



## *Opening the American West* Argument-Based Presentations Positions and Argument Options

### Overview

This argument-based unit on *Opening the American West*, a period of American history spanning from approximately 1860 – 1900, is designed around the debatable question:

**What was the most important factor in the opening of the American West?**

This document lays out positions on this question that students are assigned to take, individually or in groups, so that they can produce argument-based presentations and plan for a structured argumentation activity, such as an argument-based seminar or a multi-sided debate format. Students should also produce an argument writing piece, as well.



## Positions

These are the four positions that students will be assigned to argue for in response to the debatable question.

**The building of the Transcontinental Railroad opened up the West, contributing to American greatness.**

**Tragically, oppression of the Native American population was the key facilitator of Westward expansion in 19<sup>th</sup> century America.**

**The Gold Rush inspired the imagination of the nation and drove Westward expansion in 19<sup>th</sup> century America.**

**The Homestead Act provided the opportunities for individuals that ultimately opened up the West.**

**Whether or not everyone would like to admit it, the American big businessmen of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the single biggest factor in Westward expansion.**



## Argument Options

These are argumentative claim options from which students can choose in building their arguments to support their position. Students are not limited to these options; they can, if they choose, create their own claims to evidence and develop into arguments.

### **Transcontinental Railroad**

Completion of the transcontinental railroad united America geographically.

The transcontinental railroad was a crucial mechanism to expand commerce and multiply American economic growth.

The transcontinental railroad literally made travel to the West so much easier, removing the main barrier to expansion and settlement.

### **Native American Oppression**

Other factors driving Westward expansion – such as the transcontinental railroad and homesteading – were only possible because of the oppression of the Native American population.

White Americans feared the Native Americans on the Great Plains and out West, which meant that their removal was a pre-condition for white Americans' movement.

The mass slaughter of buffalo, which Native Americans had always relied on for their survival (the buffalo provided food, clothing, and shelter to natives), itself was an important means by which white Americans supported their expansion.

### **The Gold Rush**

Innumerable towns in the West were founded and built as “boom towns,” catering to prospectors.



The Gold Rush fueled individual Americans' imaginations to become rich quickly, creating the underlying motive for so many to come out West.

In the end, America has and always has had an individualistic, Capitalist culture, and the Gold Rush is the factor that above the others aligns with that culture.

### **The Homestead Act**

Farmers and freedmen were among the groups of individuals that saw in the Homestead Act the kind of opportunity that led them to settle the West.

The Homestead Act brought a uniquely diverse range of settlers out West, making it the key factor in the opening of the West.

In providing individuals with land on which to build their lives, the Homestead Act was the most long-term of all of the Westward expansion forces.

### **Big Business**

Carnegie, Rockefeller, and their peers built the social institutions that made life in the West civilized and appealing.

Business leaders provided the capital which was ultimately necessary, and without which none of the other factors would have enabled expansion West.

The most important factor in opening the West was not the initial travel there, but the investment in business and cities that occurred after the travel.