

## Essay Writing Tips for History

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US History

### How do I start my essay?

- Reading the question...read thoroughly and really get a grasp on what is being asked of you.
  - Staying focused on the question will prevent those rambling answers that lose points
- Outlining – it is important to strategically map out what you are going to say.
  - Devising the **sequence, structure, and scope** of the essay is essential, and usually a timesaver when it comes time to write

### Outlining

- Assuming this is the question: “Explain how new territories added to the United States increased the likelihood of Civil War. You must use the following terms in your answer: Mexican War, Wilmot Proviso, California, Utah, New Mexico, Kansas, Nebraska, slavery, and popular sovereignty.”
- How would you outline this...? Any ideas?

### Sample Outline

- Intro sentence/thesis – “The debate over the inclusion of slavery in the new territories added to the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century precipitated the onset of the Civil War”
- Mexican War
  - California, Utah, New Mexico added
  - Slave or free?
- Wilmot Proviso
  - 1846 – attempt to make all Mexican War territorial gains free
  - Did not pass – angered the south
- **Compromise of 1850**
  - California free, New Mexico & Utah popular sovereignty (define)
  - Included **fugitive slave act** – controversial, angered the north
- Kansas-Nebraska Act – 1854
  - Split the territory into two sections – use popular sovereignty
  - Both sides take issue – want influence
  - **Violence in Kansas – “bleeding Kansas”**
- Closing Sentence/restate-reword thesis – “The controversial relationship between slavery and westward expansion created many of the sectional tensions that divided the north and the south and led to the civil war.”

### Things to avoid...

- Overstating – saying more than you can prove or
- logically infer...don't do this!
  - Tend to be declarative statements not defended by fact
  - Example: “Abraham Lincoln would have emancipated slaves sooner had the North won a major battle earlier.”
    - This is not illogical, but it is not something you can prove using factual evidence
- The fix: Use language that allows for flexibility and indicates interpretation.
  - Example: “It is likely that Lincoln would have emancipated slaves sooner, had a victory like Antietam occurred earlier in the war”
- The fix: Don't write what you can't defend.

### Things to avoid...

- Fluff – unnecessary words/sentences that miss the point, fail to advance your thesis
  - Example: In the Lincoln/slavery question, some people wrote this “Lincoln became a master of war strategies during the war”
    - This does not address his view on slavery and should be removed
- The fix: think about what you are writing and don't write anything that does not relate to the question or your thesis
  - Write with a purpose!
- The fix: proofread and omit/remove fluff

### Things to avoid...

- Jumbling – writing answers in illogical order, poor flow of ideas.
  - Example: In the war strategies question someone wrote “The south fought a defensive war. Winfield Scott was a successful general in the Mexican War. The south betrayed...”
- The fix: Outlining as discussed early.
- The fix: Proofreading. After your essays are complete, review them and ask yourself “does this all make sense, sound good?” (This is one key to getting an A!)

### Things to work on...

- Synthesis – connecting multiple concepts/terms into a single coherent piece of work
- On questions where I give you the terms you need to make sure they relate to both the question and to one another (in most cases)
  - I do not pick these terms at random!
  - Example: on the war strategies question you must relate the terms **Anaconda Plan**, **Mississippi River**, **Richmond**, and **blockade**. Additionally, the term **Vicksburg** should relate to the success of the plan.
- The fix: Know your stuff! Pay attention in class, ask questions, be thorough in your research.

### Things to work on...

- Write concisely – get to the point!
  - The goal of your essay is to answer the question...don't ever forget this.
  - Avoid tangents. (sidetracking that deviates from your thesis)
  - Avoid covering any one topic more than is needed. Ex. Wilmot Proviso.
  - Don't write more when less will do.
  - Remember not to fluff! Write with a purpose.
  - Lastly, don't use words that you don't understand or aren't sure of. They will not impress, they will depress.
    - Simple language that is typically the safest choice

### Things to work on...

- Write precisely – tell me exactly what you mean.
  - Avoid generic phrases and words
    - Ex: “Overall, Lincoln did this very good”
    - My response: What is “this” and how do you define “very good”
  - Avoid being vague – be clear.
    - Don't dance around the question or concept you are discussing, tackle it head on.
    - Too much of this indicates that you don't know what you are talking about and are likely doing this assignment on the fly disregarding proper resources.

### Things to work on...

- Going to extra-mile – show me what you know.
  - Remember the outline... I highlighted the terms “bleeding Kansas” and “Compromise of 1850” which were not among the list of terms to be included, but were helpful in making a good argument. This type of effort and depth of knowledge separates the A's from the B's.
  - Do not attempt this if the added information does not help your thesis, help answer the question, or is cannot be defended by fact.

### Things to work on...

- Formality – make sure your writing is always proper unless otherwise stated.
  - Swearing in a paper is inappropriate.
  - Never use contractions. (don't, can't, etc.)
  - Do not doodle/sketch on your papers
  - Do not use “casual” or “cliché” words/phrases
  - Ex: “Lincoln's attitude towards slavery was freaking insane. He was tripping about how the south was treating blacks and all. He was like, this can't go on”
    - What is wrong here?

### Things to work on...

- Spelling, grammar, and handwriting
  - Misspelling words in any take home essay assignment is unacceptable. Refer to a dictionary if you are remotely unsure.
  - At this stage and beyond, your sentence structure, phrasing, and word choice should be consistent and stellar. Proofread!!!
  - Some of you must write more legibly...many teachers and professors will not try to interpret what you write, but rather they will refuse to score illegible work or have you rewrite it.

### The 5 Essential Rules of DBQ writing

1. Understand the question!
  - Read the question and analyze the keywords
  - Must know what you are being asked to provide a competent and complete answer!

### The 5 Essential Rules of DBQ writing

2. Read the source, just as critically as the document
  - Who, what, when, where, why, etc.?

### The 5 Essential Rules of DBQ writing

3. Use all the documents...
  - Unless they refute your thesis

### The 5 Essential Rules of DBQ writing

4. Stay within the time period!
  - If you stray you may not get back...
  - If you **absolutely** feel you need to, make sure to return to the time period

### The 5 Essential Rules of DBQ writing

5. Show your knowledge of the period
  - Go beyond the documents...you must show the reader you know the **broader historical context!**
  - In other words, "Show what you know!" ~Mr. M

### Other Helpful Tips

- ❑ Avoid excessive quoting, they want you to *analyze*, not *regurgitate* the documents
- ❑ You don't have to use the documents in order!
- ❑ Cite the documents using the author in the sentence and the Document letter in parenthesis at the end ("Winthrop says in his writing, xyz...blah blan. {Doc B})
- ❑ If you have to give up something...and try your best not to...sacrifice the conclusion!

### Intro

- ❑ The intro is **THE MOST IMPORTANT PART** of the DBQ!
- ❑ There are 4 parts, each of which we will analyze and practice. Know them and perfect them!
  - Setting
  - Bridge
  - Partition
  - Thesis
- ❑ Once you have the intro, the rest of the DBQ falls into place!

### Intro - Setting

- ❑ Provide the setting, or the historical context, of the essay. (i.e. when, where, and what is going on.)
- ❑ Use what is given in the prompt!
- ❑ Incorporate relevant background knowledge.

### Intro - Bridge

- ❑ Give a basis for analysis to setup your response.
- ❑ What do we need to look at to get at the prompt?

### Intro - Partition

- ❑ Outline the prongs, or sub-topics to be addressed.
- ❑ Generally two to three areas that will comprise your body paragraphs.
- ❑ Often broken into political, social, economic, etc. categories of analysis

### Intro - Thesis

- ❑ Clearly articulates the argument, or purpose, of the essay to be proven throughout.
- ❑ This is recommended as the last sentence to lead the reader into your making of the case in the subsequent body paragraphs.

## USING MEL-CON PARAGRAPHS TO WRITE WELL-ORGANIZED, WELL-CONSTRUCTED ESSAYS\*

\*yes, you must use this format from now on

## MEL-Con Paragraphs

### Main Idea

- The first sentence of the paragraph/topic sentence
- Connects the paragraph to the thesis statement

### Evidence/Examples

- Information that supports the main idea (facts, statistics, quotes, documents, readings, etc.)

### Link

- Connect the evidence to the idea in the topic sentence
- Explains how the evidence supports your main idea

### Conclusion

- The last sentence of the paragraph/summation
- Mentions the evidence in a new, concise way
- *Transitions* to the next paragraph

## MEL-Con Paragraphs

- Every expository (and most persuasive) paragraph that you read is a MEL-Con paragraph
- MEL-Con just gives us a framework to talk about writing in the social sciences
- No less than SIX sentences per paragraph
  - 1 main idea
  - 2 pieces of evidence
  - 2 linking sentences
  - 1 conclusion sentence

## MEL-Con Paragraphs - Transitions

- Every evidence sentence must use effective transitions to connect the pieces of evidence
- Samples of transition words/phrases:
  - For example/another example...
  - One piece of evidence that supports this is...
  - Furthermore
  - In addition
  - Similarly
  - Likewise
  - Finally
  - Lastly
  - Most importantly

## MEL-Con Paragraphs - Conclusions

- Summarize your main idea and evidence in a concise fashion
- *Transition to the next paragraph*
- Avoid using "In conclusion..."
- Samples of concluding words & phrases:
  - In summary
  - Accordingly
  - The evidence clearly shows
  - As a result
  - It is clear that
  - It is evident that
  - Therefore

## Happy Writing!

Use these tips in high school and in college and I guarantee you will see higher scores on your essays.

~Mr. McMurray