

## **Doing the DBQ**

### **Strategies for Tackling the APUSH Document Based Question**

This document will help you learn strategies for dealing with the DBQ on the AP U.S. History exam in May. Remember that it is more than just analyzing the documents and writing about them, you must also bring in your knowledge of the period. These two things are tied together—your knowledge will help you interpret the documents and the analysis of the documents will increase your knowledge of the period.

#### **The Basics:**

The DBQ essay requires the same writing skills as any other essay...

- A strong introduction
- Effective argument
- AND use of historical evidence
- It adds the ability to analyze and use primary and secondary source documents in your essay.
- It allows you to interpret the historical document.
- It allows you to find contradictory evidence, bias, and point of view in documents.

#### **Steps to a Successful DBQ Essay**

**Step 1:** Carefully read the question.

- Look at the VERBS: evaluate, assess, analyze, establish the validity (truth)
- Look carefully for conjunctions, i.e., does the question ask to contrast AND compare, or does the question ask to contrast OR compare. These are two different things—be sure you know what the question is asking you to do.
- Decide what the question calls for (underlining or highlighting key components of the question helps.)
- Don't rush through this part!!

**Step 2:** Divide the question's topic(s) into categories.

- If they are included (discuss the social, political, and economic development of the colonies) GREAT!! Highlight /underline those words.
- If not then improvise: use one of the critical thinking strategies you have learned: PERSIA

**Step 3:** Brainstorm

- Make a list of everything you know that pertains to the question: people, documents, issues, topics, battles, social changes, Supreme Court cases, etc.—anything that you feel is relevant to the question.
- Do this **BEFORE** looking at the documents.

**Step 4:** Carefully read the documents. Look for:

- The author/artist and any background information such as publication dates
- Bias, point-of-view, tone
- Counter-arguments
- Change over time
- Analyze the documents, find the “essence” of the document (summarize) it in a quick sentence
- Look specifically for things you can use in your essay. Underline everything that is relevant. You want to use as many of the documents as possible.
- Do NOT quote from the documents.
- Use them to support your thesis.
- You must cite documents parenthetically within your essay.
  - After the idea you borrowed, cite the source by placing the source in parenthesis (Doc A)
  - You should “group” documents, if they are related, at least once (Doc's A, B, C)
- For non-verbal documents (pictures, posters, diagrams, charts, graphs, etc.)
  - Interpret them—there is usually a lot of outside information you can glean
- Remember your DBQ essay should have an equal mix of documentary evidence and outside evidence.

**Step 5:** Write the Intro—Write your introductory paragraph in the following pattern:

- Introduce the topic—Write **two sentences that address the topic of the question in a general way**. Do NOT restate the question as it is worded.
- Establish the setting
- Define any key terms
- Clarify your categories. Write an organizational statement in which you mention the two or three issues or aspects of the topic about which you are going to write (your argument categories)
- Place your thesis—remember it must address all parts of the question asked. Write a **clear thesis statement** that expresses your response to the question. The best place for the thesis is at the end of the intro paragraph. (Tip: Try beginning the thesis sentence with the word “although.” This may help you frame a thesis that addresses the “complexity” of the question.)
- Note: Most students should write the thesis first, then build the paragraph backwards from the thesis to more general statements.

**Step 6:** Write the supporting body paragraphs.

- Remember to stay focused on your thesis.
- Don't just write a narrative or summary of the topic.
- Begin the first body paragraph with a topic sentence about the **FIRST** thing mentioned in your organizational statement. Mention lots of specific, relevant information to support your thinking. The more information, the more accurate it is, the more you interpret it, and the better the essay will score. The topic sentence of the next body paragraph should be the **SECOND** thing you mentioned in your organizational statement.

**Step 7:** Write the conclusion.

- Do not introduce new material here.
- Wrap up your proof—restate your thesis and its support (briefly)

**Step 8:** Proof read your work if there is any time remaining.

- **MAKE SURE YOU ANSWER THE QUESTION THAT WAS ASKED.**

## The Details

The directions for the DBQ ask the student to “construct a coherent essay that integrates your interpretation of documents (primary sources) and your knowledge of the period” referred to in the question. Writing a DBQ, however, requires the same skills that a standard essay requires: a strong and well developed thesis, use of substantial relevant supporting evidence, and the ability to analyze all parts of the question (i.e., political, social, economic). At the same time, the DBQ requires the ability to interpret documents, recognize bias and conflicting viewpoints, and use and refer to documents effectively in the context of an essay.

High scores will be earned only by essay that **both** cite key pieces of evidence from the documents **and** draw on outside knowledge of the period (ideally a 50/50 mix). Some pointers:

1. Answer the question. Take a few minutes to really understand what the question is asking. Define all the words. Look at the key verbs.
2. Pre-write. Brainstorm what you know about the topic, time period, etc. Take some time to study the documents.
  - A helpful tool for gathering information from outside documents is DEPTH: dates, events, people, time period, historical trends...
  - Look for ways to group documents to help answer the question. This demonstrates an ability to categorize documents—an analytical indicator. Use PERSIA/APPARTS (or another such tool) if categories are not given.
  - Look at the source of the documents **before** you read the document itself—this will help with analysis of the document’s bias, point of view, and tone. **THIS STEP IS CRUCIAL.**
  - Look for documents that represent views that are exceptions to the trend. You want to find contradictory evidence and use it.
  - Look for any evidence of “change over time,” but only if it is clearly in the documents; don’t read it in when it isn’t there.
  - Analyze the non-verbal documents—maps, charts, cartoons...Every picture tells a story.
3. It is **CRUCIAL THAT YOU ANALYZE THE BIAS, POINT OF VIEW, TONE, RELIABILITY**, etc. of the documents as much as possible. This will not always be possible with every document, but it will be possible with many of them. Say, for example that your DBQ is on child labor in late 19<sup>th</sup> century American factories, and your document is the testimony of a well-to-do doctor employed by the factory owner. If he testifies that the factories are healthy for children, this is a great opportunity for bias and reliability analysis. If you have a document where the writer seems strident and impassioned, this is a great opportunity to note the document’s tone.
4. You should cite your supporting documents; otherwise you might be guilty of plagiarism. Cite documents in the following manner: Use your documentary support (without quotes), then after using it, cite it by placing the document letter or number inside parenthetical markings (Doc A).
5. You should use all of the documents. A brilliant analysis of just a few will not score very highly. It is important that you try to use all of them.
6. **DO NOT JUST WALK THROUGH THE DOCUMENTS AND DESCRIBE WHAT THEY SAY.** This could very well be a laundry list. You have to analyze them, group them when appropriate (itself a form of analysis) and critique their biases.
7. Don’t quote passages from the documents. Find the essence of the document and summarize it.
8. In the actual writing of the DBQ, use the same organizational format as you use for a regular essay (i.e., thesis statement, major points in intro paragraph, topic sentences, specific references/evidence...) DBQ’s may look like a weird exercise, but writing one is much like any other essay.

## WRITING HISTORICAL ESSAYS

1. A good essay does more than “rattle off” facts. It reveals an understanding of the general principles of the “big picture” of history. The best essays “weave” an understanding of content with some critical analysis.
2. Plan your essay! Brainstorm and list facts pertaining to the question. Then, write a working outline before you begin the writing process. An essay will be judged on the following criteria:

- Has relevant thesis
  - Addresses ALL parts of the question
  - Supports thesis with specific evidence
  - Is well organized
3. Look at the key words in the question to determine how many paragraphs you write. Do not assume you should write a five-paragraph essay. Be sure to follow the directive verbs in the question.

## **SEVEN STEPS IN WRITING AN ESSAY**

### **1. Analyze the Question**

- Without a clear understanding of the question, you cannot write an adequate answer. Be sure that you address all “tasks” in the question. Pay attention to EVERY word in the question.
- Understand the directive terms: discuss, explain, evaluate, analyze... (See below)
- All questions have one thing in common: they demand judgment about the historical evidence. A question is never satisfactorily answered by simply reporting information. If you think that you can write an essay without making some judgment on the issue, you have not understood the question.

### **2. Collect and Sort Information**

- Once you understand the question, “brainstorm” what you know about the topic. List everything, and then categorize it in some meaningful way (PERSIA/APPARTS).
- Note taking/Outlining is important in the pre-writing stage. It focuses attention on possible ways to organize material.
- Make a “working thesis,” a general answer to the question.
- Also, anticipate counterarguments. Consider arguments that are against your thesis, not to prove them, but to show you are aware of opposing viewpoints. The strongest essays confront conflicting evidence. Include this in your essay somewhere.

### **3. Develop a Thesis**

- Thesis: Your brief answer to the question given. It generally explains why or how something happened. Your thesis should take a stand on an issue or historical problem.
- A thesis makes an assertion that a reasonable person could disagree with. It is your “claim” statement, what you claim to be true (and what your content will prove to be true).
- A thesis requires some judgment and interpretation of evidence. Everything that comes after your thesis should support the thesis. Develop your thesis throughout your essay. However, include your thesis in the introductory paragraph of your essay. Tell the reader so he/she can evaluate your arguments as he/she reads your essay.
- For a thesis to be “well-developed,” it should have some power to explain the issues in the question. It should be “focused” on the way you plan to answer the question. Try to make your thesis “measurable.” You can then show your analytical ability.
- Here is a somewhat formulaic approach to constructing a thesis:
  - A “concessive” clause: “Although such and such...” If you do not concede something, you will appear unreasonable or unaware of another side of the issue.
  - The “main” clause: the thing you attempt to prove in your essay
  - The “because” clause: This will force you to summarize supporting arguments (categories).

### **4. Write the Introduction**

- Include relevant background information, i.e., time and place (setting) are usually important to establish.
- DEFINE your key term, those that are vague or controversial (effective, liberal,

revolutionary...)

- Include your **THESIS** statement. It is best to “weave” your arguments into the thesis. Use **PERSIA** if categories are not given.
  - Good essays get to the point quickly. Avoid broad statements such as “from the earliest times...” Don’t waste time getting to the point.
  - Organize your attack: arrange your arguments in some logical order—chronological, least-to-most important, or some other meaningful way.
5. **Write the Body/Supporting Paragraphs (Prove one “big picture” idea/argument per paragraph)**
- Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence. Every sentence should relate to and support the main idea.
  - Prove your arguments. Demonstrate analysis—tell how and why the thing happened.
  - Provide factual information to prove your thesis. Each set of facts that supports a category should be a separate paragraph. Use specific support.
  - Evidence should be used such as data (facts and figures) or authority (what historians know, or think they know).
  - Evidence is detailed information that gives the reader reason to believe what you tell them. All generalizations and assertions should be supported by facts.
  - Use structural indicators (first, in the second place...) and use transitional devices between body paragraphs. Show where you are going with your essay.
6. **Write the Conclusion**
- Good essays should end simply and cleanly.
  - The conclusion should focus on the thesis. Restate the thesis in a fresh and interesting manner or explain the significance.
  - Attempt to use foreshadowing by connecting to future events, but do not introduce new evidence.
7. **Proof the Essay**
- Check your work.
  - Reread your entire essay. Begin with the conclusion, then the intro. See if they agree.
  - Be familiar with the reminders listed below as you proof your work.

### **TYPES OF ESSAY QUESTIONS**

1. Change over time—Questions that ask you to look at a period of history and explain the evolution of a particular aspect within the time frame given. For example, “Between 1790 and 1870 the economic growth of the US was significantly stimulated by government aid. Discuss this growth.”
2. Cause and effect—Questions that ask you to weigh factors and explain the resulting relationship between those factors and the end result. For example, “Why did the US enter the First World War?”
3. Compare and contrast—Questions that ask you to show similarities and differences on the topic given. For example, “Compare and contrast the society in the North with the South before the Civil War.”
4. Define and Identify—Questions that ask you to identify key factors by both definition and historical significance. “Identify the social, political, and economic factors that led to the Second Great Awakening.”
5. Statement/Reaction—Questions that ask you to form an opinion on a given statement based on historical evidence. “‘Slavery was the sole cause of the Civil War.’ Evaluate this statement.”

6. Evaluation—Questions that ask you to form an opinion based on good or bad, right or wrong, based on historical evidence. “Select any three of the following and evaluate their effectiveness as political leaders.”
7. Analyzing Viewpoints—Questions that ask you to defend or refute a given historical viewpoint based on historical evidence. “Defend the economic policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the years 1933-1939.”
8. To What Extent/In What Ways—Questions that ask you to explain the different ways and the “how much” (to what extent) something was changed. “In what ways and to what extent did the Industrial Revolution change nineteenth century society?”

### **SOME PERTINENT REMINDERS**

1. Keep it simple. Do not use flowery language or overly complex sentences. However, do use a few big, but relevant, words if you can use them CORRECTLY. Don't use many words when one or two will do.
2. Write about the past in the past tense. The only exception should be in using direct quotes. But if you do use quotations, keep them to a minimum.
3. However, write in the active voice. It is livelier and more interesting to read. Active voice is when the subject acts through the verb. "Columbus discovered America" as opposed to "America was discovered by Columbus."
4. Write clearly and neatly. Readers may be prejudiced against sloppiness.
5. Misspellings may be inevitable, but a student should learn to spell terms associated with each unit of study as well as other frequently occurring terms, such as "affected" and "occurred" or words like "which," "their/there."
6. Things to avoid in writing historical essays:
  - Lengthy quotations. In fact, try to avoid using any quotations in your essays.
  - Rhetorical questions and rhetoric in general. You are not to use the essay to espouse personal opinions irrelevant to the questions.
  - Do not use personal pronouns ("I," "me," "my," "they said") or vague references.
  - Avoid writing in the first person.

### **DIRECTIVES**

Look for directive verbs or phrases (sometimes called "action verbs") that are intended to direct the focus of the essay.

1. Analyze—Determine the nature and relationship of the component parts of; explain; break down. Tell HOW, WHY something happened. (Similar to cause and effect)
2. Assess—Judge the value or character of something; appraise; evaluate; how true or false it is
3. Cause/Effect—Explain the beginning or the end of something.
4. Compare—Examine for the purpose of noting similarities and differences. When the question calls for comparisons the readers expect you to include differences as well.
5. Describe—Give an account of; tell about; give a word picture of
6. Discuss—Talk over; write about; consider or examine by argument or from various points of view; debate; present the different sides of
7. Evaluate—Give the positive points and the negative ones; appraise; give an opinion regarding the value of; discuss the advantages and disadvantages of something
8. Examine—Make clear or plain; make clear the causes or reasons for; make known in detail; tell the meaning of
9. Justify—to give good reasons for something; to explain why something is true
10. To What Extent and In What Ways—How much? In what ways did an event or condition relate to another? Demonstrate an understanding of both what was done and what was still left to be done. Anticipate counterarguments.

**TRANSITION AND SIGNAL WORDS**  
**Sequence and Chronological Order Stems**

After, afterward	Following	Next	Subsequently
Ago	For a time	Now	Suddenly
Already	Further	Not long after	Then
At last	Furthermore	Once	Thereafter
At the same time	Immediately	On (date)	Third
As	Initially	Preceding	To being with
Before	In the first place	Presently	Today
During Eventually	In the meantime	Second, secondly	Until
Even now	Last, lastly	Several	While
Finally	Later	Sometimes	
(the) final	Long after	Soon, soon after	
First, first of all	Meanwhile	Some	

**Compare and Contrast Stems**

Although	Either...or	Just as	Regardless
Also	Even though	Like	Same as
As opposed to	Equally important	Likewise	Similarly
As well as	However	Neither...nor	Still
But	In comparison	Nevertheless	Unlike
By comparison	In contrast	Notwithstanding	Unless
Compared with	In like manner	On the contrary	Whereas
Conversely	In the same way	Not only...but also	While
Despite	In spite of	On the other hand	Yet
Different from	Instead of	Rather than	

**Cause and Effect Stems**

Accordingly	Consequently	May be due to	So that
As a result	Hence	Nevertheless	Then
As if	In order to	Provided that	Therefore
As though	If...then	Since	Thus
Because	It follows that	So	

**Emphasis Words**

Besides	Furthermore	Moreover	Of course
Certainly	Indeed	Obviously	

**Stems for Examples**

Another	First, second...	Specifically	To illustrate
For example,	In addition	Such as	
For instance	Most important	To begin with	
Furthermore	Namely	That is	

**Conclusion words**

As a result	In other words	On the whole	To sum up
Consequently	In short	Therefore	
For this reason	It follows that	Thus	
In brief	In fact	To summarize	