

Ben Franklin: A New American Identity?

*Talented, many-sided, seemingly humble,
yet full of pride and ambition: Who was this model
citizen of the new nation?*

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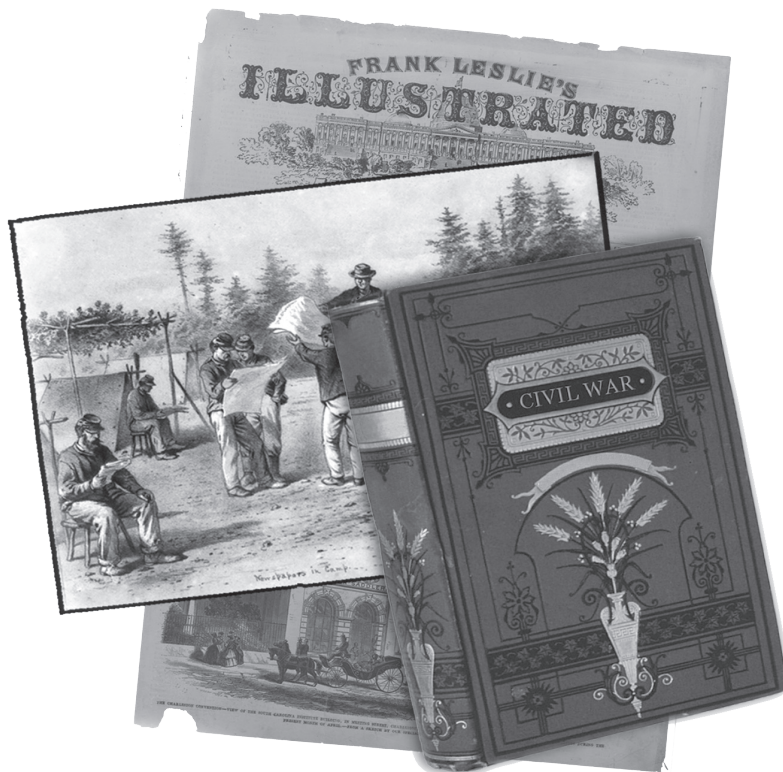
Teacher Introduction

★ 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 2005 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

★ *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.
- **CD-ROM.** The ImageXaminer lets students view the primary sources as a class, in small groups, or individually. A folder containing all of the student handouts in pdf format, including a graphic organizer for use with the ImageXaminer's grid tool, allows for printing directly from the CD.
- **One DBQ.** On page 22, 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*

All pages in this booklet may be photocopied for classroom use.

1. Have students read “Suggestions for the Student” and the Introductory Essay.

Give them copies of pages 7–9. 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 with the ImageXaminer. You may also ask them to use its magnifying tools to more clearly focus their analysis.

3. “Debate the documents” as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Use the overheads to focus this discussion on each source in turn. 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 22 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 22):

In what ways did Franklin come to be seen as the ideal of a new American personality? Should he be seen this way? Why or why not?

- 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.

★ *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 things 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. The DBQ is on page 22.

• Franklin: America's First Citizen? •

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston in 1706. He learned the printing trade from his brother, and began writing newspaper articles at age 12. At 17, he decided to take charge of his own life. He ran away to Philadelphia where he opened a print shop. At 23 he bought his own newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. He married and began to raise a family.

Leaving home, seeking his own way in life, working hard, and striving for success. In these ways, Franklin was already living out what many see as the typical American success story. It's just one of many reasons Franklin is often called "The First American."

When Franklin was born, most people in the British colonies of North America saw themselves as British subjects who were also members of a particular colony or town. That is, they were Virginians, or citizens of Maryland, or Bostonians. Yet during Franklin's life, these colonists united against British rule and won their independence in the American Revolution. In 1787, they wrote a new constitution creating a powerful federal government. They became one nation. And as they did so, most of them came to think of themselves as "Americans."

But what did it mean to be an American? Some historians say the story of Franklin's life answers that question. Let's take a look at a few of the details of that life.

Franklin became one of the most famous people of his age. He was a self-educated man who carried out scientific experiments, on electricity, for example. He also invented useful devices such as bifocals or the Franklin stove. He was the sort of practical problem-solver that Americans have always admired. Franklin's practical attitude showed up in other ways as well. He was a model active citizen working to make his local community better through volunteer effort. He helped set up a militia and a volunteer fire company

for Philadelphia. He organized America's first hospital and first subscription library. He helped found Pennsylvania's first university.

His writing also took a practical form. In 1732, he began to publish the yearly editions of his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, full of helpful advice for ordinary citizens. His autobiography was used in schools for many years as a way to give students good advice about making their own way in the world.

Franklin's career as a statesman helped guide Americans through the colonial years and into their first years as a new nation. He helped write the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution of 1787. However, his main role was as a diplomat overseas. In the 1750s, he began many years of representing the colonies in England. During the American Revolution, he was in Paris winning French military aid for the American side. He later helped negotiate the peace treaty ending that war.

The French came to admire Franklin greatly. Ordinary people loved his plain manner. Educated aristocrats saw him as the perfect ideal of the Enlightenment—a thoughtful man, tolerant of religious differences, who used reason to achieve greatness in many fields. Franklin played on this image and used it to win French support for his country. In doing so, he was also typical of something very American; he was a celebrity, some would even say a great self-promoter.

Do Franklin's character and life story help to define what it means to be an American? The documents here will help you debate this question. And they will help you learn more about one of the nation's most fascinating founders.

Ben Franklin Time Line

1706

• • • Franklin is born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 17.

1723–30

• • • In 1723, he runs away to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1728, he opens a print shop there. The next year, he becomes the owner of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. In 1730, he marries Deborah Read Rogers.

1731–37

• • • In 1731, Franklin joins a local Freemasons lodge. He founds the first lending library. The next year, 1732, he begins to publish his annual editions of *Poor Richard's Almanack*. In 1736, he sets up the Union Fire Company in Philadelphia (later he founds the first American fire-insurance company). In 1737, he is chosen to be postmaster of Philadelphia.

1746–52

• • • He carries out his electrical experiments. He performs his famous kite experiment in 1752.

1754

• • • Franklin introduces a plan of colonial union at the Albany Congress.

1757–62

• • • He is in London as a representative of the Pennsylvania Assembly.

1760s–70s

• • • Off and on, he is in London and France, representing various colonies.

1775–6

• • • Franklin returns to Philadelphia and is elected to the Continental Congress. The next year, he signs the Declaration of Independence. He then goes to France as an American Commissioner.

1778

• • • He helps arrange and then signs a treaty of alliance with France.

1783–85

• • • With John Adams and John Jay, he works out the details of the peace treaty with Great Britain. This ends the American Revolution. In 1784, he invents bifocals. He returns to Philadelphia the next year.

1787

• • • Franklin serves as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

1789

• • • He is elected president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

1790

• • • At age 84, Benjamin Franklin dies in Philadelphia on April 17.

Visual Primary Source Document 1



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC4-3576.

Information on Document 1

This portrait of Franklin was painted by artist David Martin in 1766. It shows Franklin seated at a table reading documents. The spectacles Franklin wears may be meant to call attention to his own invention of bifocals, eyeglasses that enabled the wearer to see both near

and far. Franklin is depicted in this portrait as a thoughtful man of science. As if to add to this point, the artist shows Franklin facing a bust of Isaac Newton, who was probably still the most famous scientist of all in Franklin's age.

Visual Primary Source Document 2



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-45334.

Information on Document 2

This 1782 illustration is one of many portraits of Franklin all based on an original by French artist Joseph Siffred Duplessis in 1778. All the portraits show Franklin in a similar style. And all include the Latin word “Vir,” which is Latin for “man.”

These portraits were created by French artists while Franklin was in Paris working to win the French government’s support for the colonies in the American Revolution. This print shows Franklin as a plain man with a fur coat and open

collar, and without a wig or anything else marking someone as a person of high status or importance.

The portrait is inside an oval draped with foliage, and it rests on a pedestal with books, a map, eagles, storm clouds, and lightning. The word “VIR” carved into the base seems to mean “man” in general. Or as we might say, “Humanity.” It presents Franklin as an ideal of some sort—a figure representing the very best of humanity.

Study the Document: Visual Source 1

Instructions: Take notes on these questions. Use your notes to discuss the documents and answer the DBQ.

1 Main Idea or Topic

Write a brief paragraph explaining what you think Franklin is doing in this scene. Describe what you imagine his mood to be and about what he might be thinking.

2 Visual Features

What features in this painting add to the overall view it gives you of Franklin's personality? Notice such things as dress, hand gestures, facial expressions, other objects in the scene, use of color and shading, etc. How do these help create an idea of what Franklin was like and of his importance as a historical figure?

3 Background Information

List three key facts about Franklin or his times that help you understand why the artist painted Franklin this way. For example, what do you know about Isaac Newton? Why do you think the artist included a bust of Newton in his painting? What do historians mean by the "Enlightenment"? Could the Enlightenment have anything to do with the way the artist depicted Franklin here?

Study the Document: Visual Source 2

Instructions: Take notes on these questions. Use your notes to discuss the documents and answer the DBQ.

1 Main Idea or Topic

Write a brief paragraph as a caption to go with this portrait. Sum up the portrait's view of Franklin.

2 Visual Features

What features in this painting add to the overall view it gives you of Franklin's personality? Notice such things as dress, facial expressions, other objects in the scene, etc. How do these help create an idea of what Franklin was like and of his historical importance?

3 Background Information

Franklin was in Paris during the American Revolution. Why? During those years, French artists created many portraits of Franklin similar to this one. From what you know about France then, can you explain why Franklin was so popular there at that time?

4 Bias

How does this view of Franklin differ from the one in Document 1? In what ways are the two views similar?

Comparing the Documents

★ *The Visual Sources*

Answer the question by checking one box below. Then complete the statements on the Comparison Essay worksheet. Use all your notes to help you take part in an all-class debate about these documents—and to answer the final DBQ for the lesson.

Which of these two primary source documents would be most useful to a historian trying to understand Franklin and the way he was seen by Americans and others during his times?



Document 1 ☐



Document 2 ☐

Comparison Essay

I chose Document _____ because:

I did not choose Document _____.

However, a historian still might use the document in the following way:

KEEP THIS IN MIND: Some sources are very biased. A biased source is one that shows you only one side of an issue. That is, it takes a clear stand or expresses a very strong opinion about something. A biased source may be one-sided, but it can still help you to understand its time period. For example, a biased editorial cartoon may show how people felt about an issue at the time. The usefulness of a source depends most of all on what questions you ask about that time in the past.

Written Primary Source Document 1

Information on Document 1

John Adams worked with Franklin in Paris during the American Revolution. He was able to see for himself the way the French came to admire Franklin as a kind of hero. Adams was far less outgoing than Franklin and far less at ease with others. He viewed Franklin's willingness to become a popular figure as a sign of pride and vanity. Here, Adams describes in his diary a conversation about Franklin he had on May 10, 1779, with Hezekiah Ford. Ford was an Anglican clergyman from Virginia who was in Paris at the time.

• Document 1 •

Ford. "I came to France with the highest opinion of Dr. Franklin as a philosopher, a statesman and as even the *Pater Patriae* [father of his country]. But I assure you *Tempora mutantur* [times change].

"He has very moderate abilities: He knows nothing of philosophy, but his few experiments in electricity: He is an atheist, he doesn't believe any future state: Yet he is terribly afraid of dying."

This is Ford's opinion. This is his character of the great man.

I believe it is too much to say that he is an atheist, and that he doesn't believe a future state: tho I am not certain his hints, and squibs sometimes go so far as to raise suspicions:—and he never tells any body, I fancy that he believes a God, a Purgatory or future state. It is too

rank to say that he understands nothing of philosophy, but his own electrical experiments, altho I don't think him so deeply read in philosophy, as his name imputes.

He has a passion for reputation and fame, as strong as you can imagine, and his time and thoughts are chiefly employed to obtain it, and to set tongues and pens male and female, to celebrating him. Painters, statuaries, sculptors, China potters, and all are set to work for this end. He has the most affectionate and insinuating way of charming the woman or the man that he fixes on. It is the most silly and ridiculous way imaginable, in the sight of an American, but it succeeds, to admiration, fullsome and sickish as it is, in Europe.

Written Primary Source Document 2

Information on Document 2

The first of these passages is from Franklin's famous autobiography. In it, he describes his attitude toward religion. The second passage contains parts of a speech Franklin gave to the Constitutional Convention of 1787. That convention had just finished work on what would become the U.S. Constitution. Franklin explains his decision to sign it despite the fact that he disliked some parts of it.

• Document 2 •

Part A

I had been religiously educated as a Presbyterian; and tho' some of the dogmas of that persuasion ... appeared to me unintelligible, others doubtful, and I early absented myself from the public assemblies of the sect, Sunday being my studying day, I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and governed it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteemed the essentials of every religion; and, being to be found in all the religions we had in our country, I respected them all, tho' with different degrees of respect, as I found them more or less mixed with other articles, which, without any tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality, served principally to divide us, and make us unfriendly to one another. This respect to all, with an opinion that the worst had some good effects, induced me to avoid all discourse that might tend to lessen the good opinion another might have of his own religion; and as our province increased in people, and new places of worship were continually wanted, and generally erected by voluntary contributions, my mite for such purpose, whatever might be the sect, was never refused.

Part B

I CONFESS that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present; but, sir, I am not sure I shall never approve of it, for, having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged, by better information or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that, the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment of others. Most men, indeed, as well as most sects in religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them, it is so far error ...

I doubt, too, whether any other convention we can obtain may be able to make a better Constitution; for, when you assemble a number of men, to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. From such an assembly can a perfect production be expected? ...

On the whole, sir, I can not help expressing a wish that every member of the convention who may still have objections to it, would, with me, on this occasion, doubt a little of his own infallibility, and, to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument.

Study the Document: Written Source 1

Instructions: Take notes on these questions. Use your notes to discuss the documents and answer the DBQ.

1 Main Idea or Topic _____

In a single paragraph, sum up in your own words all of the things Adams disliked about Franklin.

2 Author, Audience, Purpose _____

What do you know about John Adams?
Why do you suppose he felt as he did about Franklin?

3 Bias _____

Choose three sentences in this document that most clearly express Adams's bias, or point of view. Can you find a sentence that is a factual statement about Franklin, without any bias at all? If so, write it down here. Do you think Adams was at all fair in criticizing Franklin as he does here? Why or why not?

4 Usefulness _____

Could this diary entry from Adams be useful to a historian despite its very strong bias? Why or why not?

Study the Document: Written Source 2

Instructions: Take notes on these questions. Use your notes to discuss the documents and answer the DBQ.

1 Main Idea or Topic—A

Look over the first of the two passages in Document 2. In your own words, explain the main concern Franklin seems to have about religion in the American colonies.

2 Main Idea or Topic—B

Look over the second of the two passages in Document 2. In it, Franklin says he supports the Constitution even though he thinks it has flaws. In your own words, explain why he feels this way.

3 Background Information

Why do you think Franklin worried about religion as he does in the first passage in Document 2? List two or three key facts about religion in the colonies that might help you explain his worries.

4 Bias

Do the two passages in Document 2 have anything in common? That is, do they express an overall view about society and how best to live in it? Explain your answer.

Comparing the Documents

★ *The Written Sources*

Answer the question by checking one box below. Then complete the statements on the Comparison Essay worksheet. Use all your notes to help you take part in an all-class debate about these documents—and to answer the final DBQ for the lesson.

Which of these two primary source documents would be most useful to a historian trying to understand Franklin and the way he was seen by Americans and others during his times?

John Adams, in his diary, describes a conversation about Franklin he had on May 10, 1779, with Hezekiah Ford.

Document 1 ☐

A passage from Franklin's famous autobiography, and a second passage from a speech Franklin gave to the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

Document 2 ☐

Comparison Essay

I chose Document _____ because:

I did not choose Document _____.

However, a historian still might use the document in the following way:

KEEP THIS IN MIND: Some sources are very biased. A biased source is one that shows you only one side of an issue. That is, it takes a clear stand or expresses a very strong opinion about something. A biased source may be one-sided, but it can still help you to understand its time period. For example, a biased editorial cartoon may show how people felt about an issue at the time. The usefulness of a source depends most of all on what questions you ask about that time in the past.

Document-Based Question

Your task is to answer a document-based question (DBQ) on Ben Franklin and his role and image in the early American republic. In a DBQ, you use your analysis of primary source documents and your knowledge of history to write a brief essay answering the question. Using all four sets of documents, answer this question.

Document-Based Question

In what ways did Franklin come to be seen as the ideal of a new American personality? Should he be seen this way? Why or why not?

Below is a checklist of key suggestions for writing a DBQ essay. Next to each item, jot down a few notes to guide you in writing the DBQ. Use extra sheets to write a four- or five-paragraph essay.

- *Introductory Paragraph*

Does the paragraph clarify the DBQ itself? Does it present a clear thesis, or overall answer, to that DBQ?

- *The Internal Paragraphs — 1*

Are these paragraphs organized around main points with details supporting those main ideas? Do all these main ideas support the thesis in the introductory paragraph?

- *The Internal Paragraphs — 2*

Are all of your main ideas and key points linked in a logical way? That is, does each idea follow clearly from those that went before? Does it add something new and helpful in clarifying your thesis?

- *Use of Primary Source Documents*

Are they simply mentioned in a “laundry list” fashion? Or are they used thoughtfully to support main ideas and the thesis?

- *Concluding Paragraph*

Does it restate the DBQ and thesis in a way that sums up the main ideas without repeating old information or going into new details?