

U.S. History Essay Writing Information

The AP U.S. History Exam is three hours and ten minutes long.

In Section I:

Part A:

Students are given 55 minutes to answer 55 multiple-choice questions: 40%

Part B:

Short answer - 4 questions 50 minutes: 20%

In Section II:

Part A:

Students are given a 55-minute exercise in the use of historical evidence (the document-based question or DBQ), which includes a 10-minute reading period. 25%

Part B:

The Long Essay - students select 1 other essays to write on out of two. The Students will be given 35 minutes to complete the long essay. 15%

The Eight Commandments of Writing the History Essay

- I. **Thou Shalt Have a Thesis Sentence.** The thesis must state the argument and everything in your essay must support your argument.
- II. **Thou Shalt Get to the Point.** Make your case, don't make sweeping generalizations. Don't waste time using fluff and stuff, tell it like it is.
- III. **Thou Shalt Use Factual Evidence.** Your thesis is only valid if the evidence supports it. The evidence gives the reader reason to believe your thesis.
- IV. **Thou Shalt Take Contrary Evidence Into Account.** Showing that there is at least another side to the story is not only necessary, it helps strengthen your argument not weaken it.
- V. **Thou Shalt End the Essay Simply and Cleanly.** If you must use a concluding sentence or paragraph, don't introduce new evidence or make moral judgments.
- VI. **Thou Shalt NOT use Personal Pronouns in the History Essay.** Using such words as I, you, we, us, my, or they is not acceptable.
- VII. **Thou Shalt NOT Misspell Words or Use Poor Grammar.** An abundance of misspelled words or grammatical errors can detract from a well-written essay.
- VIII. **Thou Shalt NOT Use Rhetorical Questions.** Stick to answering the question, not to introducing another.

DBQ Do's and Don'ts

The Do's:

1. Read and interpret all parts of the essay question, looking for keys such as **Change Over Time**.
2. Read and analyze each of the documents, looking for **Point of View**.
3. Determine the working order of the documents, **Grouping Them**.
4. Read the historical background, **Determine its Significance**.
5. Reread documents, looking for significant keys; **Name, Position, Reliability**.
6. Develop the thesis, **Address All Parts of the Question**.
7. Develop paragraphs being sure to answer all parts of the question, **Refer Frequently to the Terms of the Question**.
8. One does not have to use all documents, but for a "Nine" **You Must Use a Preponderance**.
9. Integrate the documents into your response, **Be Sure to Analyze**.
10. Common indicators of analysis include; essay structure, juxtaposition of documents, recognition of contradictory point of view, use of external information to illustrate the documents.

The Don'ts:

1. **Don't** use the documents in a laundry list fashion, quickest way to a low score.
2. **Don't** simply explain or summarize the documents, group them together.
3. **Don't** forget to analyze the documents when incorporating them into your essay.
4. **Don't** fail to answer the question in an effort to use all the documents.
5. **Don't** "parrot" the views of the documents, analyze those views.

The Thesis Statement – What is it?

The Thesis Formula: X. However, because of A, B, and C, Y.

'X' represents the strongest point against your argument.

'A, B, and C' represent the three strongest points for your argument.

'Y' represents the position you will be taking - in other words, your stand on the prompt.

Prompt: Assess the validity of the following statement, "Teaching is the most important profession in the world and everyone should consider it as a possible career choice."

Pros

Emotionally satisfying Physically demanding
Make a difference in the world Low pay

Summers off Long work hours
 Work during the summer for more pay Not much respect in our society
 Not much competition - job market Requires certification
 Only need a bachelors degree Have to do additional work - coach, etc.
 Work usually comes home with you

Cons

Physically demanding
 Low Pay
 Long working day
 Not much respect in our society
 Requires certification
 Had to do additional work - coaching etc.
 Work usually comes home with your.

Thesis Statement: Teaching is an emotionally satisfying profession. However, because teachers rank consistently at the bottom of the pay scale, often work at home without just compensation, and receive a lack of respect in our society, teaching is clearly not the most important profession and would be an unwise career choice.

Variants on the Thesis Statement:

Although X; because of A, B, and C, Y. (not recommended)X. However, A, B, and C. Therefore, Y.

Consider the following 2008 DBQ prompt: “Analyze the ways in which the Vietnam War heightened social, political, and economic tensions in the United States. Focus your answer on the period 1964 - 1975.”

How much should we spend to win the war
 How much should we spend to win the war
 The first thing that you are going to need to do, in order to answer the question fully, is to brainstorm outside and background information that you know about the topic. The categories are already given to you in this prompt, so label them and start writing down whatever you can about the topic. Some prompts may not give you the categories, if that is the case you can always rely on PERSIA - politics, economics, religion, social, intellectual, etc., to help you organize the information. After you have gotten as much information as possible, go to the documents (if it is a DBQ) and see what else you can come up with. After you have grouped the information, you will need to develop a Level 2 statement about what all of them have in common. This will be discussed in the next section.

Level 3

Social

Political

Economic

Level 2

Growing unrest and disenchantment over why the war was being fought

Who should run the war and how it should be waged

How much should we spend to win the war

Level 1

Black Panthers
 Great Society
 War on Poverty
 Hippies

Selective Service
 26th Amendment
 Silent Majority
 Peace With Honor

Recession
 Stagflation
 New Nationalism
 Revenue Sharing

Social

Woodstock
 Bob Dylan
 Tet Offensive

Political

Vietnamization
 Hawks v. Doves
 Eugene McCarthy

Economic

Gas Rationing
 Guns and Butter

Walter Cronkite
Kent State
Pentagon Papers
Selective Service

War Powers Act
Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Levels of Specificity / Developing a Topic Sentence – How Much Do I Say?

Level Three Thesis (not enough): The Vietnam war was only one phase in a greater struggle with communism that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, there was an increase in social, political, and economic tensions in the United States from 1964 - 1975. In the end the war damaged America's confidence in themselves and their government.

(Comment – This really tells me nothing more than what has already been stated in the prompt. You have a thesis statement, however, it is much too general. This is the most common mistake students make.)

Level Two Thesis: The Vietnam war was only one phase in a greater struggle with communism that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, during the period 1964 - 1975 America was racked by growing unrest and disenchantment over why the war was being fought, who should run it and how it should be waged, and how much American economic investment should be expanded into winning the war. Therefore, in the end, the war damaged America's confidence in themselves and their government.

Level One Thesis (too much): The Vietnam war was only one phase in a greater struggle with communism that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, during the period 1964 - 1975 Black panthers rioted, a great rift divided the country over the Great Society's war on poverty and the economic ability to continue the war, college sit-ins plagued the college campuses, Hippies and the Silent Majority continued to clash over America's role in International affairs, and Congress and the President fought over the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the War Powers Act with regard to just how much power each should have in waging the war. In the end the war damaged America's confidence in themselves and their government.

(Comment – there is too much specific information in this thesis.)

How to reference the documents in the DBQ?

The most unsophisticated way to reference a document in a DBQ essay is to do the following, "According to document A bla, bla, bla." This is supposed to be a historical paper. DO NOT laundry list the documents in your paper, "Document A says this, document B says this . . . etc." Instead, you should show the reader that you understand the documents and use them effectively within the argument of your paper. DO NOT quote documents, the readers know the documents, quoting may be appropriate for an English paper, but is not appropriate for a history paper. So how do I use a document? Suppose you have an excerpt from the Clayton Antitrust Act, you could make the following assertion, "The Clayton Antitrust Act was implemented during the Wilson administration to help support the antitrust legislation of the earlier and somewhat inefficient Sherman Antitrust Act." There you go, you just used the document and probably brought in some outside information, by mentioning it was implemented under Wilson.

To Conclude or Not To Conclude – What is the Answer?

There are lots of different theories about whether or not you need a conclusion; my belief is that if you have time to write one, then great. But if you are running short of time, then scrap it and don't worry about it. There is nothing in the AP rubric that says you have to have a conclusion. As an AP reader / grader, I can tell you that not having a conclusion never lowered a grade. But adding a bad conclusion did. So my advice is, if you have one, you better make sure it is good - DO NOT introduce any new information in the conclusion!

In no circumstance should your history essay have fluff in it, this is not an English class (I apologize to all the English teachers). They have different requirements and different expectation for their essays. In History class you are expected to write a history essay, in English class you are expected to write an English essay - they are two different tasks, skills, and assignments. Learn what each is asking of you and be like Nike - "just do it."