareness also grows when students engage in the act of comparison, including synthesizing information from multiple sources.



Helping Students Understand the Importance of Document-Based Questions and Essays (Part II):

- **Use Critical Thinking Questions as Students Interact with Primary Sources:** The instructor should work closely with students to draw on their prior knowledge of a topic. They should also ask students to closely observe each source: *Who created it? When was it created? Where does your eye go first? What do you see that you didn't expect? What feelings and ideas does the text or artifact trigger in you?* As students engage in these types of text-and artifact-based questions, encourage them to begin to formulate possible thesis statements that can be the basis for their DBQ essay response.
- **Engage Students in the Process of Inquiry and Investigation:** Encourage students to speculate about each source, its creator, and its context. Expanding their focus beyond the text itself, ask them to consider such questions as the following: *What was happening during the time period when the text or artifact was created? How do you interpret the creator's purpose in generating this product? How does the author get his or her point across? What was the primary source's intended audience? To what extent does the creator address the background, beliefs, and needs of the audience? To what extent can you discern biases or stereotypes in the work?* Always ask students to test their assumptions about the past and use comparative text analysis to offer support for ideas—and counter-claims to negate ideas with which they disagree.
- **Build in Formative Assessment Tasks:** As students respond to DBQ assignments, monitor how they are applying critical thinking and analysis skills to the assigned primary sources. Periodically, ask students to paraphrase what they are reading and summarize their evolving perceptions, claims, and assertions. Encourage them to share their thesis statements, including asking for reasons and specific evidence to support their conclusions. Also, ask students to identify questions for further investigation and develop strategies for how they might answer them.



“Thesis and argument development requires the student to present a historically defensible claim that responds to all parts of the question. Students must illustrate relationships among historical evidence such as contradiction, corroboration, and/or qualification. They must use all of the documents presented and explain the significance of the author’s point of view, purpose, historical context, and/or audience. They must situate the argument by explaining the broader historical events, developments, or processes immediately relevant to the question. Finally, they must explain the connection to different historical periods, situations, eras, or geographical areas—not just present a phrase or reference.”

The AP Prep Scholar



QUICK TIPS FOR DOCUMENT-BASED ASSIGNMENTS

1. Use **hook assignments** at the beginning of a DBQ assignment (e.g., engaging students in the question[s] they will answer, clarifying vocabulary, and activating prior knowledge).
2. Provide **scaffolding questions** to guide students to key facts and concepts in each document.
3. Encourage students to use **visual organizers** such as document analysis sheets (highlighting key elements of the assignment and text responses).
4. Ensure that DBQ assignments **culminate in a written essay** of argumentation or analysis.
5. Reinforce the concept of **“bucketing,”** categorizing and classifying documents thematically and then writing the document letter and key facts from each document in the appropriate category.
6. Ensure that students understand the **scoring rubrics and related evaluation criteria** for which they are responsible.
7. Use peer response groups and coaching sessions to provide feedback about students’ thesis, organization, and use of evidence.

Department of Curriculum
and Instruction
1340 Braddock Place
4th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22314



**Every Student
Succeeds...**



Recommendations for Teacher Self-Reflection

1. **Model for Students the Key Elements of a Document-Based Question:** Share with students examples (available via the Advanced Placement website) of DBQs and related scoring rubrics. Ask them to reflect upon prior experiences they have had with similar assignments, including considering strategies and best practices for timed writing experiences.
2. **Emphasize the Importance of Reading the Question Carefully:** Help students to understand the importance of “unpacking” DBQ essay assignments. Stress that they need to know what is being asked of them before completing the task.
3. **Revisit the Purpose and Importance of the Thesis Statement:** Ensure that students fully comprehend the importance of the thesis statement as they respond to a DBQ. Remind them that great essays support and defend with evidence a claim or assertion that is revisited as the controlling idea of the response.
4. **Help Students Practice and Apply Strategies Identified by the College Board for DBQ success:** For many students, a DBQ experience may be first encountered in an Advanced Placement course. However, even elementary students can benefit from such practices as the following:
 - **Taking notes** on the texts included in the DBQ: What do they mean? Who is writing? How do the texts reflect historical and cultural patterns?
 - Formulating the **thesis before writing**, ensuring that the essay response has a clear and focused direction. Ideally, the student will form the initial thesis while taking notes on the texts themselves.
 - Making certain that all **documents are addressed** (i.e., ensuring that they receive balanced and equal treatment over the course of the essay).
 - Avoiding **mechanical summary or regurgitation**, using the documents to make a point and integrating them into a coherent support of the thesis.
 - Making and supporting **meaningful connections** among the documents presented in the DBQ: Who agrees? Who disagrees? Why?
 - Providing **context** throughout the DBQ response, including outside examples and connections to other periods, areas, and historical themes.

How frequently do you use these “document-based questioning” strategies in your classroom?

