

HOW TO WRITE A DBQ ESSAY

Purpose

The primary purpose of the document-based essay question is not to test your prior knowledge of subject matter, but rather to evaluate your ability to formulate and support an answer from documentary evidence. The DBQ is designed to simulate the work of the historian, and differs from the task of actual historians mainly in the time available for analysis. There is no “correct” answer; instead, a variety of approaches and responses are possible.

The College Board Advanced Program Administrators expect your essay to show “cogency and appropriateness of interpretation and ability to marshal historical data in support of that interpretation.”

In other words, you must:

- 1) **Use your knowledge by comprehending the facts and then apply those facts as evidence to prove your thesis.**
- 2) **Analyze and evaluate the documents by determining relevance, credibility or biases of the sources, cause and effect relationships, and assumptions.**
- 3) **Synthesize the facts, the information from the documents, and your own ideas to create an original, well-organized response to the assignment.**

Helpful Hints: In writing the essay, you may find it useful to consider the following points:

- 1) Read the assignment carefully. Analyze the statement or question given to be sure you understand all of the parts. This breakdown can give you categories to use for outlining and/or structuring your essay.
- 2) Read all the documents in order of presentation. Return to the more important documents for further study.
- 3) There are no “decoy” – irrelevant or deliberately misleading – documents.
- 4) Look for ideas as you read through the documents. Think about how the documents can be used to formulate and support an answer to the question. Highlight significant words or phrases and make notes in the margins.
- 5) Evaluate the credibility of the source by checking the author, date, and key words in the document. Think about motives, needs, and timing. Include this evaluation in your essay.
- 6) Respond to all aspects of the assignments in your thesis.
- 7) Do not rewrite or list the documents when you organize or write your essay. In no case should the documents simply be cited and explained in a “laundry list” fashion.
- 8) Do cite documents and show the reader that you are aware of the source and its relevance. Examples: Northern and Southern France are compared (Doc. 4) . . . or . . . the view of a French Bishop is given in (Doc. 6) . . . or . . . the view of a royal official in (Doc. 13) . . .
- 9) You may refer to historical facts and developments not mentioned in the documents. However, it is not necessary. If you do incorporate “outside information” into your essay and do it well, it may earn you an extra point above the basic core.
- 10) You must integrate and merge the documents; it shows thinking.
- 11) When you write your essay, get to the point! This is not a term paper; it is a timed exercise. (The suggested writing time is 45 minutes.)