



**WRITING A DBQ:
AP* U.S. History**

What Is a DBQ?

- An essay question that asks you to take a position on an issue that has several possible answers
- No “right” or “correct” response
- You must craft a thesis based on your own knowledge and your interpretation of the evidence presented

A DBQ is an essay question that asks you to take a position on an issue that has several possible answers. There is no “right” or “correct” response. The question is designed to give you the opportunity to craft and defend a thesis based upon your knowledge and your interpretation of the evidence presented to you in the primary sources and other documents.

What Is a DBQ?

- You will need to combine your outside historical knowledge and a significant amount of knowledge gleaned from the documents to demonstrate your ability to craft an argument.



There will be one document-based-question on the exam. It will have one of the following historical thinking skills as its main focus: **causation, change and continuity over time, comparison, interpretation, or periodization.**

All DBQs will also always assess the historical thinking skills of **historical argumentation, appropriate use of relevant historical evidence, contextualization and synthesis.**

Expectations:

In Your response you should do the following:

- State a relevant thesis that directly addresses all parts of the question
- Support the thesis or a relevant argument with evidence from all, or all but one, of the documents
- Focus the analysis of each document on at least one of the following: **intended audience, purpose, historical context, and/or point of view.**
- Support your argument with analysis of historical examples outside the documents.
- Connect historical phenomena (events, people, processes) relevant to your argument to broader events or processes.
- Synthesize (combine) the elements above into a persuasive essay

Structure of AP Exam

The AP U.S. History Exam consists of four parts, organized as follows:

Section 1

Part A: Multiple-choice questions (35–40 questions)
Part B: Short-answer questions (4 questions)

Section 2

Part A: Document-based question (1 question)
Part B: Long-essay question (1 question)

**Prompt Analysis Format:
A 5 Step Method**

Step 1 – Attack the Prompt

Read the question carefully,
a few times, then think about the following:

- What is the **essence** of the question?
- Be sure to know exactly what the question is asking you.

First, read the question carefully and try to determine the essence of the question. For example, what type of question is it: What historical skill is it testing?

causation,

Compare causes and/or effects, including between short and long term effects. (I.e. students should move from describing causes to analyzing and evaluating interaction of multiple causes and/or effects).

Analyze and evaluate the interaction of multiple causes and/or effects.

Assess historical contingency by distinguishing among coincidence, causation, and correlation, as well as critiquing existing interpretations of cause and effect.

change and continuity over time,

Recognize, describe, and analyze historical patterns of continuity and change over time (of varying lengths).

Connect patterns of continuity and change over time to larger historical processes of themes.

comparison,

Describe, compare, and evaluate multiple historical developments within one society, one or more developments across or between different societies, and in various chronological and geographical contexts.

Explain and evaluate multiple and differing perspectives on a given historical phenomenon.

interpretation,

Analyze diverse historical interpretations.

Evaluate how historians' perspectives influence their interpretations and how models of historical interpretation change over time.

Periodization

Explain ways that historical events and processes can be organized within blocks of time.

Recognize that the choice of a specific period gives a higher value to one historical narrative, region, or groups.

Analyze and evaluate competing models of periodization of US history.

Step 2 - The Thesis Statement

- A positive assertion regarding an issue about which reasonable people may hold different opinions
- Answers the question in one sentence
- Use your database to organize your arguments
- Don't discuss the documents in the order in which the DBQ presents them



A thesis statement is a positive assertion regarding an issue about which reasonable people may hold different opinions. You must have a thesis before you can prove it. Your first paragraph should reflect that you have a thesis and that you understand the complexity of the question. Remember, there are no simple answers to a DBQ— if an easy response existed, the question wouldn't have been asked in the first place. The level of sophistication of your analysis and the degree to which you successfully prove your thesis are crucial in receiving a high score.

Step 3 - Analyzing the Documents

- A document is not a fact, but a piece of evidence to interpret
- Point of view is crucial – is there anything about the doc that is a red flag – i.e. the author, the time, the place, etc.?
- Briefly write the main point of each document in your own shorthand.
- HIPPO
 - The “O” is how you might use the document in your essay.

- The analysis of the documents should provide evidence to support the thesis.
- **While evidence from at least 6 documents must be included, the essay should incorporate more in-depth analysis of at least four documents (i.e. a MAJORITY of the documents provided) – examining**
 - **Point of view**
 - **Intended audience**
 - **Purpose**

A strong essay, however, does not simply list the characteristics of one document after another. Instead, it makes connections between documents or parts of documents to craft a convincing argument.

A good essay would observe that the documents also reflect differences in point of view, audience, format, etc.

Step 3 - Analyzing the Docs cont.

- If the prompt requires you to take one position or another, group the documents on the basis of those positions.
- Then think – so what? How might I use this? How does it fit in to my essay? In other words, you will be required to think about what you can INFER from the contents of the document.

Outside knowledge might follow up on specific references in the documents.

In other cases, you might use outside knowledge to provide context and demonstrate continuity and change.

The inclusion of knowledge that extends beyond the documents themselves should strengthen the argument and demonstrate an appreciation and awareness of the nuances/complexities/contradictions of history.

Step 3 - Analyzing the Docs cont.

- In a Nutshell, when you look at a doc, think about:
 - **Document information** (i.e. what the document is about, the purpose, main idea – think of it kind of like a summary)
 - **Document Inferences** (i.e. what can you INFER from the documents – how might you use it? Why do you think the AP test makers put this doc there)
 - **Potential Outside Info triggered by the doc** (i.e. the doc may help you remember other stuff)

Step 4 – Rough Outline.

- This is to be done within the first 15 minutes on test day.
- It is a quick outline that is not graded, and should consist of your own shorthand.
- It should provide a sketch of each paragraph – its purpose and/or main argument, the docs you will use, and the outside knowledge you will use

Step 5 – write the essay (finally!!)

The First Paragraph

- Make a strong first impression
- The reader should know your position on the question unequivocally after the first paragraph



In the first paragraph of your essay, you need to provide insight (that is, analysis, perspective, and point of view) into the complexity of the question. This is particularly important if you want to get the highest essay scores. You should make a strong first impression. Try to impress the reader with your analysis of the question. Above all, the reader should know your position on the question unequivocally after the first paragraph.

O'Brien Special - Your opening paragraph should contain the following:

1. A brief definition of the terms and parameters as you understand them
2. Insightful commentary on the question and its complexity
3. Your thesis (MAKE IT NUANCED – RESTATES THE QUESTION BUT ALSO INTRODUCES YOUR RATIONALE/REASONS)

The Body of the Essay (continued)

- Stick to the facts
- Make sure that each point you make supports your thesis and is substantiated by historical evidence.
- Include outside information
- Cite a majority, **MAYBE ALL**, of the documents

Don't editorialize. Stick to the facts. Think of the essay like a sports broadcast: you need to provide the color analysis, not the play-by-play. Instead of saying, "Johnson strikes out," you need to say, "Johnson has proven again and again that he can't handle an inside fastball." When you make a point, be sure that it links to your thesis and supports it. When you finish a paragraph, look back and make sure it connects with your thesis. In addition, you need to provide a substantial amount of outside information and cite a majority of the documents in your essay.

The Conclusion



Think of the opening and closing paragraphs as mini-essays that lay out your entire case. However, the opening paragraph far exceeds the closing one in importance.

Prompt Analysis Format: Summary

1. Attack the **PROMPT**
2. Write tentative **THESIS**
3. Analyze **DOCS**
4. Write rough and quick **OUTLINE**
5. Write the **DBQ**

DBQ Facts & Tips

- Synthesize the information that is in the documents rather than paraphrasing or quoting the documents.
- In other words, use the main idea of any document to support your thesis, don't rely too heavily on quoting it. (perhaps use excerpts that are within YOUR text.
- Documents are meant to trigger recollection of relevant outside information to include in your responses.

DBQ Facts & Tips

- Be prepared to write a “concession paragraph” just before the conclusion. A concession paragraph acknowledges challenges and conflicts to your thesis. Although this paragraph should never REPUDIATE (i.e. negate) your thesis, its inclusion in your essay demonstrates that you are attuned to the complexity and controversy that may surround the issues in your answer.

Revisit your THESIS and Start your Intro

A SAMPLE OUTLINE FOR A DOCUMENT-BASED ESSAY:

1. **Introduction Paragraph**
 - a. State your thesis, or Big Picture Argument.
 - b. Provide three reasons why your Big Picture Argument is true.
2. **Body Paragraph 1 - Your First Reason**
 - a. Document evidence to support your first reason.
 - b. Provide outside information to support your first reason.
3. **Body Paragraph 2 - Your Second Reason**
 - a. Document evidence to support your second reason.
 - b. Provide outside information to support your second reason.
4. **Body Paragraph 3 - Your Third Reason**
 - a. Document evidence to support your third reason.
 - b. Provide outside information to support your third reason.
5. **Conclusion Paragraph - Your Conclusion**
 - a. Restate your thesis in different words.
 - b. Place your essay answer in a wider historical context.

Now you are ready to revisit your thesis, You should provide evidence of both, but pick a side. Remember, every issue has contradictions – you are to highlight them, and come to a clear conclusion.

Perhaps jot down a rough outline of the body paragraphs.

Write an introductory paragraph with a clear thesis that answers the question in one sentence.