Unit 6

Deconstructed DBQ Document Set and Teacher Context

Teacher Resource

Resource Overview

This document provides teacher support for implementing the Unit 6: *America in Transition* Deconstructed DBQ in the middle school classroom. It includes seven documents, each designed to help students explore connections to the DBQ question while understanding the relevant historical context.

Use the context in this document to guide your students in making these connections and help them engage with the primary sources effectively.

Scaffolding note: For students who need additional support, you can assign or allow them to choose 3-4 documents. For students who need more of a challenge, provide all seven documents and require them to use each source at least once in their analysis.

Document Exposure Table

This table shows where each primary source in the Deconstructed DBQ appears throughout the unit. Use this overview to help with lesson planning, reinforce key concepts, or activate prior-knowledge before students engage with the full DBQ.

Teacher note: As students move through the curriculum, they encounter more documents overall, but each one appears fewer times. This gradual decrease in exposure is intentional—it helps shift the responsibility for document analysis to the student, supporting the development of independent thinking and source analysis skills over time.

Document	New or Repeated Exposure	Unit Resources Using the Document
Document A: Excerpt from a young woman working in the Lowell Mills (1830s or 1840s)	New	
Document B: Excerpt from Angelina Grimké's "Letter to Catharine Beecher" (1837)	New	

Document C: Excerpts from "Letters from an Immigrant" by Johan Schütz (1840s)	New	
Document D: Excerpt from the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments (1848)	Repeated	1. *Social Movements of the Nineteenth Century* Lesson Plan
Document E: The County Election by George Caleb Bingham (1852)	Repeated	1. *Interactive Suffrage Timeline* Lesson Plan 2. Unit 6 Video
Document F: Excerpt from Frederick Douglass' What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? Speech (1852)	New	
Document G: Excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's Walden (1854)	Repeated	1. *Social Movements of the Nineteenth Century* Lesson Plan

Documents

Each Deconstructed DBQ document is accompanied by background information to enhance teacher understanding of each source. The information is organized by key concepts in the DBQ question.

Scaffolding note: You may choose to share some or all of this information with your students to support their understanding of the documents.

Document A: Excerpt from a young woman working in the Lowell Mills (1830s or 1840s)

...I now feel that I am in a place where I can **make a living**, where I can help my family. But the work is **grueling**, and the hours are long. The noise is deafening, and the air is filled with dust. We work from sun-up to sun-down, and for what? A small **wage** that barely supports us...	**make a living**- to earn enough money from working to afford necessities **grueling**- incredibly difficult or tiring **wage**- the amount of money earned in exchange for time worked

This excerpt comes from a young woman employed at the Lowell Mills in Massachusetts during the 1830s or 1840s. These mills were part of the first major wave of industrialization in the United States, particularly in the textile industry. The Lowell system was notable for hiring young women from rural New England to work in factories under the promise of decent wages, education, and supervision. While the system offered new economic opportunities for women, it also imposed strict schedules and difficult working conditions. This document provides a personal perspective on the lived experience of industrial labor in one of the most iconic early American factory towns.

Economic Change

The source illustrates the rapid economic changes of the early nineteenth century, particularly the rise of industrialization. The shift from agrarian to factory-based work meant that people—especially women—were leaving family farms to earn wages in mechanized settings. It describes long hours, poor working conditions, and meager pay. The growth of textile factories like Lowell symbolized a broader transformation in the American economy, as mass production and wage labor became increasingly common.

Response

This firsthand account also reflects the tensions and challenges that came with these changes, prompting various social and political responses. While the mills offered economic opportunity, the harsh conditions led to early labor organizing efforts, including petitions, strikes, and the formation of labor publications by the "mill girls." These responses showed that Americans—especially working-class citizens—were willing to engage with democratic institutions by demanding reforms, such as shorter workdays and safer conditions. The document is a window into how ordinary Americans, particularly women, began to assert their voices in shaping the terms of the new industrial economy.

Document B: Excerpt from Angelina Grimké's "Letter to Catharine Beecher" (1837)

...I know nothing of man's rights, or woman's rights; human rights are all that I recognize... The **doctrine** of human rights is not **susceptible of proof**; it rests on the **immutable** truth that man has a **moral** nature... and is therefore subject to the moral law...	**doctrine-** a set of beliefs **susceptible of proof-** capable of being proven **immutable-** unable to be changed **moral-** interest in right and wrong or goodness of character

This excerpt is from Angelina Grimké's 1837 "Letter to Catharine Beecher," a powerful and public response to Beecher's opposition to women's involvement in the abolitionist movement. Grimké was a Southern-born woman from a slaveholding family who became a leading abolitionist and advocate for women's rights. In her letter, she defends women's moral and civic responsibility to speak out against slavery, basing her argument not on gendered rights, but on universal human rights. This letter became a foundational document in the early women's rights movement.

Economic Change:

Grimké's argument connects indirectly to the economic changes of the early 1800s by challenging the moral foundations of slavery—an institution that was deeply embedded in the Southern economy. As the cotton economy boomed thanks to innovations like the cotton gin, the demand for enslaved labor grew. The wealth generated by this system intensified debates about slavery's role in the national economy and spread into new western territories.

Response:

This document shows how democratic institutions and citizens responded to rapid economic and social changes by expanding the public debate about rights and responsibilities. Grimké's assertion that all people are bound by moral law—regardless of gender—challenged traditional power structures and encouraged more Americans to engage with reform movements. Her letter helped lay the groundwork for increased political participation by women and underscored the role of moral persuasion in shaping public policy. It also exemplifies how Americans used print culture—pamphlets, letters, and public addresses—to influence democratic discourse and advocate for systemic change.

Document C: Excerpts from "Letters from an Immigrant" by Johan Schütz (1840s)

...I have come to this land not just to work but to live freely, to share in the **blessings of liberty** that I have only heard of in my homeland. In America, I see opportunities for work, for education, and for a future that I could never have dreamed of. Here, I am not **bound by the chains** of class or birth—here, I am free to make my way in the world and to build a better life...	**blessings of liberty**- a phrase in the Preamble that means the freedoms and rights protected by the Constitution **bound by the chains**- held in place

This excerpt comes from "Letters from an Immigrant" by Johan Schütz, written in the 1840s, a period when millions of Europeans immigrated to the United States in search of better economic and social conditions. Immigrants like Schütz often wrote letters home describing their experiences and aspirations in the new country. These letters

served both as personal reflections and as persuasive accounts that encouraged others to emigrate. Schütz's letter captures the optimism and promise that many newcomers associated with America during a time of rapid national growth and transformation.

Economic Change:

Schütz's words reflect the massive economic shifts of the early nineteenth century, particularly the expanding labor market and opportunities created by industrialization, westward expansion, and urban growth. As new transportation systems like canals and railroads connected distant markets, the U.S. economy became increasingly dynamic and accessible. Immigrants like Schütz filled vital roles in building infrastructure, working in factories, and cultivating farmland, contributing significantly to the American economy. His mention of work, education, and opportunity underscores how America's changing economy attracted immigrant labor and promised upward mobility to those willing to work hard.

Response:

The excerpt also illustrates how Americans and democratic institutions responded to these changes by gradually expanding the idea of who could participate in the American dream. Although many immigrants initially faced prejudice and hardship, their contributions and civic engagement began to reshape American politics and culture. Schütz's belief that he is "not bound by the chains of class or birth" highlights how the American ideal of equality and self-determination resonated with newcomers, pushing democratic institutions to adapt and become more inclusive—at least in principle—to the realities of a diverse and changing population.

Document D: Excerpt from the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments (1848)

...He has **monopolized** nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a **scanty remuneration.** He closes against her all the **avenues to wealth and distinction,** which he considers **most honorable to himself...**	**monopolized-** completely controlled **scanty remuneration-** very little pay **avenues to wealth and distinction-** ways to earn money and status **most honorable to himself-** the types of jobs or positions in society that men see as most respected, powerful, or high-status—such as being a lawyer, politician, doctor, or business leader.

This excerpt comes from the Declaration of Sentiments, drafted at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, the first organized women's rights convention in the United States. Modeled after the Declaration of Independence, the document was principally authored by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and signed by both women and men who supported gender equality. The Declaration listed a series of grievances about women's legal, political, and economic status, highlighting systemic inequalities in American society. It marked the formal beginning of the organized women's rights movement in the U.S.

Economic Change:

The excerpt directly addresses the economic dimensions of gender inequality during a time of rapid economic transformation. While industrialization and market expansion were opening new forms of labor and business, these opportunities were largely inaccessible to women. The document critiques how women were either excluded from profitable professions or paid significantly less for the work they could perform—often in factories, teaching, or domestic service. As the economy shifted, the benefits of growth were not equally shared, and this document reveals how women were economically marginalized even as the broader economy surged.

Response:

The Seneca Falls Declaration is a clear example of how Americans used democratic means to respond to rapid social and economic changes. It called for legal and political reforms, including the right to vote, equal access to education and employment, and property rights for married women. The grievances laid out in this excerpt were not only a reaction to economic exclusion but also a demand for the democratic system to fulfill its promise of equality.

Document E: The County Election by George Caleb Bingham (1852)

This painting shows a local election day in a small Missouri town around the 1840s or 1850s. It's full of activity—men are voting, but also talking, arguing, and even drinking. These were all ways of influencing votes.

George Caleb Bingham's 1852 painting The County Election is a seminal work in his "Election Series," which also includes Stump Speaking and The Verdict of the People. Bingham, a Missouri artist and politician, drew upon his firsthand political experiences to depict the complexities of American democracy. Set in a Missouri town square,

the painting portrays a bustling election day scene with individuals from various social strata engaging in the voting process. Notably, the artwork captures both the idealism and the imperfections of the democratic process, highlighting activities such as vote solicitation and public inebriation. Through this piece, Bingham offers a nuanced commentary on the state of American democracy in the mid-nineteenth century.

Economic Change:

The painting reflects the rapid economic transformations of the early nineteenth century, particularly the shift towards a market economy and the rise of the middle class. The diverse crowd depicted—including farmers, merchants, and laborers—illustrates the expanding electorate and the increasing political engagement of individuals influenced by economic changes. The presence of symbols like the mill in the background signifies industrial growth and its impact on local economies. Bingham's portrayal underscores how economic developments were reshaping societal structures and influencing political participation.

Response:

The County Election serves as a visual exploration of how Americans and democratic institutions responded to these rapid changes. By depicting a public, though flawed, electoral process, Bingham emphasizes the importance of civic engagement and transparency in governance. The painting highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of the democratic system, suggesting a need for ongoing reform and vigilance.

Document F: Excerpt from Frederick Douglass' What to the Slave is the Fourth of July? Speech (1852)

...This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may **rejoice,** I must **mourn.** To drag a man **in fetters** into the grand, **illuminated temple of liberty,** and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman **mockery and sacrilegious irony.**	**rejoice-** to show or feel great joy **mourn-** to show or feel deep sadness **in fetters-** in chains or restraints **illuminated temple of liberty-** a space that embodies freedom and justice **mockery and sacrilegious irony-** insulting, teasing, or taunting

This excerpt is from Frederick Douglass's famous speech, *"What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"* delivered on July 5, 1852, in Rochester, New York. Douglass, a formerly enslaved man who had become a leading abolitionist, orator, and writer, was invited to speak at an Independence Day celebration. Rather than celebrating the holiday, Douglass used the occasion to expose the hypocrisy of a nation that proclaimed liberty while continuing to uphold slavery. His speech is one of the most powerful condemnations of slavery in American history and a call to align the country's values with its Founding Principles.

Economic Change:

Douglass's speech highlights the way slavery remained deeply entrenched in the American economy even as the rest of the country was modernizing and transforming. In the 1850s, the Southern economy was booming due to cotton production, which relied on enslaved labor. This economic reality created a profound contradiction between the growing ideals of freedom and opportunity of Westward Expansion and the continued exploitation of Black Americans in the South. Douglass's metaphor of "fetters" and the "temple of liberty" exposes how economic prosperity in other regions depended on the denial of basic human rights in another.

Response:

This speech also shows how Americans used democratic tools—like free speech, public assembly, and political advocacy—to respond to injustice. Douglass's bold address was not just a critique; it was a plea for national self-reflection and reform. By speaking to a mixed audience of reformers and citizens, Douglass challenged democratic institutions to confront their failures and expand the meaning of freedom. His words inspired abolitionists, informed public opinion, and increased pressure on the political system to address the moral and political crisis of slavery.

Document G: Excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's Walden (1854)

I went to the woods because I wished to **live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life,** and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, **and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life.**	**live deliberately-** on purpose, with careful thought **to front only the essential facts of life-**to focus on only the most important parts of life **and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived-** so he wouldn't reach the end of his life and realize he never truly experienced it

	I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life-to experience life fully, like getting the most nutritious part out of a bone **to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life-** to live simply and strongly—like a Spartan soldier—and push away anything unimportant or fake

This excerpt is from Walden, published in 1854 by Henry David Thoreau, a transcendentalist writer and philosopher. Thoreau spent two years living in a cabin he built near Walden Pond in Massachusetts, seeking to live simply and in harmony with nature. His work critiques materialism, industrialization, and conformity, and it celebrates self-reliance, individual conscience, and the spiritual benefits of solitude. Walden became a foundational text in American literature and philosophy, influencing future movements related to environmentalism, simplicity, and civil disobedience.

Economic Change:

Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond was in part a response to the rapid economic changes sweeping through early nineteenth-century America. As industrialization expanded and cities grew, many Americans were increasingly tied to wage labor, factory work, and a market-driven lifestyle. Thoreau's decision to "live deliberately" was a rejection of this new economic order. He believed that the pursuit of wealth and productivity was distracting people from living meaningful, thoughtful lives. His emphasis on essential living stands in stark contrast to the consumerism and complexity of the growing industrial economy.

Response:

Thoreau's experiment and his writing offer a philosophical response to the social and economic transformations of his time. Rather than engaging through political channels, Thoreau's response was personal and spiritual—an attempt to reclaim individual autonomy in an era of conformity and mechanization. His work also contributed to broader democratic conversations about the role of the individual in society and the need for moral reflection in a rapidly changing world.