

General Information on Essay Writing:

It is important to realize that your essay is evaluated at the college level, but it is also considered a rough draft. Errors in spelling and punctuation will not detract from your score unless they interfere with the reader's understanding of your essay. Be legible with your handwriting. Consider the following standards:

- Does the essay contain a thesis statement that clearly addresses and deals with the question?
- Do arguments within the essay support the thesis and lead toward a viable conclusion?
- In the case of document-based questions, are the documents used appropriately and in a way that clearly supports the position of the thesis?
- Is your own knowledge and outside information used appropriately and in sufficient quantity to support the position of the thesis?
- Does the essay analyze rather than describe as it attempts to prove the position of the thesis?
- Does the essay end with a clear restatement of the thesis in a way that affirms what the writer was attempting to prove?

Understanding Your Audience:

There are many style of writing. Not everything that you have learned in your English courses will fit the requirements of a history paper. For history, the best comparison is to consider that you are like a lawyer presenting a case before a jury. You must present a set of arguments that support your position (the thesis statement). You must draw your arguments from the evidence available, document-based facts and/or outside information (your own knowledge beyond the documents). You must convince a jury that your position is correct; the jury is your reader. You are engaged in an activity that is more like a debate than creative literature. Flowery statements and fanciful language do not fit well into the purpose and audience for which your arguments are intended. Be assertive – never use “I think” or “I believe” before your argument.

Thesis Statement:

For many students this is one of the most important and least understood parts of a good essay. A thesis statement comes at the beginning of your essay in a short introductory paragraph where you basically tell the reader the position you will attempt to prove.

In order to create a good thesis statement, you must understand exactly what the question is asking you to do and then craft your thesis to address each of the major issues presented by the question. In this situation a simple repetition of the question will not be considered a good thesis statement. You have to create a thesis that tackles the issues of the question and states what you plan to prove regarding those issues. A good introductory paragraph and thesis statement will also suggest briefly how you plan to prove your position.

When you have finished your introductory paragraph/thesis statement, you basically have a roadmap that points the direction your essay will travel, marks the turning points of your trip, and tells the reader the conclusion you plan to reach. Writing the essay at that point becomes much easier for you to do – just connect the points on the map.

Together the thesis statement and the introduction must address the central issues of the question in a clear way. Each paragraph that follows must contain only information used in support of that thesis. Nothing should appear in your essay that is not essential to the support of that thesis statement. A good essay will end with a strong, short conclusion that restates the thesis.

Prompt: *To what extent did the foreign policy objectives of the first five presidential administrations center around the question of “entangling alliances” and the decision to remain neutral in European affairs?*

Inadequate, underdeveloped thesis statement and introductory paragraph:

With the Atlantic Ocean between the United States and the European powers, the first five American presidents could safely follow a policy of complete isolation from world affairs while building a young and powerful nation.

This thesis statement is overly simplistic and based upon an incorrect assumption – the U.S. was not completely isolationist.

Adequate thesis statement and introductory paragraph:

The Treaty of Friendship of 1778 with France that helped secure the independence of America in the American Revolution did not look so good in 1793 when France was fighting Britain and the United States might be drawn into that war. From Washington to Monroe, American presidents sought to escape involvement in the affairs of Europe behind a wall of neutrality.

This is better, as it addresses the issue of neutrality brought up in the question. However, it lacks development that would show the direction in which the author plans to extend.

Sophisticated thesis statement and introductory paragraph:

From Washington to Monroe, all American presidents recognized U.S. economic dependency upon trade with Europe and the world, but each also realized that for both internal political reasons and external military reasons, the United States was in no position to enter a foreign war. Fearful that “entangling alliances” would draw the U.S. into foreign wars that would divide its people internally, while both militarily and economically threaten the survival of the young nation, the first five presidents sought to maintain a policy of neutrality.

This introduction provides clear and detailed reasons to explain the foreign policies of the first five American presidents. The pathway this student plans to take to prove their position is clear.

Definition of Analysis Level Writing:

Analysis level writing is also a very difficult concept for many students to grasp. Earlier in your academic career, especially in elementary and middle school, you were able to achieve high grades by simply writing down everything you knew about the general topic of the question. If the question concerned the causes of the Civil War, you wrote down everything you knew about the causes of the Civil War. The more you knew and wrote down, the higher your grade would be. This is no longer true. A little later in middle and early high school an essay with better description would earn the top score, but this is also no longer true. You have now reached a point where you will be expected to write at the level of analysis.

Analysis is not description – it is using substantial facts to prove positions that support the ideas advanced in your thesis statement. Your essays will be judged on the quality and accuracy of your arguments in support of the position you have taken. Now you must answer more than the “what and when” by moving on to prove the “how and why”.

Analysis is the use of facts and evidence at a higher order than just citation or description. To cite a fact is to prove that you know it. Using a fact with analysis demonstrates that you understand it and know how to use it to prove something significant regarding the issues of the question or your thesis.

Here is a simple citation of a fact:

The sinking of the RMS Lusitania in 1915 with the loss of American civilian lives was seen by President Wilson as a violation of American neutral rights. This would be a major event in a chain which drew the United States into World War I on the British side.

This writer has faithfully answered the “what and when” but there is no analysis.

Here is the same fact used with analysis:

By 1915 both Britain and Germany had violated American neutral rights, but President Wilson responded more dramatically to events such as the sinking of the RMS Lusitania because American civilian lives were lost whereas British violation involved only property rights. The death of women and children had a much greater impact on American public opinion than the seizure of a few cargoes. The emotional impact of events like the sinking of the RMS Lusitania would gradually draw the United States into conflict with Germany and an alliance with Britain.

This writing has moved beyond the “what and when” by explaining why the sinking of the RMS *Lusitania* drew the U.S. into this war and provided the “how and why”. There is greater depth in this example. The facts are not just simply stated – the writer is also weighing the facts and reaching an interpretation when they explain why Wilson responded more dramatically to certain events.

Definition of a Document-Based Question (DBQ):

A document-based question is in effect a mini-research paper with the research materials provided. You are expected to exhibit an acceptable knowledge of history by presenting outside information in your answer and incorporating into that a substantial number of facts from the documents. Your answer must directly address the main issues of the question and propose a thesis or position that you will prove within your essay.

Prompt: *Using the sources and your own knowledge, to what extent do you agree that ‘Israel carried out the war [1967 Six Day War] to defend the very existence of the state’?*

This is an example from a DBQ essay that is descriptive:

Source A indicates that the Six-Day War was the outcome of Arab countries instigating violence towards Israel as a direct result of fearing the Soviet Union’s role to be in the war, when the USSR could have adopted a more peaceful, constructive position.

Source D shows Nasser on 26 May 1967 requesting that the US take no military action against the Arabs, assuring President Johnson that his current actions were only to prove the weakness of the alliances between the United States and Israel and Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Nasser states that should Johnson grant his request, he shall ally himself to the whim of President Johnson.

Think of it this way: the reader can view these documents and obtain the same information that this student listed. There is no analysis and no individual knowledge displayed.

This example uses the same documents, but the documents are used as evidence to support analysis:

The statement is true to some extent, as Israel feared a new invasion from the surrounding Arab states, as an increasingly hostile rhetoric had been developing between Israel and Egypt. Nasser had made a request, that “the US undertake no direct military action in the form of landings, shifting of naval fleet, or otherwise” (Source D). Nasser wanted to retake the buffer zone that had been created after the 1956 Suez-Sinai Crisis, and reclaim the land so that Egypt’s and Israel’s borders would be connected again, thereby making Israel feel threatened by Egypt. Moreover, Nasser initiated the “closing of the Tiran Straits” (Source A), which Israel saw as a hostile move, and making them fear that Nasser intended to annex Israel once more.

This student begins by directly addressing the question. The documents are used as evidence in support of their answer. To make this essay even stronger, the student could include more of their own outside knowledge about the relationship between Egypt and Israel, if it is relevant in answering the prompt. When evidence from the documents and one’s own knowledge are combined, it is called synthesis.

Document Usage:

- If provided four documents on an IB exam, use all four documents, including the graphic source (picture, cartoon, etc.).
- Do not use the DBQ documents in the order they were printed
- Cite documents by title (“The Wilmot Proviso...”, “President Lincoln’s 1863 address...”) or in a parenthetical citation such as (Source A)
- You do not have to quote the documents –stronger essays will have fewer direct quotes. Only select quotes when they are necessary to make your point. Most of your references to the source should be synthesized into your own words.

Here is a common mistake:

Booker T. Washington was an important black leader who was asked to speak in Atlanta during a world fair in 1895. His speech was called the “Atlanta Compromise” and offered to accept segregation and racial inequality if African Americans were given a chance to have economic equality. “The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of question of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.” (Source D) He was saying that blacks would accept segregation and would work hard to earn a better life for themselves.

This student has used a very lengthy quote in their statement and did not bother connecting it to any of their own writing. This “floating quote” does not add anything to the argument and gives the impression that the student is trying to pad the essay to lengthen it. Furthermore, when the student does try to interpret Washington’s words, they only demonstrate a surface level understanding of the text.

This is better:

In the Atlanta Compromise of 1895, Washington, a former slave, suggested that African Americans accept segregation in exchange for economic equality and the right to earn a living. Washington saw a gradual evolution in which blacks would earn social equality by success in the manual arts, the professions, and in educating their race. He was certain that moderate white leaders would join with him in this enterprise and support industrial education for blacks, hire them into their factories, and sell them land where they could prosper. Washington did warn of serious consequences if both sides did not maintain the entire balance of the compromise, while also recognizing that progress would be “the result of severe and constant struggle” (Source D).

This student is referring directly to the text by paraphrasing Washington’s claims in his Atlanta Compromise. They are also demonstrating their own knowledge about Washington beyond the text. When a direct quote is used, it is brief and in context.