

The DBQ: Colonial Justification Argument — Class Feedback & Next Steps

This guide highlights what the class did well on the DBQ and what to tighten in revision. Your job now is not to rewrite history — it's to sharpen control, clarity, and argument.

1. Thesis / Introduction

Most of you chose a side (good), but some intros sounded like background instead of an argument. A strong thesis must: (1) take a stance (justified or overreach), (2) name your evaluative lens (consent, liberty, rule of law, proportionality), (3) preview your pillars, and (4) ROOT THE ARGUMENT IN TIME.

You must start using dates immediately — including in the thesis. Don't wait until paragraph two. If you are arguing that British policy became intolerable, say when that shift happened (1763, 1765, 1774, 1775, etc.). Your reader should know what era you're judging by the end of the first paragraph.

■ Stronger Thesis Example:

"After Britain ended salutary neglect in 1763 and began imposing new taxes on the colonies in the 1760s without any representation in Parliament, the relationship began to break down. By 1775, the colonists were justified in rebelling for three reasons: Parliament taxed them without representation in the 1760s, it punished Massachusetts with the Coercive Acts in 1774, and it used armed force at Lexington and Concord in April 1775."

■■ Needs Work:

"The colonists were angry at taxes and wanted to be free from Britain's unfair rule."

How to Revise: Bring in dates, state the standard you're using to judge Britain (consent? liberty? rule of law?), and end with a roadmap: "The colonists were justified because __, __, and __."

Ask yourself: If someone read only my intro, would they know my stance, why I think I'm right, how the essay will be structured, *and* what time period I'm talking about?

2. Structure & Topic Sentences

Your overall order was usually strong (taxation → coercion → independence). Where many of you lost points was inside paragraphs. Topic sentences often told *what happened* instead of *why it mattered*.

■ Strong topic sentence:

"By imposing the Stamp Act without colonial consent in 1765, Britain violated its own constitutional principles and forced colonists to question imperial legitimacy."

■■ Needs Work:

"In 1765, the Stamp Act was passed and the colonists were upset."

Do this in every body paragraph:

- Start with a claim that links to your thesis, not just a timeline fact.
- Tie that claim to a *specific year* early in the sentence. Dates = credibility.
- Keep each paragraph on one pillar (don't mix 'taxes' and 'troops' in the same paragraph).
- End by connecting back to your thesis: "This is why colonists saw rebellion as justified, not reckless."

Transitions that help: "Because...", "As a result...", "In response...", "This escalation meant..." (Cause and effect, not just 'Then in 1774...').

3. Analysis (The 'So What?' Step)

Quoting a document is not analysis. Explaining why it matters is analysis. This is where big gains happen.

■ Strong:

"The Stamp Act Congress's claim that 'no taxes be imposed...without consent' [Doc. A, 1765] shows that colonists saw representation as a basic right, not a favor. When Parliament ignored this, it signaled that colonial voices no longer mattered inside the empire."

■■ Needs Work:

"The Stamp Act Congress said that no taxes should be imposed without consent."

How to Revise:

After every quote or event, add 1–2 sentences that answer: "To colonists, this proved that...", "This mattered because...", or "This shifted the conflict from protest to survival..."

Pro move: Name the consequence. ("After petitions failed, colonists began to see resistance as self-defense, not rebellion.")

Date tip: Attach years to turning points in your analysis. Don't just say 'after this.' Say 'after the 1774 Coercive Acts...' That forces precision.

4. Using the Documents

Most of you used at least three required documents. That's great. What separates 'solid' from 'excellent' is how you introduce and explain them.

■ Strong use:

"In his 1775 speech to Parliament, Lord North insisted that 'the supremacy of the mother country can admit of no question' [Doc. E]. To colonists, that wasn't a call for compromise — it was proof that Britain cared more about obedience than consent."

■■ Needs Work:

"Lord North said the mother country was supreme." (and then moving on).

What strong writers did:

- Gave context: who is speaking, when, and why.
- Used short quotes, not full pasted sentences.
- Explained how the quote proves the thesis (not just that it exists).
- Compared voices (ex: Paine vs. Inglis) to show tension inside the colonies.

Checklist for each document: Identify it → include the year → quote briefly → explain impact on your argument.

5. Counterclaim & Rebuttal (Student-Friendly)

Counterclaims make your argument stronger by showing you understand both sides.

■ Strong Example:

“Critics might argue that British taxes were reasonable because Britain had defended the colonies in the French and Indian War. However, taxing people who had no representation in Parliament violated the British idea of consent, which is exactly what colonists believed they were defending.”

Be fair to the other side. Don’t twist or exaggerate Britain’s motives. For example, instead of writing ‘Britain just wanted to crush the colonies and steal their money,’ a fair version would be: ‘Britain argued it had the right to tax the colonies because it had spent money defending North America in the French and Indian War.’ That shows you understand their logic without saying you agree.

Then rebut using your lens — the principle you’re using to judge what was justified (for example, consent, rights, or self-preservation). For example: “But taxing people who had no representation in Parliament went against the British idea that government requires the consent of the governed, so colonists saw these taxes as illegitimate.”

End by snapping back to your thesis. For example: “This is why the colonists were justified in rebelling — by 1775, Britain wasn’t just asking for revenue; it was denying the colonies political voice, punishing Massachusetts with the Coercive Acts in 1774, and using armed force at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, leaving no peaceful alternative.”

6. Big Takeaways

Major strengths:

- You’re taking clear positions and defending them.
- You’re integrating primary sources instead of just retelling events.
- Your tone sounds academic and persuasive, not casual.

Still to tighten:

- Make your thesis evaluative, not descriptive — and date it.
- Start paragraphs with arguments, not timelines.
- Follow every quote with analysis, not summary.
- Use a real counterclaim + rebuttal, not just emotion.
- Stay factually precise (Tea Act = monopoly, not new tax; Paine does NOT argue to stay loyal to Britain).

7. Revision Checklist

- Does my thesis clearly state my side, my lens, and my roadmap — *and include dates*?
- Do my topic sentences make claims, not just describe events?
- Does each paragraph tie back to my lens (consent, liberty, etc.)?
- After I use evidence, do I explain why it matters?
- Do I identify each document with context (who/when/why) before quoting it?
- Did I include a fair counterclaim and then rebut it using my lens?
- Do my transitions show logic (cause/effect), not just time jumps?
- Does my conclusion return to my thesis and lens instead of just repeating it?
- Did I cut vague filler (“a lot,” “many people,” “it was bad”) and replace it with specific claims?
- Does every sentence help prove my argument? If not, cut it.

Final Reflection

This DBQ asked you to do real historical work: take a position on whether the colonists were justified or overreached, and defend that position with primary sources. You did that under pressure. Your next step isn't 'more' — it's 'tighter.' Sharper thesis with dates. Cleaner topic sentences. Shorter quotes, stronger analysis. You're closer than you think.