

Document-Based Question

OVERVIEW

An important skill for students to learn in history courses is how to use information provided in different types of documents to support an argument. Oftentimes this skill is tested in the form of a document-based essay question. In this activity students will learn to interpret documents and use them to support an argument.

PLANNING

Time Suggested

Two 45-minute class periods

Materials

Document-Based Question Handout

OBJECTIVE

- Students will learn to use evidence from a variety of documents to support an argument.
- Students will learn to use context information to draw conclusions from historical documents.
- Students will learn to write a document-based, analytical essay.

PROCEDURE

1. Start by reminding students of the process for analyzing documents. Refer back to the lesson from the chapter on the Expanding West for details.
2. Review with the class the steps for answering a document-based essay question from the *Learn the Skill* section. Remind students that they must develop an argument on which to base their essay. Review each document with the class. Check to see that students understand the point of each document. Then have students group the documents into categories. Encourage students to use these categories as the basis of their argument.
3. Students may want to simply summarize each document. Remind them that this is not the point of a document-based essay. They must use the documents as evidence for their argument. For example: *Many Americans suffered greatly during the Great Depression. A letter sent to Mrs. Roosevelt states that up to 5,000 people suffered through freezing temperatures with little food.*
4. Have students write a thesis statement and plan their essay. Provide feedback on their ideas. For homework, have students complete their essay.

ENRICHMENT

Have students exchange completed essays and critique an essay other than their own. Ask students to identify the thesis statement, supporting details, and use of documents in that essay. Then have students provide suggestions for what the author could do to improve his or her paper.

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LEARN THE SKILL

Occasionally you will be asked to answer an essay question using a variety of documents as evidence. Now that you know how to analyze documents, this should be an easy task. Document-based essay questions ask that you examine several short documents and use evidence from those documents, as well as your own knowledge, to answer an essay question. Follow the tips below to answer a document-based essay question:

- Read and understand the question and the historical background.
- Analyze each document provided.
- Develop an argument using the documents and your knowledge of the topic. Write a strong thesis statement based on your argument.
- Plan your essay. Use an outline or other method to plan exactly what documents you will use to prove each of your points.
- Write your essay. Remember to refer to the document in your essay.

APPLY THE SKILL

DIRECTIONS Follow the steps for answering a document-based essay question to help you answer the question below.

Historical Background *The stock market crash of 1929 began a period of economic crisis for the United States. The Great Depression, as it is known, lasted from about 1929 to 1939, and all Americans felt its effects.*

How did the Great Depression affect Americans?

Document 1 from *Hard Times* by Studs Terkel, 1970. Film critic Pauline Kael describes life during the Great Depression.

When I attended Berkeley in 1936, so many of the kids had actually lost their fathers. They had wandered off in disgrace because they couldn't support their families . . . Families had totally broken down. Each father took it as his personal failure.

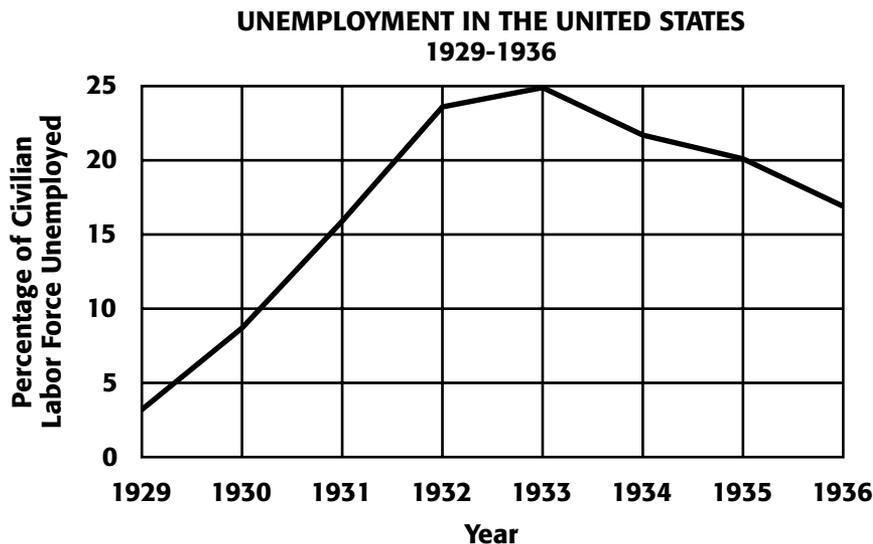
Document 2 from a 1933 letter to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt from Bottineau County, North Dakota.

Last winter the temperature went down to 40 below zero and stayed there ten days, while a 60-mile wind howled across the plains. And entering that kind of winter we have between 4,000 and 5,000 human beings . . . without clothing or bedding, getting just enough food to keep them from starving.

Document 3 from James T. Patterson's *America in the Twentieth Century: A History*, published in 1976.

Despite hard times, some small business people in the tourist trade—motel owners, used car dealers, gas station operators—made profits during the decade. So did other people well placed in “luxury” and leisure trade occupations—cosmetics manufacturers, movie theater and race track owners, cocktail bar managers, major league baseball players.

Document 4 from *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Bureau of the Census



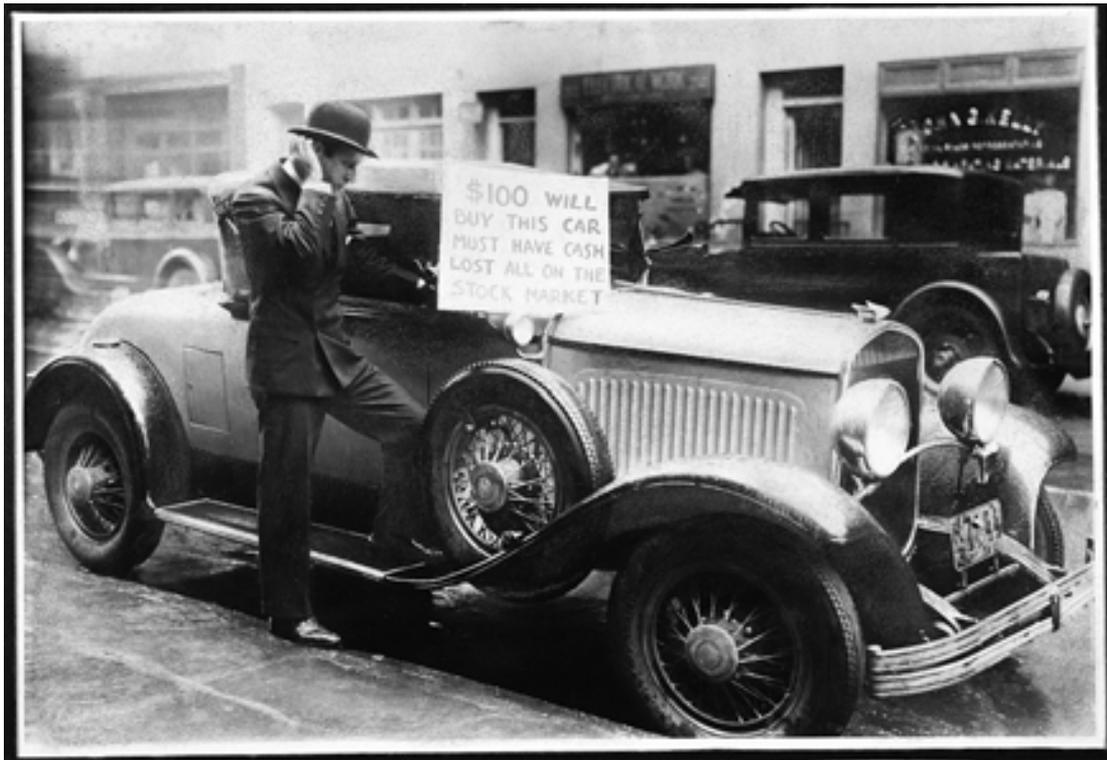
Document 5 from “No Men Wanted,” by Karl Monroe, published in *The Nation*, August 6, 1930.

Finally, I stood in the bread line in Twenty-fifth Street . . . To my surprise, I found in the line all types of men—the majority being skilled craftsmen unable to find work. One of them told me he had been a civil engineer and had earned \$8,000 a year.

Document 6 from James T. Patterson's *America in the Twentieth Century: A History*, published in 1976.

The search for jobs led countless Americans to leave home . . . A Missouri Pacific official told the Senate two years later that the number of transients illegally riding trains had risen from 13,700 in 1928 to 186,000 in 1931. Hundreds of thousands rode on other railways, hitch-hiked, or gathered their families into an old truck or car and took off.

Document 7 Bankrupt investor Walter Thornton tries to sell his luxury roadster on the streets of New York City, 1929.



Document 8 American social historian Frederick Lewis Allen describes the effects of the Great Depression in his book, *Since Yesterday*, published in 1940.

Among the comparatively well-to-do people of the country (those, let us say, whose pre-depression incomes had been over \$5,000 a year) the great majority were living on a reduced scale . . . These people were discharging servants, or cutting servants' wages to a minimum . . .