

The Free-Response Essay

I. Overall

The DBQ is worth 45 percent of your *essay* grade, and the two free-response questions you must answer are worth 55 percent (or 27.5 percent each). The two free-response essays are together worth more than one-quarter of your *overall exam grade*, so they are VERY important. Many students are tempted to ease up when they finish the DBQ because it is so challenging. Don't make this mistake ! Reach down for that last bit of energy; you are in the home stretch, but the journey is definitely not over. . .

Unlike the DBQ, *everything* you include in your free-response answers will be outside information. Most questions ask you to *analyze, assess, or evaluate* the causes or effects of a historical subject, allowing for answers that are divided between description, comparison and commentary.

While most questions allow you to include a good deal of description, be careful that you do not *simply* describe. You need to show relationships, & make generalizations.

II. The Game Plan

1. Be sure you pick the questions you know the most about, *not* the ones that seem easier (at first glance). The more you know *and* can show (in a coherent style, naturally !) the better your score is likely to be.
2. Read the question twice. Misreading the question is a common error, so make sure you are answering the right one !
3. Plan your time so you can divide the 70 minutes evenly between the two essays. Pace yourself to be sure to do a good job on both questions. Too many students spend most of their time on the first essay, and then do not have enough time to write a decent second essay. Both essays are worth the same amount of points, so treat them equally. Pace yourself, watch the clock, and make sure you are finishing (or, better yet, have finished) your first essay when 35 minutes have passed.

III. Individual Questions & Essays

1. Circle, underline, and use brackets to highlight key words in the question.
2. Create a grid or columns for your outline notes.
3. *Based on your notes*, develop a thesis.
4. Write a quick outline.
5. Use *transition words* to indicate continuity of thought and changes in the direction of your argument.

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IV. Understand the Structure of the Question

1. You must answer **all** parts of the question.
2. Be sure you're clear on what you're being asked to do: "compare", "describe", "explain", "identify", "list", and "select" mean different things; taking this into account can only make your response stronger. Don't be tempted to change the question a little to one that might be more to your liking, because you won't get points for knowing something else or answering a question that was *not* asked.
3. If you are asked to list things, use an itemized list with numbers or with the words "first", "second", and "third." This will help you keep track of your evidence.
4. Many questions provide a general thesis or framework for your lead sentence (e.g., "The Jacksonian period of 1824-48 has been celebrated as the era of the 'common man.' To what extent did the period live up to its characterization?"). You already have one-half of your thesis contained in such a question, but don't simply restate it. Make sure to present a clear set of reasons for that thesis' support.
5. Sometimes questions will include a caution against using a certain approach in your answer. For example, a statement that says, "Your answer should not include a discussion of presidential primary elections" in an essay on the presidency is a clear prohibition: abide by it.

V. Answer Directly and Explicitly

1. Let the question guide you; if you're asked to link institutional processes with public policy (e.g., checks and balances as seen in the War Powers Act of 1973), write a focused essay that presents explicit links.
2. Questions asking for a list usually want narrow, specific items. Do not examine items that you *would* use in a broader essay about the subject. If the remainder of the question asks for links, that would be an appropriate place to elaborate.
3. Your *introduction* is one of the most important paragraphs. Make sure you state both the topic and your opinion. If you do not, the evaluator may be confused. That said, you should not write "In my opinion" or "I believe" at any time. Just state your position clearly.

VI. In Closing. . .

Check your work (if you have time).

Stay positive. Do not panic. Everyone else is as nervous as you are !