

TIPS ON ESSAY SKILLS

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While reading a book on educational philosophy, former Plano Senior High School AP teacher Tom New stumbled across a fundamental principle for teaching essay skills:

STUDENTS DO NOT LEARN HOW TO WRITE THOUGHTFUL AND INFORMATIVE ESSAYS UNLESS THEY KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT THE ASSIGNED TOPIC.

Although this idea seems rather obvious, this is an idea that is often lost on even the best students. Roughly translated, it means this:

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO WRITE A GOOD ESSAY ON A TOPIC ABOUT WHICH YOU KNOW NOTHING.

Students often forget that the essays in an AP class count just as much as the tests that they will take. Therefore, it behooves you to pay attention in class, take good notes, and study for the essay just as they would study for any multiple-choice test. Though the teacher has a responsibility for putting forth a good AP class that educates students about the content of the class, preparation for the essay's content is ultimately the your responsibility.

WRITING FOR HISTORY

One of the first things students must realize is that people change the way they communicate based on their audience. You are writing for a history class. The instructions given here are for writing about history. It may be different (not necessarily better, just different) from what you learn in English. That may mean, to paraphrase the immortal words of Yoda, you must first unlearn what you have learned.

The first thing that must be addressed is how to tackle the question.

1. Read the question or prompt carefully: The basic purpose is to answer the question. Read the question **three** times and be able to paraphrase the question and know the essential task demanded by it. Answering the question will be the central focus of your essay. Many essay prompts will "suggest" a particular format to follow for organizing your response. Create a framework or hypothesis for answering the question.

- Break the question down with dates, points asked for, make sure you are aware of the entire question
- Be mindful of the verb – what exactly are you supposed to do? Be sure that you understand the required task. For some discussion of essay verbs, click [here](#).

- Look for words that need defining: words like "effective", liberal/conservative, imperialism, etc.
- Look for ways to answer the question in a sophisticated manner; not with a simple yes or no, or right or wrong – it is more comfortable to stick with black and white; as historians we must learn to dwell in the gray
- Look for multiple points of view.

2. Brainstorm on paper everything that comes to mind regarding the topic at hand. What do you know about the topic? Put this down on paper to get your brain in gear for writing the essay.

3. Organize your thesis, develop three main points (if not already provided), and put your brainstormed information in a chart format for your three body paragraphs.

4. Write your introductory paragraph. ESTABLISHING STRUCTURE IS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF YOUR ESSAY – IT IS NOT AN OPTION! Your introductory paragraph should look like this: T-E-L

1. **Thesis statement** - A critical factor present in the opening paragraph is the THESIS. Exam readers appreciate reading the thesis sentence at the very beginning of the essay. Simply put, the thesis statement does two things:
 - a. Serves as the student's answer to the question
 - b. Acknowledges that the student is aware of the complexity of the question
2. **Expansion** - Brief explanation of any key theme or complex idea contained in the thesis. This may also be where you put the question into historical context or explain why it is worth answering.
3. **List** - A quick listing of the main organizational points that will be used to structure and present the data used to defend the thesis. In your brainstorm, you fleshed out three categories of information or three key points – list them here so the reader knows where you are going.

Another important factor to the opening paragraph is the inclusion of selected key words or phrases that indicate JUDGMENT AND ANALYSIS by the student. Students should use vocabulary words that indicate a higher degree of sophistication. Students that use judgment and analysis to indicate interpretation in the essay rather than a straight narrative composition that recites only facts will certainly earn a higher rank. THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT! One overall suggestion that helps students develop this ability is to have students prioritize their organization list of factors or main ideas and indicate primary vs. secondary causation, repercussion, or some other aspect of varying degrees of importance for their list. These words should be included in subsequent paragraphs to indicate degrees of importance. For a selected list of "buzz words" that jump from the paper and scream judgment and analysis, click [here](#).

Students should stay away from absolutes (never, always, and completely). Remember, historians dwell in the "gray areas" of history. Hence, students should think of issues in terms of a scale of 0-10 when providing analysis of historical issues. Anybody can answer "true or false." Good students of history address "how true" or "how false."

SUPPLEMENTARY PARAGRAPHS

The number, order, and nature of these paragraphs will be determined by the organizational list in the introductory paragraph. Generally, students should expect three body paragraphs unless the essay guides the student to do less or more. When in doubt, ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS **ANSWER THE QUESTION!!!** If the question asks you for two paragraphs, do what it says.

- 1. SUPPLEMENTARY PARAGRAPHS SHOULD BE ARRANGED IN DESCENDING ORDER OF IMPORTANCE.** The only exception to this rule would be in the case where you were going to address topics **chronologically**. Even then, you would be well-served to be sure to get your strongest point down on paper first.
- 2. SUPPLEMENTARY PARAGRAPHS SHOULD HAVE CLEAR AND RELEVANT TOPIC SENTENCES THAT FOLLOW THE ORGANIZATIONAL LIST IN THE INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH.** The supplementary paragraphs can be quite cluttered. For the National Exam it is imperative that students unleash an avalanche of names, dates, people, bills, pieces of literature, and ideas that are germane to the essay. It is imperative that students support their assertions with relevant information. This is what separates thoughtful essays from random musings and pontification. This said, students should not simply laundry list or data dump without taking into consideration the element of judgment and analysis. Make sure there is relevance to the thesis!
- 3. THE ESSAYS FOR THE NATIONAL EXAM ARE TO BE EXPOSITIONS AND NOT JUST NARRATIVE ESSAYS.** Expositions state a thesis. Again, there is one possible pitfall to some of the ideas in the preceding section. Don't just tell a story and spit out tons of details... present those details with the context of a thesis.
- 4. STUDENTS SHOULD DISPLAY AN APPRECIATION OF THE COMPLEXITY OF HISTORY.** There are a plethora of events, emotions, and ideas that impact human history. As a result, students should reveal their appreciation of the fragile and complex nature to human history by avoiding overtly simplistic comments in their essays, such as something is "bad", "good", "great", or "fantastic." As stated above, students should stay away from absolute phrases and the idea of single causation.
- 5. THE VOCABULARY AND NARRATIVE STYLE OF THE ESSAY SHOULD BE ATTENDED TO.** The verbs used in an essay are a critical element in presenting a more sophisticated and descriptive essay. In conjunction with their adjectives and other descriptive tools, the students should strive to go beyond the more mundane verbs. For example

"The assassination caused the war..."

Vs.

"The assassination provoked the outbreak of war..."

Or

"The diary showed the prejudice..."

Vs.

"The diary vividly illustrates the deep prejudice..."

Do not use the verbs SHOW, FEEL, or BELIEVE when another stronger verb will work. Note the choice of verb tense. Past tense should be used for past action. It is quite important that students use a variety of wonderful verbs.

SOME WONDERFUL VERBS

**REVEALS, ILLUSTRATES, PORTRAYS, EXEMPLIFIES, DEPICTS,
IMPLIES, DEMONSTRATES, INDICATES, SYMBOLIZES**

The choice of verb reveals judgment and analysis as well as the relevance and merit of the information. Students should also employ additional modifiers to enhance the descriptive power of their essay. Adjective and adverbs are sadly lacking in most student expositions. For example: "Smith's letter to Abernathy strongly portrays Jackson's belligerent attitude towards the Bank of the U.S." See the list of words included earlier for more examples.

- 5. STUDENTS MUST AVOID THE USE OF FIRST PERSON IN AN EXPOSITION!** It is understood that the thoughts and ideas within the essay are theirs or those sources cited.

RESPONDING TO DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

The most important thing to remember when responding to a Document Based Question (DBQ) is this: in spite of all the extra materials involved, **IT IS AN ESSAY**. You should prepare to write a DBQ the same way that you would prepare to write any free response essay. Therefore, the first steps that you should take to tackle the question and begin your essay are the same:

- 1. Read the question and break it down into its component parts.**
- 2. Brainstorm on paper everything that comes to mind regarding the topic at hand.**
- 3. Organize your thesis, develop three main points (if not already provided), and put your brainstormed information in a chart format for your three body paragraphs.**

NOTE: YOU SHOULD NOT HAVE LOOKED AT THE DOCUMENTS YET! PRETEND YOU ARE ANSWERING A STANDARD FORMAT ESSAY, AND THEN SAY TO YOURSELF "LOOK, THERE ARE DOCUMENTS, THESE DOCUMENTS CAN HELP ME!" This is a key thing to remember. The documents are not the basis of your essay – they are supplemental evidence that you should include to help make your case.

4. Read the documents:

- Look at the source and author first, search for important information here, bias, time frame, objectivity, points of reference
- Read the document quickly yet carefully and look for its major point. Underline, circle or identify major points, or jot them down in your notes for your essay.

- Keep in mind that sources differ in reliability, degree of information (implied vs. stated), and direct application to the topic. The top scores are given to those essays that demonstrate JUDGEMENT and ANALYSIS of the documents.
- Be detectives!
- Look for contradictions
- One of the most important things that you can do is think of outside information that would be relevant to this document. Does this document address things that are in your brainstorm? Does it jog your memory about things that you missed?

5. Identify the documents in your chart for use to support your body paragraphs.

- Try to use as many documents as possible, but you do not have to use all documents. Use those that are relevant to the defense of your thesis.

6. Begin writing:

- Thesis, explanation sentence, and list of three main topics

7. Use the documents in a sophisticated manner

The key thing to remember here is that the essay is not ABOUT the documents. It is an essay about the HISTORICAL SUBJECT that uses the documents to support your thesis. This is very important! Unlike some other subjects, US history requires that you have a blend of outside information and document usage to support your case. YOU MUST HAVE BOTH ELEMENTS IN YOUR ESSAY!

When writing your essay, DO NOT QUOTE THE DOCUMENTS; refer to them in context by name NOT BY "DOC. A." Although you may put (doc. a) in parentheses at the end of your sentence, that alone is not enough to be counted as good document usage.

- ex. "Jackson's letter to Henry Swartz adequately demonstrates his preconceived animosity towards the Indians..." NOT "Doc. A shows Jackson's hatred of the Indians..."
- Paraphrase the documents to support your major points in your essay, do not rewrite the documents or simply list what each one is about. You must use the documents don't let the documents dictate your essay.
- Use verbs like: adequately demonstrates, evident, reveals, identifies, suggests, implies, indicates, reflects, exemplifies
- Use phrases that demonstrate awareness of the credibility of each document
- Indicate to the reader that you understand the source.
- Make sure that you use the documents overtly to support your argument. Simply citing the document is not enough.

8. Most DBQ essay responses are longer than the standard essay. 2-4 pages is average length for this type of essay.