

How to Write a DBQ

The purpose of a DBQ is not to test your knowledge of world history, but to evaluate your ability to practice skills used by historians. In order to write a DBQ, you will answer a question by analyzing several historical documents.

This is a skill that must be practiced. Although you may struggle at first, do not get discouraged. Remember, there is not an actual right or wrong answer. Your answer is YOUR interpretation of the documents. As long as your answer is logical, and your interpretation is supported by the content of the documents, you are correct.

For the World History AP exam, students are expected to write one DBQ. Students are given 40 minutes to complete the essay. The College Board recommends students spend 10 minutes analyzing the documents and 30 minutes writing the essay.

Steps for completing the DBQ

I. Prewriting (10 minutes)

A. Read the Question

1. Read the question and the historical background carefully. Ask yourself, “What is it they are asking me to accomplish?” Be sure to note whether the question has several parts. Does it ask you to analyze, compare/contrast, identify change over time, etc.?
2. Identify the parameters of the question (time period, social classes, political and economic but not social causes, etc.).
3. Identify the other key terms in the question.
4. MANY STUDENTS WHO FAIL THE DBQ DO SO BECAUSE THEY FAIL TO ANSWER THE QUESTION.

B. Analyze the Documents

1. Create a tentative chart based upon the question.
2. Use APPARTS to analyze each document.
3. As you read each document, make notes (where the document fits on your chart, whether it is pro/con, author’s point-of-view or bias, etc.)
4. Underline one or two key phrases in each document.

C. Construct an Outline

1. Make a quick outline by identifying important ideas and the documents that support your ideas.
2. Before you begin writing, re-read the question. Does your outline cover the question completely? Did you use all of the documents?

II. Writing the Essay

A. Introduction Paragraph (3 sentences)

1. Frame the question by identifying the parameters of the question and putting the question into a global context (1 sentence)
2. Thesis statement
 - a. Must answer the question
 - b. Needs to be clear, analytical, and comprehensive
 - c. Use an although statement (1 sentence) to answer the question
 - d. Show analysis of although statement through causation, point of view, etc.
3. Use 3 Part Thesis Paragraph

B. Body Paragraphs

1. Topic sentences should relate back to the thesis.
2. Evidence

- a. Should always refer to the documents
 - b. Evidence should depend heavily upon the documents. Outside information is not as important on the World History exam as it is on the U.S. History exam. Outside evidence may be used to enhance understanding but it must NOT be the basis of your argument
3. Using the documents
- a. Summarize and analyze every document
 - b. Group the documents (i.e. put documents with the same topic, theme, point of view, time period, etc. together). NEVER GIVE A LAUNDRY LIST OF DOCUMENTS
 - c. Documents should constantly refer to the question and/or your thesis
 - d. Identify each document by using the author's name and the document number in such a way that the reader cannot help but notice your use of the document
 - e. Do NOT quote the documents. Paraphrase the documents in your own words using key terms from the sections of the document you highlighted in the pre-writing section
 - f. Identify point of view for every document. (See attached page for how to identify point of view)
4. Additional Suggestions
- a. Use as many indicators of analysis as possible. The indicators of analysis are:
 - 1) Analytical essay structure (thesis, discussion w/evidence, conclusion)
 - 2) Organization of evidence into categories, especially ones not specified in the question itself—GROUPING IS GOOD
 - 3) Frequent reference to the terms of the question
 - 4) Combining documents for analysis or evaluation
 - 5) Recognition of contradictions, ambiguities, etc. in documents
 - b. Although your essay will NOT be scored for grammar, spelling, or sentence structure, readers are human. Sloppy writing and poor composition skills will have an impact on the sub-conscious of the reader. Write as neatly as time constraints allow.

C. Conclusion

- 1. Identify two or three documents that would have helped you prove your thesis.
- 2. Restate your thesis statement.

III. Common Errors

A. Major Concerns

- 1. Simply paraphrasing or summarizing the documents.
- 2. Failing to integrate the documents with the essay.
- 3. Failing to answer the question asked.
- 4. Failing to analyze the documents or determine their significance (i.e. treating all documents of equal value, as absolute truth, not noting possible bias, etc.).
- 5. Failing to demonstrate that independent thought has gone into the essay.
- 6. Failing to address the points of view of the authors of the documents.
- 7. Failing to use all of the documents.

B. Minor Concerns

- 1. Grammar and spelling.
- 2. Do NOT refer to yourself in the essay. High school teachers, AP graders, and college professors hate when students do this.
- 3. Thesis statement is not in the first paragraph.