



Historical Society
of Pennsylvania

Document Based Question (DBQ)

Development Guide

The Bank of America's "Preserving American Freedom" project includes fifty of the treasured documents within the vast catalog of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Through the "Preserving American Freedom" project all of these documents are digitized with transcriptions and annotations, as well as with other user friendly elements that will help both teachers and students create their own Document-Based-Question (DBQ). The DBQ is an instrumental component to all Advanced Placement history courses (U.S, European, and World). A DBQ measures a student's ability to analyze, synthesize, and compose an essay based on a series of edited documents and their historical knowledge. The creation of a DBQ challenges either the teacher or student formulating the DBQ to take on the roll of the historian and pose big questions that will be answered using the documents selected. Within the "Preserving American Freedom" project, HSP provides two DBQs and a clear guide to the creating your own original DBQ based on the documents.

The two DBQs accompanying this guide serve primarily as assignments and templates for creating your own DBQ. Teachers may edit the provided DBQs to meet curriculum needs or the requirements of their individual courses. The Abolitionist DBQ is generated from a specific section, "Negotiating Freedom in the New Republic," using only the documents in this section pertaining to the Abolitionist Movement (leaving out two documents on different subjects). The Declaration of Independence DBQ examines the concept of equality throughout our history. The second DBQ illustrates how multiple sections of "Preserving American Freedom" can be used to select specific documents addressing the concept of equality from 1776 to 1968.

The "Preserving American Freedom" project is divided into seven topical sections covering various aspects of freedom, obtained and denied, in the United States from 1655-1978. Documents are arranged chronologically in each section and can easily serve as a companion piece to any textbook. Also, each section includes a contextual essay written by an eminent historian that may also serve as a developmental tool to provide the needed outside knowledge required in a successful DBQ. The goal of HSP is to allow all students and teachers the ability to succeed with primary sources.

DBQ Construction

- Determine what period, theme, or concept of United States History you would like to explore in creating your own original DBQ.

For example, the concept of equality can be used to illustrate knowledge gained over a semester or the abolitionist theme may be tailored to a certain chapter in the textbook.

- Determine the focus of the DBQ you wish to create. DBQ's do not have to be limited to advance placement or honor courses. DBQ's can reinforce similarities (compare), differences (contrasting), change and continuity (trace), and a variety of other learning tasks.
- Select the specific section or sections of the "Preserving American Freedom" project that best address the period, theme, or concept you have decided upon.

For example, the concept of equality will use multiple documents from most sections and the abolitionist theme will concentrate on section three, "Negotiating Freedom in the New Republic."

- Develop the question for your DBQ. A good question will challenge the students to combine their knowledge of the documents and outside sources in their essay.

Concentrate on the words used when developing a question. Refer to your state's [department of education standards](#), [Bloom's Taxonomy](#), or your department chair / supervisor – if needed.

- Determine how many documents will be used in creating an original DBQ, most teachers recommend between 6-9 documents in a DBQ.

For example, the concept of equality incorporates nine documents from sections two through seven and the abolitionist theme uses seven documents all from section three.

- Thoroughly read all the documents selected in order to edit the significant segments of each document to be used in the DBQ. The document segments selected should be relevant to the question and reinforce the material covered in the course. When editing also keep in mind time restrictions, students should complete the entire DBQ in approximately a class period or hour.

Please refer to the provided DBQ samples and compare them with the original documents within “Preserving American Freedom.”

- In constructing your own DBQ, use the two HSP provided DBQ’s as templates. Make sure to include your directions, clarifying expectations, and the question at the top of the page. Below the question, list the edited documents (include the document title, author, year – as the source) in a logical order that will help the student best answer the question. You may consider labeling each document by a sequence of letters.