Using the DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTIONS Technique for Literature:

HARPER LEE’S
TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD
by Melissa Durham
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**About the Author** ........................................................................................................................................................................... 3
**About This Book** ............................................................................................................................................................................... 4

**Correlation to Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards**

- Writing Standards Correlation ............................................................................................................................................................... 5
- Reading Standards Correlation ............................................................................................................................................................... 6
- Speaking and Listening Correlation ..................................................................................................................................................... 7

**To the Teacher** .................................................................................................................................................................................. 8

**How to Use This Book** ...................................................................................................................................................................... 9

**Suggestions for Teaching with DBQs** ........................................................................................................................................... 11

**Handouts** ..................................................................................................................................................................................... 12

- Handout 1: Paragraph Frame for Persuasive Writing .......................................................................................................................... 12
- Handout 2: The Persuasive Thesis Formula ........................................................................................................................................ 13
- Handout 3: Five-Paragraph Essay: Keyhole Outline Organizer ......................................................................................................... 14
- Handout 4: Five-Paragraph Essay: Blank Keyhole Outline Organizer .................................................................................................. 15
- Handout 5: DBQ Writing Rubric ............................................................................................................................................................ 16

**Using the Document-Based Questions Technique for Literature: Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*** .................................................................................................................. 17

- Author Biography .................................................................................................................................................................................. 17
- Setting and Context ................................................................................................................................................................................ 17
- Major Characters .................................................................................................................................................................................... 19
- Synopsis .............................................................................................................................................................................................................. 20

**DBQ 1: Principles** ............................................................................................................................................................................. 23

- Statement and Unit Question ................................................................................................................................................................. 23
- Document A: “Principle” Definition ...................................................................................................................................................... 24
- Document B: *Calvin and Hobbes*, cartoon, by Bill Watterson ......................................................................................................... 25
- Document E: “Foes carry softball player around bases after her first homer,” by the Associated Press ................................................ 30
- Unit Question Restatement ................................................................................................................................................................. 31
DBQ 2: COURAGE ....................................................................................................................... 33

Statement and Unit Question ........................................................................................................... 33
Document B: “Living Fearlessly and Being Courageous: What Does That Mean?” by Martha Pasternack ........................................................................................................................................... 36
Document C: “Courage,” by Edgar Albert Guest ................................................................................ 38
Document D: Courage of a Journalist, cartoon, by Farhad Foroutanian ........................................ 40
Document E: “Malala Yousafzai—Biographical,” by the Nobel Foundation .................................. 41
Unit Question Restatement ................................................................................................................ 43

DBQ 3: COMPASSION .................................................................................................................. 45

Statement and Unit Question ............................................................................................................. 45
Document A: “Boston Kind: Stories of Compassion,” by Rabbi Or Rose ....................................... 46
Document B: Mary Fisher’s Speech to the Republican National Convention .................................. 48
Document C: “Fisk University Dean and Student Die In Car Wreck After Denied Hospital Care Due to Race,” from the Equal Justice Initiative ........................................................................................................... 51
Document D: Grim Reaper Shuttles Migrants Across Open Water, cartoon, by Malcolm Mayes ....................................................................................................................................................... 52
Unit Question Restatement ................................................................................................................ 54

DBQ 4: EQUALITY .......................................................................................................................... 55

Statement and Unit Question ............................................................................................................. 55
Document A: “Scottsboro,” from the Equal Justice Initiative ............................................................ 56
Document B: I Have a Dream, an excerpt from the speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. .......... 57
Document C: They Have Ears but They Hear Not, cartoon by Albert Alex Smith ....................... 58
Document D: “Caged Bird,” by Maya Angelou ................................................................................ 59
Document E: Ain’t I a Woman?, by Sojourner Truth ...................................................................... 61
Unit Question Restatement ................................................................................................................ 62

ANSWER KEY .................................................................................................................................. 63
About the Author

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Melissa has been teaching for 38 years, 32 of which she spent in Lubbock ISD. She serves as the campus academic leader for ELAR, coaches high school and middle school UIL Ready Writing, is the spelling bee coordinator, and currently teaches English II Pre-AP and AP Language/Composition as well as dance. She has taught grades 7-12.

Melissa has presented at the National Conference for Girls’ Education in February 2014, at the AP Language and Composition Review (2014–2016), and at the Texas Middle School Conference in 1996. She received training in AP Language and Composition, AP Literature and Composition, Senior Project, Laying the Foundations, and English Pre-AP High School Training. Melissa led Laying the Foundations training for Lubbock ISD teachers and served on the Superintendent’s Council from 2013-2015 as well as textbook committees, the high school Writing Curriculum Committee, and the CSCOPE Assessment Committee. In addition, Melissa has been a mentor teacher for Tech Teach as well as a new teacher mentor for the Lubbock ISD. She has attended the STAAR Review in Austin, Texas, and the Lubbock ISD Leadership Conference several times (2011–2016).

About This Book

As English teachers, we want our students to find a way to connect to literature. As we watch our students move vertically through ELA classes, we realize that there needs to be more than just an emotional attachment to the text; there needs to be relevance. Students need to be aware that the events and/or experiences that develop character are not limited to the printed page. The themes, conflicts, and symbols are universal—crossing all boundaries. When students begin to see the connections, book to book or book to self, then the text becomes a living thing and will find a way to hook into a student’s memory.

*Using the Document-Based Questions Technique for Literature: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird* is designed to aid in developing relevance, in that the students must see connections to the text with items such as news articles, poems, cartoons, and speeches. The main purpose of each document relates to something specific in the novel.

As students work through the documents in order to answer the document-based questions, the goal for them is to see that the literature they are asked to read is relevant in the 21st century. The interaction students must have with the documents and the text will create pathways for long-term memory and give them the tools to continuously look for connections across subject areas as well as in real-life events. Showing them how to discover relevance creates life-long learners.

We want students to be able to answer the question, “Why are we still reading this selection and studying this material?” The variety of genres addressed in the DBQs will heighten interest and lead students to be more engaged, inquisitive learners, while giving you, the teacher, the opportunity to extend assessments from the typical to the exceptional.
Everyone brings something to the reading of a novel, and after reading, they take away something new to ponder, to consider, and to compare to their own lives. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a book that quietly addresses issues of vast importance to society in an accessible way. The larger message is masterfully interwoven into the story Jean Louise “Scout” Finch tells of a few years in her small-town childhood. At first glance, many students might not think they have much in common with Depression-era families facing poverty, racism, and societal norms that are not a part of their 21st-century lives. However, as the story unfolds, students will begin to make some connections with the events, characters, symbols, and themes in the novel.

*Using the Document-Based Questions Technique for Literature: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird* will bring the themes and issues addressed into a sharp focus which will provide students with the tools necessary to understand the connections they have made and to the relevancy of a novel that was published almost 60 years ago. This material will encourage students to compare primary sources to the novel, but more importantly, to their own lives and experiences. The outcome will be that students will bring their own viewpoints to the reading of a source, to the discussions, and to the essays they will write. What they will take away from this experience will leave a lasting impression and develop readers who see depth in literature.
How to Use This Book

*Using the Document-Based Questions Technique for Literature: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird* is divided into seven units:

- handouts
- novel background and synopsis
- four DBQ units arranged around a thematic question
- Answer Key

**Handouts** to copy and distribute include:

- a paragraph frame for persuasive writing
- a persuasive thesis formula
- an essay organizer
- a DBQ writing rubric

These are merely suggestions but are provided to streamline the writing and grading process.

The **background and synopsis** unit includes:

- an author biography
- setting and context
- a list of major characters with descriptions
- a synopsis of the novel

These can be copied and used as handouts to aid with reference and recall.

Each **DBQ** unit focuses on a thematic question based on the novel, and features five documents related to the theme. These documents include:

- editorial/political cartoons
- poetry
- newspaper articles
- blog posts
- speeches
- informational texts

Students read and analyze the documents to make connections and answer the unit question in the form of an essay.
Sections within each DBQ unit feature:

- **Guiding Questions for Understanding**, which the teacher may assign to students to answer individually or use for whole class discussion.
- **Guiding Questions Writing Activities**, which allow students to build toward the final five-paragraph essay.

After students have completed the writing activities in the unit, they are to choose the three answers/paragraphs that they believe provide the strongest support for their position on the unit question. When writing the complete essay, students will connect the three topics with appropriate transitions.

The **Answer Key** contains possible answers for the Guiding Questions for Understanding, as well as for the writing activities. There is also additional information for each document that may relate to audience, purpose, historical background, and author’s point of view. The teacher may use this additional information to help introduce each document.

Copy the units and distribute them to the students. Use the DBQ units separately or as a whole. The units may be a two- to three-day lesson, depending on how they are used. The analysis of the documents along with the Guiding Questions for Understanding may be completed in the classroom and/or as homework. The writing activities should be completed in the classroom.
Suggestions for Teaching with DBQs

There are a number of ways for you to use this book in the context of teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* to your students.

**Pre-Reading Assessment:**

Select DBQs to give the students in order to introduce to them the context of the book as a formative assessment. The topics of the four DBQs:

- DBQ 1—“Principles,”
- DBQ 2—“Courage,”
- DBQ 3—“Compassion,” and
- DBQ 4—“Equality,” will provide them with a strong context for the plot development of the book once they begin.

**Spiraling the DBQs as Extension Activities:**

Once again, given the topics of the DBQs, you can stop the novel and do a DBQ as either a summative or formative assessment of student comprehension. If you want to provide a stronger context and create a formative assessment before the section of the novel dealing with a particular topic, stop the students, have them read and analyze before the section, complete the DBQ, and then continue with the analysis of the book.

If you want to provide the students with the ability to compare/contrast the treatment of the topic in the book to that of the materials in the DBQ as more of a summative assessment, read and analyze the specific section of the novel, complete the DBQ, then discuss the similarities and differences among the selections with regard to the treatment of the topic.

**Post-Reading Assessment:**

Select DBQs to give students a means of connecting the context of the book to them as a summative assessment. The topics of the DBQs:

- DBQ 1—“Principles,”
- DBQ 2—“Courage,”
- DBQ 3—“Compassion,” and
- DBQ 4—“Equality,” will provide them with a stronger comprehension of Scout and Jem’s experiences as well as allow them to make different and personal text-to-text and text-to-world connections.
Author Biography

Harper Lee was born Nelle Harper Lee in 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama, a small town about halfway between Montgomery and Mobile. She was the youngest of four. Her father was a newspaper editor-turned-lawyer. As a child, Lee was intelligent and adventurous, not unlike Scout, the protagonist of her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lee was friends with author Truman Capote, who was the inspiration for the character of Dill.

After several short stints in college, Lee moved to New York City and worked as a reservation clerk for an airline. As she became more interested in writing, she left her job and moved into a cold-water apartment (in the 1950s, many artists and writers lived in New York in such apartments, which were very inexpensive). One year, her close friends in New York gave her money as a Christmas present so that she could take time off from her job and concentrate on her writing.

Lee submitted the manuscript of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to a publisher, J.B. Lippincott & Company, in 1957. It caught the attention of editor Tay Hohoff, who told her that the novel felt more like a series of short stories than a complete novel. During the next two years, Hohoff worked with Lee on revisions, and the novel was published in 1960. Though it received mixed critical reviews, it won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. It was made into an award-winning film in 1962. Until 2015, it was her only published book. Lee died February 19, 2016.

Setting and Context

Published in 1960, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a classic coming-of-age story that follows the Finch children, Scout and Jem, through three years of their childhood, and their involvement in the turbulence of a racially charged court case.

In 1931, when Harper Lee was five years old, a group of young African American men were accused of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama. The Scottsboro Boys, as they became known, were the center of a controversial trial, and eventually, five of the nine defendants were sentenced to long prison terms. The trial was controversial because, as in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there were doubts about the truth of the crime, and the proceedings were racially charged. Unlike Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the defendants received poor legal representation. Critics have noted the similarity between the Scottsboro case and the case defended by Atticus in the novel.
Written in the 1950s, *To Kill a Mockingbird* appeared at a time when the country was in the midst of the growing Civil Rights Movement and facing the results of years of oppression and discrimination of African Americans.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in the fictional small town of Maycomb, Alabama, in the years 1933 to 1935. The country and the town are in the depths of the Great Depression, and as Scout says, “There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County.”

In addition to the Depression, another important historical factor affecting life at this time was the Jim Crow laws that were in place to restrict the civil rights and liberties of African Americans. “Jim Crow” was a derisive term for African Americans. A Louisiana law barring blacks from riding on train cars with whites was challenged in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896. Upholding the law, the Court said that public facilities for blacks and whites could be “separate but equal.” This allowed state and local laws to continue to reinforce racial segregation. This is important to know, to fully understand the reaction of the residents of Maycomb to Atticus (actually) defending Tom Robinson, and to understand why Bob and Mayella Ewell believe their accusations will and should be accepted as truth without question. It is especially important to understand the norms for the period and the acceptance of the deplorable treatment of Tom Robinson in the novel.

The novel criticizes the hypocrisy and racism that burdened the South while upholding certain models of behavior and belief. The use of allusion, foreshadowing, and symbolism makes the novel a complex piece of literature rather than simply a child’s adventure tale. The first-person narration, combined with a memoir-type retelling of events, brings the reader into the events, along with young Scout. The children’s summertime activities set the stage for presenting lessons on justice, equality, morality, and compassion.
**DBQ 1: PRINCIPLES**

**Directions:** After reading and discussing the documents, you will compose a final essay that smoothly integrates your interpretation of Documents A through E and your knowledge of the events in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to answer the unit question. Exemplary scores will only be earned by an essay that both cites at least three key pieces of evidence from the documents and draws on outside knowledge of the novel.

Review the following documents and answer the questions under each to explore different facets of the unit question, “To what extent should morality/principles guide a person’s decisions?”

One of the themes explored in the novel is that of morality/principles. In chapter 11, Atticus explains (again) to Scout why he is defending Tom Robinson, saying,

“This case, Tom Robinson’s case, is something that goes to the essence of a man’s conscience—Scout, I couldn’t go to church and worship God if I didn’t try to help that man [...] before I can live with other folks I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.”

**UNIT QUESTION:**

Based on this passage and the following documents, to what extent should morality/principles guide a person’s decisions?
“Principle” (noun)

A principle is a kind of rule, belief, or idea that guides you. You can also say a good, ethical person has a lot of principles.

In general, a principle is some kind of basic truth that helps you with your life. “Be fair” is a principle that guides (or should guide) most people and businesses. A politician who tries to do the right thing rather than win votes is acting on principle. A person who has principles is a good, decent person. On the other hand, if you say someone has no principles, that means they’re dishonest, corrupt, or evil.


Guiding Questions Writing Activity:

- On a separate sheet of paper, write a paragraph of at least four to five sentences explaining how the definition of “principle” is modeled on Atticus’ statement about morality/principles.
Guiding Questions for Understanding:

1. What had been the question that plagued Calvin during the school day?
2. What are his arguments for each side of the question?
3. What is at the core of Calvin’s dilemma (the consequence)?
4. What is ironic about Calvin’s consideration of cheating on this particular test?
5. What do you believe is the weakness in rationalizations?

“Sweet Trials: 1925–26”  
By Buckner F. Melton, Jr.

During the First World War, thousands of African-American families moved from the south to the industrial cities of the north, such as Detroit, in search of high-paying, wartime jobs. While they found the employment that they were after, they also learned that they had not escaped the racism that they had experienced in the southern states. Northern white attitudes were hostile to the black newcomers, and northern society and neighborhoods remained closed to them. The few neighborhoods in which these African-Americans settled soon grew overcrowded and filthy.

Dr. Ossian Sweet, a black Detroit physician, moved to the city in 1924, after studying for a time in Vienna and Paris, where he had worked with Marie Curie. Having recently married and fathered a child, he wished to avoid the slums and find decent housing. By 1925, one or two black friends of his had bought homes in white neighborhoods, but they soon left in the face of white hostility. Sweet was determined not to let the same thing happen to him.

In the summer of 1925, Sweet found a house at 2905 Garland Avenue, in a lower-middle-class, white neighborhood. The sellers were a white woman and her light-skinned, black husband. Perhaps this made Sweet think that the neighbors would accept him and his family, but in reality (as events would later show) the neighbors had probably thought the husband was white. At any rate, Sweet moved in with the help of his brothers, Otis and Henry, as well as a few friends. Among his possessions were enough guns and ammunition for the entire group—just in case they were needed—when the Sweet family moved in on September 8.

The Ku Klux Klan had been very active in the area recently. One result of this was the organization of the neighborhood Waterworks Park Improvement Association, which had formed shortly after Sweet bought the Garland Avenue house, and which was in reality a group designed to keep the neighborhood all white. The day that the Sweets moved in, a white crowd began to gather outside the house. Eventually the mob disbanded, but the following evening a new one formed. Later testimony as to its size varied, but the best evidence suggests that it consisted of a few hundred people. Among them were several police officers, who were there because Sweet had asked for police protection.

The second evening after the Sweets moved in, with Sweet and 10 others inside the house, the crowd grew restless, and some people began throwing stones and breaking windows after the arrival of Otis Sweet and William Davis, a family friend. Others yelled racial epithets. Suddenly gunfire erupted from several windows of the house. Across the street Leon Breiner fell dead, and another man suffered a leg wound. After the gunfire ended, the police burst into the house and arrested everyone inside. Within a few weeks prosecutors sought indictments against the 11 occupants for conspiracy to commit murder.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) soon turned to Clarence Darrow for help. At the time Darrow was perhaps the nation’s most celebrated attorney. Darrow, long a champion of the underdog, agreed to take the case. The first trial took place in the Detroit Recorder’s Court in November 1925. The judge was the liberal and humanitarian Frank Murphy, who later became an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court. The chief prosecutor
was Robert M. Toms, whom Darrow afterward described as “one of the fairest and most humane prosecutors that I ever met.” […]

Darrow, despite the restrictive Michigan definition, used the argument of self-defense to explain what had happened that night. Calling upon Ossian Sweet himself to tell his story, Darrow tried to make this case symbolic of earlier black persecution.

“When I saw that mob,” Sweet said, “I realized in a way that I was facing that same mob that had hounded my people through its entire history. I realized my back was against the wall and I was filled with a particular type of fear—the fear of one who knows the history of my race.”

After deliberating for three days, the all-white jury announced that it could not reach a verdict, and Murphy declared a mistrial. Five months later, in April 1926, Toms indicted Henry Sweet, who finally admitted to firing a gun, bringing him to trial a second time for murder. Judge Murphy again presided, and both Toms and Darrow used much the same litigation tactics that they had employed in the first trial. This time, Sweet was acquitted, and the following July Toms moved to dismiss the charges against all of the other defendants.

Although Darrow had argued more famous cases, he considered the Sweet trials to be his greatest personal triumph. The issues brought forth in these trials presaged the growing racial tensions throughout the country that would eventually give rise to the Civil Rights movement.


Guiding Questions for Understanding:

1. After World War I, African Americans moved north to get high-paying jobs. What did they soon discover about life in the north?

2. What prompted Sweet to purchase a house in a lower-middle-class white neighborhood?

3. What was the purpose of the Waterworks Park Improvement Association?

4. What happened on the evening of September 9, 1925?

5. What was the defense used by Clarence Darrow?

6. After the mistrial and the acquittal, why do you think the prosecutor (Toms) decided to dismiss the charges against the other defendants?

Guiding Questions Writing Activity:

- On a separate sheet of paper, write a paragraph of at least four to five sentences using evidence from the text to explain whether or not morality/principles were used when decisions were made the evening of September 9, 1925. Demonstrate the connection between this event and Atticus’ statement about morality/principles.
“The Principles of Life”
By Victor O. Nosa

[1] Life is not as wicked as we say,
for the game
we know not how to play.
Be prepared for each day,
or you might lose the race.
Buckle your shoes your way,
and lead others not astray—
For honesty pays.

[2] Exhibit good attitude;
it gives life good fortitude.
Don’t wait—create an opportunity;
it brands your originality,
and make dreams reality.
Keep away from bad company;
or you fall a victim.
Shun Hostility;
embrace Peace and Humility—
by it, the society
Finds Harmony.
In its simplicity—
The Principles of Life.

Guiding Questions for Understanding:

1. Explain the meaning of the last sentence in stanza 1 (“Buckle your shoes…”).
2. What is the meaning of “fortitude” as it is used in stanza 2, line 2?
3. What are the “Principles of Life”?

Guiding Questions Writing Activity:

- On a separate sheet of paper, write a paragraph of at least four to five sentences using evidence from the poem to explain how the “Principles of Life” relate to Atticus’ statement about morality/principles.
With two runners on base and a strike against her, Sara Tucholsky of Western Oregon University uncorked her best swing and did something she had never done, in high school or college. Her first home run cleared the centerfield fence.

But it appeared to be the shortest of dreams come true when she missed first base, started back to tag it and collapsed with a knee injury.

She crawled back to first but could do no more. The first-base coach said she would be called out if her teammates tried to help her. Or, the umpire said, a pinch runner could be called in, and the homer would count as a single.

Then, members of the Central Washington University softball team stunned spectators by carrying Tucholsky around the bases Saturday so the three-run homer would count—an act that contributed to their own elimination from the playoffs.

Central Washington first baseman Mallory Holtman, the career home run leader in the Great Northwest Athletic Conference, asked the umpire if she and her teammates could help Tucholsky.

The umpire said there was no rule against it.

So Holtman and shortstop Liz Wallace put their arms under Tucholsky’s legs, and she put her arms over their shoulders. The three headed around the basepaths, stopping to let Tucholsky touch each base with her uninjured leg.

“The only thing I remember is that Mallory asked me which leg was the one that hurt,” Tucholsky said. “I told her it was my right leg and she said, ‘Okay, we’re going to drop you down gently and you need to touch it with your left leg,’ and I said, ‘Okay, thank you very much.’”

“We started laughing when we touched second base,” Holtman said. “I said, ‘I wonder what this must look like to other people.’”

“We didn’t know that she was a senior or that this was her first home run,” Wallace said Wednesday. “That makes the story more touching than it was. We just wanted to help her.”

Tucholsky’s injury is a possible torn ligament that will sideline her for the rest of the season, and she plans to graduate in the spring with a degree in business. Her homer sent Western Oregon to a 4-2 victory, ending Central Washington’s chances of winning the conference and advancing to the playoffs.

As for Tucholsky, the 5-foot-2 right fielder was focused on her pain. “I really didn’t say too much. I was trying to breathe,” she told the Associated Press in a telephone interview Wednesday.
“I hope I would do the same for her in the same situation,” Tucholsky said.

As the trio reached home plate, Tucholsky said, the entire Western Oregon team was in tears.

For coach Pam Knox, the gesture resolved the dilemma the injury presented. “She was going to kill me if we sub and take (the homer) away. But at the same time I was concerned for her.”

“In the end, it is not about winning and losing so much,” Holtman said. “It was about this girl. She hit it over the fence and was in pain, and she deserved a home run.”


Guiding Questions for Understanding:

1. What was at stake during this softball game?
2. What had Tucholsky done for the first time?
3. What happened to Tucholsky that could have taken away this accomplishment?
4. What rules complicated the situation?
5. Who came up with a solution to the problem?
6. What were the results of this solution?
7. Why do you think Holtman and Wallace made this decision?
8. Do you agree with the decision made by Holtman and Wallace? Why or why not?

Guiding Questions Writing Activity:

- On a separate sheet of paper, write a paragraph of at least four to five sentences using evidence from the text that explains how this event is an example of morality/principles guiding people’s decisions. Demonstrate a connection to Atticus’ quotation.

Based on the quotation and the documents, write an essay that both cites at least three key pieces of evidence from the documents and draws on outside knowledge of To Kill a Mockingbird to answer the question, To what extent should morality/principles guide a person’s decisions?