

# Teaching Challenging Topics with Primary Sources

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The most common activity in a social studies classroom should be the analysis of primary sources. Students are intrigued and engaged by edited and unedited documents, written statements, transcribed speeches, photographs, pictures, charts, graphs, cartoons, and even material objects.

In recent years there has been a big push in a number of states for document-based assessment, but I prefer to talk about document-based instruction. Document-based instruction gives students the opportunity to assume the roles of historians, social scientists, and citizens as they draw their own conclusions. Without document-based instruction, it makes little sense to emphasize document-based assessment.

Ideally, our goal as social studies teachers is to prepare students to “read” historical documents in their original or unedited form. The best means of achieving this goal is to encourage students to develop their skills by working with material that matches their level of interest and performance abilities. It is wonderful for students to be able to pick up a document and analyze it on their own, but until they develop this ability, it is important to provide them with questions that guide them and help them discover key information and patterns. In selecting appropriate documents, I recommend focusing on issues that actually engage students. This makes them keen to read the text because they are concerned about what is happening in the world and in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, the official position

of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has been that social studies teachers should “face up to controversy and ... assume the special responsibility to teach students how to think.”<sup>2</sup> In a position statement on academic freedom issued in 2007, the NCSS called for the study of controversial issues “in a spirit of critical inquiry” that exposes “students to a variety of ideas, even if they are different from their own.”<sup>3</sup>

I agree with the NCSS concern about educating a probing, critical citizenry, and I believe that this requires social studies teachers to emphasize, not just introduce, controversial, contemporary, and historical issues in the curriculum. Recognizing and discussing controversies offers students a much more accurate picture of human societies and history than they can obtain from textbooks. It makes students uncomfortable with pat answers and their own preconceptions, and it stimulates them to delve for deeper meaning, to reconsider their own ideas, and to buttress their conclusions with supporting evidence. Last, but not least, a thematic focus on a controversial issue makes social studies learning a lot more exciting.

In this article, I will recommend excerpts from documents that are relevant to three challenging topics: same-sex relationships, a historic dispute about human nature and its implications for government, and the implications of an “originalist,” textual interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. The excerpts are brief, which allows for focused, in-depth class instruction. The documents can be used (depending on the document), in World History, U.S. History, or Government classes. They can also be valuable for classes that focus on important and controversial issues.

## 1. Same-Sex Relationships

One document-based activity sheet focuses on a description of the Sacred Band of Thebes by Plutarch. The Sacred Band was organized by Gorgidas, the commander of the army of the Greek city-state of Thebes in 378 BC. It was an elite squad made up of 150 male couples. In 375 BC and 371 BC the Sacred Band defeated much larger Spartan armies. Philip of Macedonia defeated the Sacred Band in 338 BC at the Battle of Chaeronea where all of its members were killed.

In *Life of Pelopidas*, Plutarch (46-120 AD), an early Greek and Roman historian, wrote about the Sacred Band of Thebes.<sup>4</sup>

### Sacred Band of Thebes

“Gorgidas first formed the Sacred Band of three hundred

chosen men to be guards for the citadel. It was composed of young men attached to each other by personal affection. For men of the same tribe or family little value one another when dangers press; but a band cemented by friendship grounded upon love is never to be broken, and invincible; since the lovers, ashamed to be base in sight of their beloved, and the beloved before their lovers, willingly rush into danger for the relief of one another. Nor can that be wondered at since they have more regard for their absent lovers than for others present; as in the instance of the man who, when his enemy was going to kill him, earnestly requested him to run him through the breast, that his lover might not blush to see him wounded in the back. It is stated that it was never beaten till the battle at Chaeronea: and when Philip, after the fight, took a view of the slain, and came to the place where the three hundred that fought his phalanx lay dead together, he wondered, and understanding that it was the band of lovers, he shed tears and said, 'Perish any man who suspects that these men either did or suffered anything that was base.'"<sup>5</sup>

After reading this passage students discuss the following topics:

1. Why does Philip of Macedonia believe the Sacred Band of Thebes, although defeated, should be honored?
2. Does the Sacred Band of Thebes and the existence of same-sex relationships belong in the history textbooks and curriculum?
3. Students' own attitudes toward same-sex relationships and whether all people should be guaranteed equal rights and dignity.

To follow up on the discussion, give the students the following assignment: *You have been invited to be student representatives on your state's world history curriculum committee. According to the agenda for the first meeting you will attend, there will be a discussion over whether same-sex relationships in Ancient Greece should be discussed in the Global History curriculum in high schools. The media and public have already been debating the issue and it will probably be a very heated meeting. To prepare you for the meeting, examine the edited excerpt from the writings of Plato and Plutarch. Answer the question: Should the high school Global History curriculum include discussion of the importance of same-sex male relationships in ancient Greece?*

## 2. What Form of Government Fits Human Nature?

A document-based format I recommend for all social studies classes is "Face-Off," which presents students with alternative perspectives argued over in the past as if the advocates for the conflicting positions actually met in debate. I model this on Oxford Union debates.<sup>6</sup> In 1860, the debate held at the Oxford University Museum, pitted Thomas Huxley against Anglican Bishop Samuel Wilberforce on the legitimacy of Darwin's theory of natural selection and human evolution.<sup>7</sup> The face-off format is also used by a number of states as the essay on their teacher certification content specialty test in social studies.<sup>8</sup>

In world history, students can join John Locke and Thomas Hobbes in a debate over human nature. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is best remembered for *The Leviathan* (1651), where he advised rulers that force must be deployed to control human passions. To restrain the unruly and aggressive nature of human beings, Hobbes favored the exercise of absolute power by a sovereign ruler or government.

In contrast, John Locke (1632-1704) provided an important philosophical counter-weight to Hobbesian authoritari-

anism. He argued that laws must be based on reason and tolerance and he championed the natural rights of all people. His view was that human beings were reasonable by nature and eager to safeguard their lives, liberty and property, which meant that they would support a form of government that guaranteed these rights. *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) is considered both a major expression of the English Glorious Revolution of 1689 that expanded the power of Parliament at the expense of the monarch, and as an intellectual precursor of the American Declaration of Independence.

Students can examine the following excerpts from the thought of Hobbes and Locke.



Thomas Hobbes (By John Michael Wright, 1617-1694.  
Source: National Portrait Gallery, London.  
Courtesy Wikimedia Commons)

**Thomas Hobbes:** "It is not wisdom but Authority that makes a law.... I put for the general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceases only in death.... During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that conditions called war; and such a war, as if of every man, against every man.... The laws of nature ... without the terror of some power to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions."<sup>9</sup>



John Locke (By John Greenhill, died 1676. Source: National Portrait Gallery, London. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons)

**John Locke:** “Liberty is to be free from restraint and violence from others.... Good and evil, reward and punishment, are the only motives to a rational creature: these are the spur and reins whereby all mankind are set on work, and guided.... Man ... hath by nature a power ... to preserve his property—that is, his life, liberty, and estate—against the injuries and attempts of other men.... The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom.... All mankind ... being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions.”<sup>10</sup>

After reading these excerpts from the writings of Hobbes and Locke, students should answer the following questions, working individually.

1. According to Hobbes, what force drives humans?
2. How is this force to be controlled?
3. According to Locke, what is the most important human value?
4. How will this value be preserved?

Working in teams, students should then compare and contrast their views by answering the following summary questions:

1. What topics do Hobbes and Locke discuss?
2. How are the ideas of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke similar and different?

To follow up, students can write a 300-word essay in answer to the question: Would you rather live in a world governed by the ideas of Thomas Hobbes or John Locke? Explain.

### 3. “Originalist” Interpretations of the Constitution

Legal scholars, jurists, political leaders, and the American public have been debating how to interpret the U.S. Constitution since it was drafted in 1787. The Federalist and anti-Federalist papers published during the New York State ratification convention in 1788 and Supreme Court decisions since then have continually added new meaning to the words, phrases, and clauses in the document that defines the operation of the U.S. government and the rights of its citizens. In the 1850s, debate over the meaning of the Constitution became so contentious that the Federal Union dissolved into Civil War.

A continuous debate over the Constitution has centered on whether its interpretation should be strictly “originalist” and text-based, or whether it should be interpreted in the context of contemporary events and beliefs. Students can connect the past to the present by examining two periods when this debate has been of special interest and importance: the antebellum period, and the latter part of the twentieth century. The right documents can introduce students to the question: what does an “originalist” interpretation of the Constitution really mean?

In U.S. history classes, students can join William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass in a debate over whether the Constitution was a pro-slavery document. On July 4, 1854, Garrison burned a copy of the Constitution and dismissed it as a “covenant with death” and “an agreement

with Hell.” He refused to participate in the electoral process or work with any group that accepted the constitutionality of slavery anywhere in the United States. Frederick Douglass was originally a Garrisonian, but during the 1850s came to believe that the Constitution, because it did not actually endorse slavery, provided a possibility for opposing it.

Students should read the following excerpts that represent the differing views of Garrison and Douglass.

### *Is the U.S. Constitution a Pro-Slavery Document?*

*William Lloyd Garrison, “The Great Crisis!” (1832):* “There is much declamation about the sacredness of the compact which was formed between the free and slave states, on the adoption of the Constitution.... We pronounce it the most bloody and heaven-daring arrangement ever made by men for the continuance and protection of a system of the most atrocious villainy ever exhibited on earth.... It was a compact formed at the sacrifice of the bodies and souls of millions of our race, for the sake of achieving a political object—an unblushing and monstrous coalition to do evil that good might come. Such a compact was, in the nature of things and according to the law of God, null and void from the beginning. No body of men ever had the right to guarantee the holding of human beings in bondage.... If the Union can be preserved by treading upon the necks, spilling the blood, and destroying the souls of millions of your race, we say it is not worth a price like this, and that it is in the highest degree criminal for you to continue the present compact. Let the pillars thereof fall—let the superstructure crumble into dust—if it must be upheld by robbery and oppression.”<sup>11</sup>

*Frederick Douglass, Speech, Glasgow, Scotland (1860):* “I ... deny that the Constitution guarantees the right to hold property in man, and believe that the way to abolish slavery in America is to vote such men into power as well use their powers for the abolition of

slavery.... The intentions of those who framed the Constitution, be they good or bad, for slavery or against slavery, are so respected so far, and so far only, as we find those intentions plainly stated in the Constitution.... Where would be the advantage of a written Constitution, if, instead of seeking its meaning in its words, we had to seek them in the secret intentions of individuals who may have had something to do with writing the paper? ... The constitutionality of slavery can be made out only by disregarding the plain and common-sense reading of the Constitution itself.... I would act for the abolition of slavery through the Government—not over its ruins. If slaveholders have ruled the American Government for the last fifty years, let the anti-slavery men rule the nation for the next fifty years. If the South has made the Constitution bend to the purposes of slavery, let the North now make that instrument bend to the cause of freedom and justice.”<sup>12</sup>

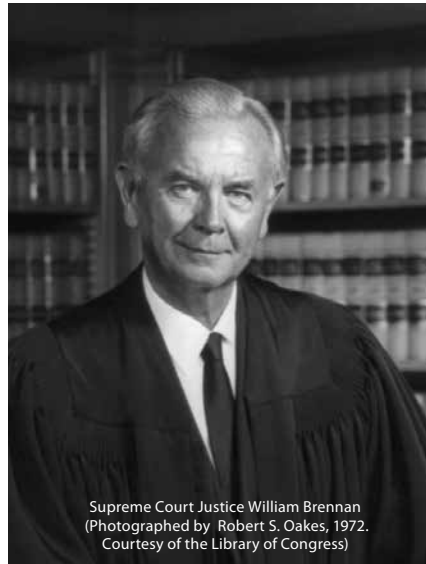
Teachers can conduct discussions based on the following questions:

1. Why does Garrison believe the U.S. Constitution is a pro-slavery document?
2. Why does Douglass “deny that the Constitution guarantees the right to hold property in man”?
3. Based on your knowledge of the Constitution, whose arguments do you find most persuasive? Why?

In the second half of the twentieth century Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and William Brennan were frequently at the center of debates over the correct way to interpret the U.S. Constitution. Brennan argued that Supreme Court justices had to interpret the Constitution in the light of contemporary events and beliefs, as “Twentieth Century Americans.” Scalia countered that unless it was amended, justices were required to base their judgments solely on the text of the document according to its original meaning at the time it was written. Students should also read the

following views of Justices Brennan and Scalia.

### **How Should Supreme Court Justices Interpret the U.S. Constitution?**

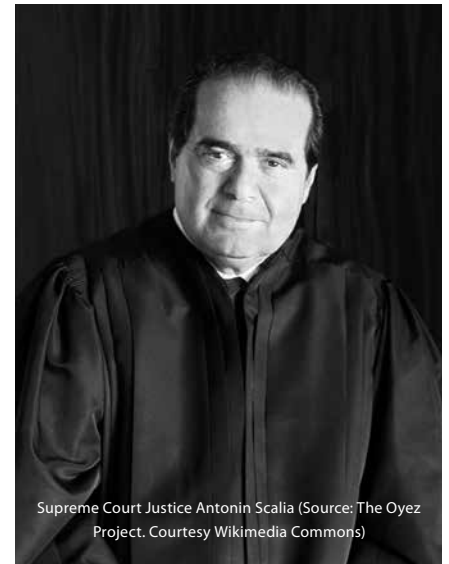


Supreme Court Justice William Brennan  
(Photographed by Robert S. Oakes, 1972.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

*Supreme Court Associate Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. (October 12, 1985):* “We current Justices read the Constitution in the only way that we can: as Twentieth Century Americans. We look to the history of the time of framing and to the intervening history of interpretation. But the ultimate question must be, what do the words of the text mean in our time. For the genius of the Constitution rests not in any static meaning it might have had in a world that is dead and gone, but in the adaptability of its great principles to cope with current problems and current needs. What the constitutional fundamentals meant to the wisdom of other times cannot be their measure to the vision of our time. Similarly, what those fundamentals mean for us, our descendants will learn, cannot be the measure to the vision of their time.”<sup>13</sup>

*Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia “A Theory of Constitution Interpretation” (1996):* “I am first of all a textualist, and secondly an originalist. If you are a textualist, you don’t care about the intent, and I don’t care if the framers of the Constitution had some secret meaning

in mind when they adopted its words. I take the words as they were promulgated to the people of the United States, and what is the fairly understood meaning of those words.



Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia (Source: The Oyez Project. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons)

I’m not very good at determining what the aspirations of the American people are... If you want somebody who’s in touch with what are the evolving standards of decency that reflect a maturing society, ask the Congress. Many European countries envy the United States Supreme Court because of its wonderful power to create rights that ought to exist and eliminate rights that ought not. I suggest this is a very new enterprise. We’ve only been doing it for forty years. We haven’t lasted for 200 years doing it. And we haven’t gone far down the road. I think at the end of it, at the end of the road, there is really a serious weakening of constitutional democracy.”<sup>14</sup>

Teachers can lead discussions of the following questions by students:

1. What does Justice Scalia mean when he describes himself as a textualist and an originalist?
2. According to Justice Scalia, what question must every Supreme Court Justice ask when interpreting the Constitution?
3. Why does Justice Scalia disagree with the point of view expressed by Justice Brennan?



As a follow-up, students can write an essay of 300 words in which they compare and contrast the positions on the role of the Supreme Court and positions on court cases that Brennan and Scalia would most likely favor in support of the views they expressed in the passage. The court cases can be actual or hypothetical.

### Conclusion

Social studies matters if the American people truly want an educated and active citizenry. By presenting students with challenging questions and interesting content rooted in their interests and experiences, we can add substance to their learning. Students who learn how to evaluate the active and important debates of human history will acquire skills that will be important throughout their lives as they deal with the complicated domestic and global issues that will confront

our citizens this century. 🌐

### Notes

1. Many edited documents with accompanying activity sheets are posted on the author's Hofstra faculty website ([http://people.hofstra.edu/alan\\_j\\_singer/teaching\\_global\\_history.html](http://people.hofstra.edu/alan_j_singer/teaching_global_history.html)). The easiest way to access them is to Google "Alan Singer Hofstra."
2. R. Muessig, ed., *Controversial Issues in the Social Studies: A Contemporary Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: NCSS, 1975).
3. National Council for the Social Studies, "Academic Freedom and the Social Studies Teacher," a Position Statement published in *Social Education* 71, no. 5 (September 2007): 282.
4. See the *Life of Pelopidas* translated by John Dryden, accessible at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/pelopida.html>.
5. See "The Sacred Band of Thebes, from Plutarch, *Life of Pelopidas*," translated by John Dryden, accessible at [www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/sacredband.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/sacredband.asp).
6. See Oxford Union debates, [www.oxford-union.org/debates](http://www.oxford-union.org/debates).
7. See "1860 Oxford Evolution Debate," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1860\\_Oxford\\_evolution\\_debate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1860_Oxford_evolution_debate).
8. See for example, the California Subject Examinations for Teachers, [www.cset.nesinc.com/CS\\_testguide\\_SSopener.asp](http://www.cset.nesinc.com/CS_testguide_SSopener.asp).

9. See Chapter 7: "Of the Ends or Resolutions of Discourse," at <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-b.html>.
10. See John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education/Part III*, [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Some\\_Thoughts\\_Concerning\\_Education/Part\\_III](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Some_Thoughts_Concerning_Education/Part_III).
11. See William Lloyd Garrison, "On the Constitution and the Union," an excerpt from "The Great Crisis!," *The Liberator* II, no. 52 (December 29, 1832), <http://fair-use.org/the-liberator/1832/12/29/on-the-constitution-and-the-union>.
12. See Frederick Douglass, "The Constitution of the United States: Is It Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?" (March 26, 1860), <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1128>.
13. See Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., "Constitutional Interpretation," (October 1985), <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=2342>.
14. See Associate Justice Antonin Scalia, "Judicial Adherence to the Text of Our Basic Law: A Theory of Constitutional Interpretation," *The Progressive Conservative* 5, no. 225 (September 2003), [www.proconservative.net/PCVol5Is225ScaliaTheoryConstlInterpretation.shtml](http://www.proconservative.net/PCVol5Is225ScaliaTheoryConstlInterpretation.shtml).

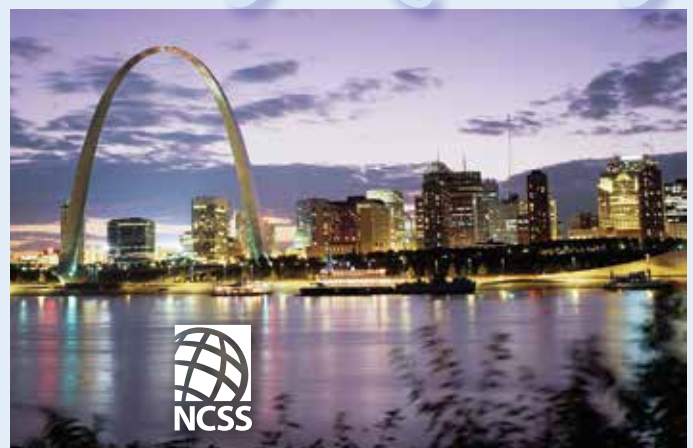
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