

## DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints  
in Primary Source Documents

# Why Reconstruction Failed

*By 1876, the nation's first attempt to bring the South back into the nation and ensure full equality for all African Americans was over—it did not succeed.*



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# 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.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *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):**

Most historians agree that Reconstruction was a failure.  
Why do you think it failed?

- 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.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *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.

## *Why Reconstruction Failed*

In 1864 and 1865, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman seized Atlanta and then swept through Georgia and the Carolinas. In his famous scorched-earth march, he destroyed everything in his path that might have aided the South in a last-ditch effort to save the dying Confederacy.

Perhaps it took total defeat and destruction to force the South to accept the reality that its independence and slave-labor system were at an end. Would an equally harsh approach convince Southerners to accept black freedom and full citizenship for the freed slaves?

Lincoln thought not. He hoped to ease the South back into the Union gently. However, Lincoln was killed on April 14, 1865. His successor, Andrew Johnson, was both weak and hot-headed. He was also a Southerner whom Northern antislavery lawmakers mistrusted. These “Radical Republicans” in Congress soon began to ride roughshod over Johnson, even impeaching him in order to remove him from office. They failed to do that, but they didn’t really need to. They had the two-thirds majorities in Congress required to override any presidential veto.

As a result, Congress soon imposed harsh military rule on the South. It did so partly to enforce black equality. By 1866, it was clear the South was not going to grant this equality willingly. Southern state “Black Codes” set up new limits on the ability of former slaves to travel, change jobs, and exercise other ordinary rights. Also, the Ku Klux Klan and other secret groups had begun using terror tactics to keep blacks from voting or exercising other citizenship rights.

To counter this, Republicans won control of Southern state governments largely with the votes of African Americans—and with the protection of the army. The Fourteenth Amendment (ratified in 1868) said that no state could deny any person

“life, liberty, or property, without due process of law” or “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of its laws.” The Fifteenth Amendment (ratified in 1870) guaranteed blacks the right to vote.

Many idealistic Northerners went South to work for the Freedmen’s Bureau, which created schools for former slaves. Yet concern for the fate of the former slaves was not the only motive behind Reconstruction. Many Republicans also used black voters to ensure their party’s political dominance. Corruption in these governments and in the Freedmen’s Bureau was widespread, as it was across the nation. As corruption scandals in the Grant administration (1869–1877) grew, many Northerners tired of Reconstruction and came to distrust the idealism used to justify it. In the South, military rule only seemed to add to white racist contempt for black voters and legislators.

The North pulled the last troops out of the South in 1877, after which Southern white “Redeemer” governments soon put an end to black political participation. Lacking property and schooling, the former slaves often had to accept tenant and sharecropping arrangements that did little to help them move ahead. Soon, the full range of “Jim Crow” segregation laws would limit their rights and confine them to decades of second-class citizenship.

Reconstruction ended in failure. Yet it is not clear how much success was possible even under the best conditions. Could Southern attitudes have been altered quickly given the context of defeat and resentment? Did blacks simply need decades of freedom to create churches, businesses, black colleges, and political organizations to fight effectively for full equality? Perhaps the sources for this lesson will help you answer these questions.



# Reconstruction Time Line

**1865**

• • •

The Civil War ends. Lincoln is assassinated. Congress establishes the Freedmen's Bureau to aid the freed slaves. President Andrew Johnson offers a mild Reconstruction plan. The Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery is ratified. The first Black Codes are enacted. That winter, the Ku Klux Klan is founded in Tennessee.

**1866**

• • •

A Civil Rights Act is passed despite Johnson's earlier veto. The Fourteenth Amendment is approved by Congress. Memphis and New Orleans race riots stir anger in the North.

**1867**

• • •

Three Reconstruction acts are passed over Johnson's veto. Congress divides the former Confederacy into five military districts and requires elections in which African American men can vote.

**1868**

• • •

In President Johnson's impeachment trial, the Senate fails by one vote to remove him from office. The Fourteenth Amendment is ratified. It says all persons born or naturalized in the United States are citizens entitled to equal protection of the laws. In November, Republican candidate Ulysses S. Grant is elected president.

**1869**

• • •

Tennessee becomes the first state to replace a bi-racial Republican state government with an all-white Democratic government. It is followed in 1870 by Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia.

**1870**

• • •

Hiram Revels is elected as the first black U. S. Senator. The Fifteenth Amendment is ratified, giving the vote to all male citizens regardless of color or previous condition of servitude. Joseph H. Rainey is the first black sworn in as a member of the U. S. House of Representatives.

**1871**

• • •

The 42nd Congress includes five black House members.

**1872**

• • •

The Freedmen's Bureau is abolished. The Credit Mobilier/Union Pacific Railroad scandal involving government officials fuels rising discontent with the Grant administration.

**1873**

• • •

The "Panic of 1873" is followed by economic hard times, adding to frustration with and disinterest in Reconstruction.

**1874**

• • •

Blanche K. Bruce is elected to the Senate. Robert Smalls, a black Civil War hero, is elected to Congress as a representative of South Carolina.

**1875**

• • •

Congress passes the 1875 Civil Rights Act. It grants blacks equal treatment in public places and transportation. The Supreme Court later overrules most of it in its 1883 Civil Rights Cases decision.

**1876-1877**

• • •

After a disputed election, Rutherford B. Hayes is inaugurated President. The last federal troops leave South Carolina. Reconstruction ends as all-white "Redeemer" governments take power throughout the South.

## DOCUMENT 1

# Visual Primary Source Document 1



*To the Polls* by T. W. Wood. By permission of T. W. Wood Gallery, Vermont College, Montpelier

### *Information on Document 1*

This watercolor by artist T. W. Wood shows citizens waiting at a polling place to vote in the elections of 1866. Four different types of Americans are shown—a well-off businessman, an Irish-American worker, a Dutch coach driver, and a black American, who is probably voting for the first time.

Thomas Waterman Wood was a native of Vermont who was settling into permanent residence in New York City when he painted this scene. It captures the mood of African Americans at a key point in their passage from slavery to freedom.