

Document Based Questions

The Document Based Question (DBQ) is a key component of the New York State Social Studies Elementary (Grade 5) and Intermediate (Grade 8) Assessment. This DBQ format tests the students' knowledge, intellect, and ability to apply skills in a new and challenging way.

The typical DBQ has two major parts. The first part asks students study six to eight primary documents on a particular theme and answer questions about each document. These scaffolding questions are designed to activate prior knowledge and construct a foundation for the student's response to the essay question that will follow in the second part of the DBQ.

In the Test Sampler distributed to elementary schools in March 2000, the DBQ centered on a small town in New York whose local post office was in jeopardy of closing. As part of the DBQ's scaffolding process, in Part A students were given a series of 8 documents to study. The content of the documents ranged from pictures of the post office in question, to editorials written by local residents, to post office improvement project flyers, to meeting notices. At the conclusion of Part A students were given two writing prompts and ample space to create "Notes" prior to moving on to Part B. Part B, the Essay section, asked students to use the ideas listed in Part A (Notes) to write an essay about the people of this small town. Students were reminded to include in their essay how the people felt about their post office, and to cite three examples of what people did together as a community, or separately as citizens, to help their post office.

Although this process is new to the New York assessments at the elementary and intermediate levels, this type of analysis should already be part of our instructional repertoire. For example, when you preview a story and have students study the illustrations and ask, "What's going on in this picture?" you're on your way to providing them with the basics of the scaffolding process.

The following suggestions to help students do their best on DBQ's are taken from the NYS United Teachers website

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.

Hopefully, you're now on your way to confidently prepare your students to meet with the highest level of success when faced with the latest Document Based Question format.