

How to Write a DBQ (Document-Based Question) Answer*

The DBQ is a special type of essay question. In the DBQ some of the information you need is presented in the documents. For the DBQ you are expected to analyze and interpret the documents and at the same time relate the information in the documents and your analysis of it to the "mainstream," that is, the main chronological development, of American history. You must include in your answer information from this chronology that is not found in the documents. To help students in their study, the College Board announces in May - one year before the exam - a 50-year time period for the DBQ.

In answering the DBQ, you must begin by analyzing the question as you would with regular essay-type questions. One of the biggest failings of students in answering the DBQ is their inability to weave outside information into their essay. The following strategy for answering a DBQ will help you avoid this problem.

1. **Read the question only**, omitting the documents, and then **list** in the exam booklet all the names, events, acts, and writings that come to mind for the time period covered in the essay. Some of these terms will later be drawn on as outside information in the essay.
2. Next, still without looking at the documents, **write a brief outline** to the question asked.
3. Only after the first two steps have been completed should you carefully read the documents themselves. (You may want to use pens to highlight the documents.) While reading the documents, you should also make brief notes. Note the source of the document. Is it biased? Note the date of the document if given. How will the date affect its accuracy? What is the exact point being made? **Finally, you should decide where the documents will fit in your outline.**
4. An effective way of incorporating outside information into the DBQ is to "**set the scene**" in the second paragraph to establish the historical context of the essay. Later in the essay other outside information should be integrated into the argument. You may want to include a "**concession statement**" either early in the essay or in the next to last paragraph to confront the point of view you do not intend to take. This is a good idea because it demonstrates that you understand the complexity of the issue and gives you an additional opportunity to weave into the essay documents and outside information.

You do not need to use all eight to ten documents to score at the highest levels on the DBQs, but you should use most of them. Some documents will be more valuable or reliable than others. Pick and choose the documents you use and rearrange the order. Group documents with similar ideas together. Be imaginative!

You should not quote extensively from the documents. Using a fragment or a sentence is fine, but more than that is a waste of time. Summarize the key idea(s) found in the document, but do not quote the full document.

In citing the sources, it is far better to mention the author or subjects of a document - for example, "John Winthrop maintains" or "the list of emigrants bound for New England illustrates" - rather than referring to "Document A". It is perfectly acceptable to put "Doc. C" after a discussion as a footnote, but in a well-written essay it is not necessary.

Remember you are to write a unified essay and not a mere summary of what is in each document. Refer to other events of the age, and clearly indicate how these documents relate to these events and help you gain a better understanding of events in the "mainstream" of American history.

*Much of the information in this handout can be found in these sources.

Kellogg, William O. *Barron's - How to prepare for the AP United States History Advanced Placement Examination*. New York: Barron's Education Series, Inc., 2000.

Rothschild, Eric. *Teacher's guide to the Advanced Placement Course in United States History*. The College Board and Education Testing Service.