

Annotating with Primary Sources Activity – Du Bois vs Stoddard Debates

Secondary source: See Appendix B: “dubois-stoddard_debate_newyorker_excerpt”

Prompt for students: Imagine being a journalist using primary sources from the [W. E. B. Du Bois Papers](#) to tell this historical story. What details or questions can you add to the excerpted secondary source based on your analysis of your primary sources?

Instructor example primary source for modeling annotation: [Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Nina Du Bois, March 26, 1929](#)

Logistics: Give primary sources to five groups for analysis (often four students each, working in pairs with one document before swapping documents). Then go around the room, in the chronological order of the sources, with each table of students sharing out loud the details they would like to add to the whole story the class is annotating, and building, together. Simple worksheets for student notes and to help prompt analysis are optional. If group numbers are different, combine or remove some sources (I suggest removing group 2 if an entire group must be eliminated).

This activity can be done in-person at UMass Amherst with the physical records, online synchronously using Zoom breakout rooms for each group analysis portion, or online asynchronously in a Padlet or other software, where students are directed to their group based on name or already assigned class groups, and all analysis, interaction, and annotating takes place in written comments.

Group #	Primary Sources	Annotations Offered	Notes
1	Letter from Madison Jackson to W. E. B. Du Bois, August 31, 1923 [I always provide a typed transcription as well]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A “layman” wrote to Du Bois for advice, which reinforces why people might listen to him in a debate, and upholds him as a public intellectual • Lothrop Stoddard was known as a prominent sociologist, and his ideas were circulating and known to readers of the N.A.A.C.P.’s journal, <i>The Crisis</i> 	We often spend some additional time addressing the ideas of a “popular writer,” “being in vogue,” and “expertise” (especially in classes aware of Du Bois’s role in the field of sociology) and discuss if students can think of people or ideas that might circulate heavily or have large platforms of influence despite lacking actual expertise (they always can sympathize and think of current examples!). This can also be connected to looking for sources and being careful about expertise and popularity.
	Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Madison Jackson, September 20, 1923	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Du Bois knew of Stoddard in 1923, and had a poor opinion of him indeed - students are often excited to note Du Bois’s cheekiness and concise wording! • Despite Du Bois’s statement that Stoddard “is simply a popular writer who has some vogue just now,” Stoddard stayed popular enough over the next 4-5 years to support the debates in 1927 and 1929 	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Du Bois's use of scrap paper from an international Pan-African Congress reinforces that his circle of work and influence was wide 	
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2	Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to the editor of The Forum, September 5, 1927	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Du Bois sent a statement to the Forum for their upcoming piece on the same topic as the debate • Du Bois's statement on the debate topic contextualized the question of racial equality with a historical analysis based on the origins of human beings and civilization in ancient Africa <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He did not address current events in the 1920s such as Jim Crow trains, school segregation, or other matters, but instead mentioned "750 B.C." when the "black Ethiopian Kingdom led the world in civilization" 	As an instructor, I inform the students that Du Bois's statement in the letter enclosure is the only clue we have in our collection, the Du Bois Papers, of what he might have talked about in the radio debate. (And he sure does start at the beginning!) They are sometimes frustrated that there is no fuller record of the event, and/or understand how this emphasizes the importance we are forced to place on Du Bois's words in this one small document. This adds extra emphasis to this idea of annotating with primary sources, in terms of what they can add, and also in terms of what is missing to us as researchers.
	Letter from The Forum to W. E. B. Du Bois, September 10, 1927	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The group putting on the radio debate had pre-debate statements from Stoddard and Alain Locke (whom Du Bois replaced) - sometimes students are curious about what those might have been • Du Bois was encouraged to use and adapt Locke's work • Logistics of the debate day and format are shared, making it easier to imagine how the debate worked and was experienced • Stoddard was looking forward to the debate and meeting Du Bois, despite his position on race relations 	
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3	Letter from The Forum to W. E. B. Du Bois, September 27, 1927	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most people writing into the radio station believed Du Bois won the 1927 debate • Du Bois was paid in 1927 	Students (and especially faculty!) are glad to see that Du Bois was reimbursed for his labor in the radio debate, and are not surprised that he won. However, his enthusiasm for debating "Stoddard as many times" as needed, and his offer to hold a large part of his calendar open (I inform them about his busy schedule) is sometimes a surprise. We often spend significant time discussing how this primary source can help us develop the historical narrative of the debate by
	Letter from W. E. B. Du Bois to Open Forum Speakers Bureau, September 20, 1928	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Du Bois "shall be delighted to have an argument with Stoddard as many times as he might see fit" - students again often allude to the tone of this correspondence in addition to its "facts," noting Du Bois's confidence and willingness to debate Stoddard • Du Bois was willing to hold 12 days in March open for another debate 	

			<p>offering a window (even if it requires some historical imaginative work) into Du Bois's personal perspective. Students easily note the awful truths of the overall narrative that we are discussing - Du Bois stood on stage with a hateful, impactful white supremacist; a man Du Bois believed had no expertise - and they often know that this was not Du Bois's only time or role as a public intellectual doing work that must have been at times, or often, a hard burden to carry. And yet, this letter from Du Bois offers students an opportunity to use their historical imaginations to see the activist from his own perspective. And his perspective is enthusiastic! It is giving of his time and energy. This one primary source offers students a second, or different, truth to hold in tandem with the hard heaviness of these debates, and this truth is from the "mouth" of Du Bois himself.</p>
Group #	Primary Sources	Annotations Offered	Notes
4	<p>One of the greatest debates ever held, 1929</p> <p>[This is a complex source, so I provide a reproduction as the second source for this group, so that students can spend time analyzing the front and back of the advertisement.]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The advertisement was trying to sell this debate and make people excited to attend! <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ It was called "one of the greatest debates ever held" ○ It presented Du Bois and Stoddard on equal footing aesthetically, giving them the same amount of physical real estate on the front and back ○ Du Bois's and Stoddard's biographies were relatively the same length. However, the strain to present both men equally is also obvious in the truncation of Du Bois's background, and language used to describe them (Du Bois as expert, Stoddard as popularizer and commander of attention) • The location, price, and other logistics of the debate are shared - students often look up the Coliseum and 	<p>Students can often glean the tension in this document, where on the one hand it is trying to set up the debate as exciting, and as equal in strength and interest on each side, and on the other is straining against the realities of the expertise, production, and argument of each man. Given Du Bois's low opinion of Stoddard (group 1 sources), victory in the radio debate, and open willingness to debate Stoddard again (group 3 sources), they can see the narrative of the live 1929 debate, as annotated with these primary sources,</p>

		<p>address on their phones and can find historic photographs, and others translate the price of attendance to what it would cost currently</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In addition to the Chicago Forum Council, the debate was put on with help from the Chicago Urban League, the Cook County Bar Association, the N.A.A.C.P., the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, and several individuals whom students could search for 	<p>as basically a platform for Du Bois to share his opinion. The co-sponsors especially reinforce this story, and students are quick to agree that different imagined white supremacist sponsors would drastically alter the story and make the event feel a threat, not a confident space, for Du Bois.</p>
Group #	Primary Sources	Annotations Offered	Notes
5	Letter from L. F. Coles to W. E. B. Du Bois, April 3, 1929	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coles, an experienced audience member of Du Bois's, noted that in the Chicago debate Du Bois "obtimated" Stoddard's point of view and "gun of prejudice," and that Stoddard's presentation was "puerile," "inane," and "pusillanimous!" - students sometimes use their phones to vocabulary check this source Despite Du Bois doing well in the debate, and Coles's request that he debate Stoddard again in a different city, Coles also critiqued Du Bois for suggesting a difference between cultural and social equality and the Black community's desire along those lines - students are often curious about this and wish we knew more about the debate from these sources 	<p>Our building class narrative about the 1927 and 1929 debates between Du Bois and Stoddard concludes with these examples of letters Du Bois received post-debate. By providing evidence of Du Bois's victory and the Forum's distribution of a transcript of the debate for much wider consumption they reinforce our annotations thus far, which have built up the 1929 debate as mostly a platform for Du Bois to share his more informed and winning opinion. But we also discuss how these sources, especially the Coles letter, leave us with open questions, just like several other source examples, and we discuss what that means for primary source research and historical storytelling.</p>
	Letter from H. M. Smith to W. E. B. Du Bois, April 24, 1929	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smith, writing from Arkansas, has "finished reading a copy" of the debate, providing evidence that the thousands who were lucky enough to get into to the live event were not the only ones to have access to the debaters' statements, and that a written copy was distributed somewhat widely Smith is extremely positive about Du Bois's debate 	

We conclude by summarizing some of the narrative components we have added to the factual structure of the debate history via annotating with primary sources. Students learn, through their own analysis and participation, how primary sources expand their understandings and abilities to ask questions of this historical story. They see how multiple truths can be held and presented in tandem in historical narrative building, and how primary sources both fill and suggest gaps in our knowledge of the past. Some are excited to learn that while the debate transcript is not a part of the [W. E. B. Du Bois Papers](#), they can access a copy if desired in the Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/DuBoisLothropStoddardDebate>