



FOR TEACHERS:

Minding their DBQs

Tips for helping your students master Document-Based Questions



What's a DBQ?

DBQ stands for Document-Based Question. DBQs are a key component of Regents social studies exams and other tests from elementary through high school. DBQs measure students' knowledge, their intellectual habits, and whether they can apply those skills to new information.

A high-school level DBQ typically has two parts. Part A has students examine six to eight documents on a particular theme and answer questions about each document. Known as "scaffolded" questions, they are designed to build a foundation for a response to the essay question that follows in Part B, where students must incorporate documents and outside knowledge into their response.

In one sample DBQ on the United States becoming a more industrialized society, documents included a chart on the impact of industrialization from 1870-1910, quotations from Samuel Gompers and Jane Addams, and a political cartoon on Andrew Carnegie. After answering one or two scaffolded questions for each document, students had to write an essay discussing the advantages and disadvantages of industrialization to American society between 1865 and 1920 and how industrialization affected different groups.

Document-Based Questions may be the state's newest challenge for students, but DBQs are really nothing new. When you show students an illustration and ask them, "What's going on in this picture?" you're asking for a scaffolded response - a big part of the DBQ process.

Following are some suggestions to help students do their best on DBQs.

Elementary school and beyond

- The best way to understand the DBQ process is to create your own practice questions. Don't rely on commercially prepared DBQs.
- Charts, graphs and maps are commonly used documents. Work with them often so students will know how to extract needed information.
- Social studies textbooks and workbooks are good sources of short quotes, charts, political cartoons and maps.

- The Pledge of Allegiance, and parts of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights can be employed as documents.
- Use symbols of the United States - the flag, the eagle, the White House - to get young students answering scaffolded questions.
- Have students individually "brainstorm" the topic, writing down as many facts as they can recall. If they do this before reading the documents, it can help them integrate their own knowledge with info drawn from the documents.
- Once you've given your first practice DBQ, have the class develop a list of what's easy and what's hard about doing DBQs. Discuss their errors and brainstorm suggestions for improvement.
- Give students a thesis statement to defend just with specific examples from their readings or textbook.
- Introduce DBQ terminology - document, scaffolded response, supporting evidence, thesis statements, etc. - early in the year and use it at every opportunity.
- Have students underline or circle the tasks they are being asked to perform in the essay question, such as compare and contrast, discuss, identify, illustrate, explain and evaluate.
- Suggest that students use as many documents as possible - at least one more than half the number provided - and specifically refer to documents they use in writing DBQ essays.
- Have students create a graphic organizer. They should reference it to be sure their essays are well structured and incorporate all needed documents and outside information.
- Give students a DBQ assignment to develop a graphic organizer without writing the essay, just to emphasize this new skill.

Middle school and beyond

- In DBQ essays, avoid "absolute" words and phrases, such as always, never, every or all.
- Encourage the use of transitional words and phrases, such as however, still and furthermore.
- Good essays don't refer to the writer, the reader or the paper itself.
- Make sure students remember the introduction and conclusion. When rushed, they tend to leave out conclusions.
- During practices, give struggling students a chance to earn extra credit, perhaps by having them submit a chart or graphic organizer based on the DBQ they were asked to answer.



- Before a practice essay, have students circle or underline the "must-haves" in every document-based essay: the document references, the student's own knowledge, and the thesis, which should be part of every paragraph.
- Web sites at the National Archives (nara.gov/education), the Library of Congress (lcweb.loc.gov) and the National Council for the Social Studies (ncss.org) are resources for documents.

State tests

Although DBQs are showing up on tests from math to English, the most intensive use of Document-Based Questions and essays occurs on the state's social studies tests.

Beginning in June 2000 with the Global History and Geography Regents Exam and followed a year later by the Intermediate Social Studies test for grade 8 and the U.S. History and Government Regents Exam, DBQs have become a major test component.

The Elementary Social Studies test for students in grade 5, scheduled to be given in November 2001, also will test students on DBQs.

For more information

- New York State United Teachers' Web site contains "how to" articles from New York Teacher on the new tests and DBQs. [www.nysut.org]
- The NYSUT Social Studies Committee is developing a DBQ workshop which will include information on creating and scoring DBQs. Watch NYSUT's Web site for more details.
- The State Education Department's Web site provides samples and strategies for helping students with DBQs. Log on to www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/social.html.
- NYSUT's [Effective Teaching Program](#) offers several courses that can help teachers prepare students to deal with DBQs. Call (800) 528-6208 or (518) 459-5400.
- Many DBQ-related sites can be accessed through www.tier.net/oestrich/DBQs.htm.



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