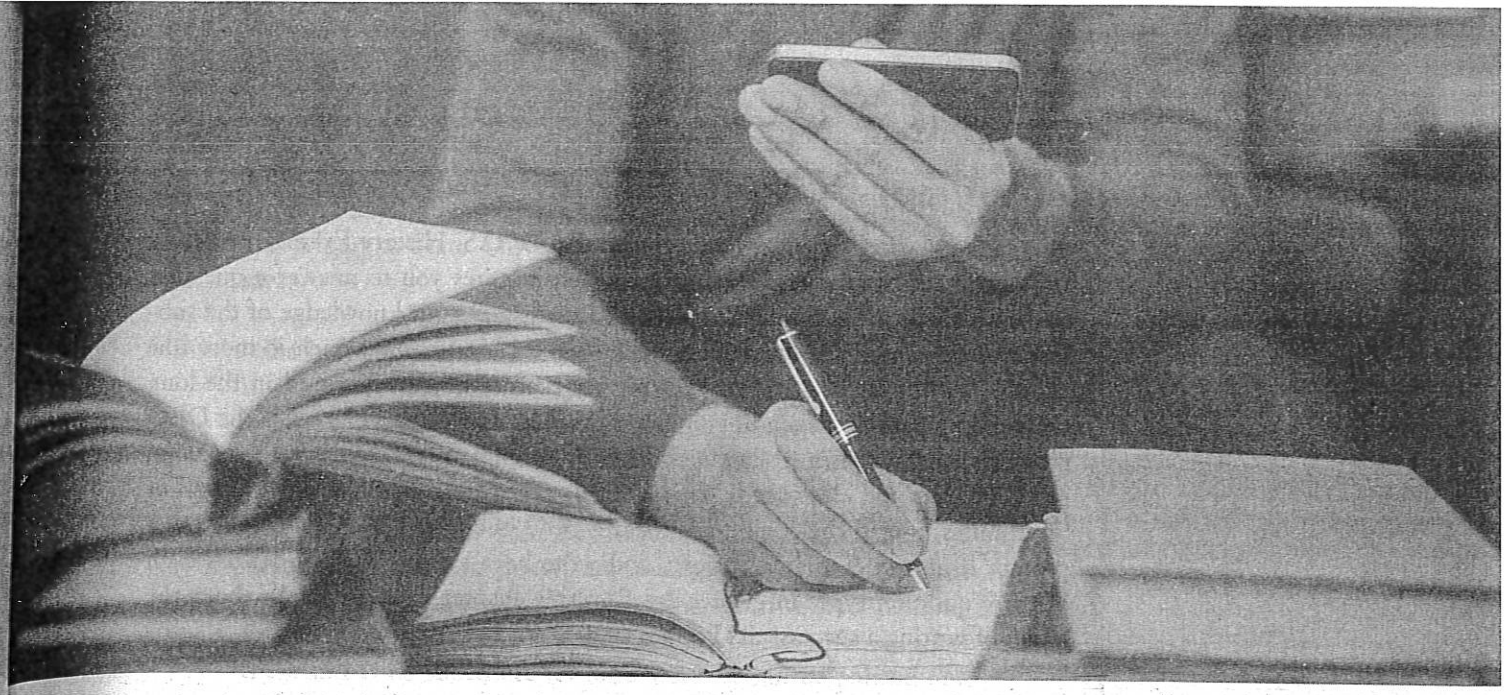


Chapter 3
How to Approach the Document-Based and Long Essay Questions

OVERVIEW

There are two types of essay questions on the AP U.S. History Exam. The first is the document-based question (DBQ), which requires you to answer a question based on six or seven primary source documents and your knowledge of the subject and time period. The second is the long essay question, which is more like typical essay questions on any other history exam. The era addressed in the long essay question shifts depending on what era the DBQ covers. Hence, if the DBQ concerns progressivism, then the long essay prompt might concern the road to the Civil War and elections in the late 20th century. You are provided a total of 90 minutes to read the documents for the DBQ question, choose your long essay prompt from two available options, and write both essays. We will discuss each of these question types in greater detail in this chapter. First, let's talk about the basics of writing a successful AP essay.

What Are the AP Essay Graders Looking For?

Here is what one AP grader said:

> "My most basic advice to students taking the AP U.S. History Exam would be the same advice I give to college students facing an essay exam: ANSWER THE QUESTION, begin with a thesis, and follow a reasonable outline. Questions usually suggest a basic thesis statement and a logical outline, so look for them and follow them. The less a writer confuses his or her reader, the better."
>
> Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, Illinois State University

In other words, be straightforward. Do not try to fudge your way through the essay; the graders are all experts in history, and you will not be able to fool them into thinking you know more than you actually do.

It is also very important to focus on the phrasing of the question. Some students are so anxious to get going that they start writing as soon as they know the general subject of the question, and many of these students lose points because their essays do not answer the question being asked. Take, for example, an essay question that asks you to discuss the effects of the Great Depression on working-class citizens. The overanxious test taker might start rattling off everything he or she knows about the Depression: its causes, its effect on the presidential election of 1932, the New Deal programs that helped alleviate its effects, and so on. No matter how well this essay is written, points are going to be lost for one simple reason—the writer did not answer the question!

Second, a good essay does more than rattle off facts. It reveals an understanding of the general principles or the "big picture" of American history. Professor Keith Edgerton at Montana State University in Billings grades AP essays, and here's what he says:

> "The best essays that I encountered were the ones that wove an understanding of content with some critical analysis. I am impressed with some originality of thought too; so few students possess it these days. Students should be willing to take something of a chance with the essays and not simply provide recitation of the few 'facts' that they have memorized. Longer essays, though not necessarily better, are usually more thorough in their coverage rather than the quick, I-need-to-get-this-done-because-I'm-tired-and-sick-of-this-test essays. It is a cliché, to be sure, but there still is no substitute for hard work. It can be painful and awfully grinding sometimes to learn history well, and it seems that there are not many students who want to devote much time to it. It does not provide instant gratification and cannot be mastered quickly, and it certainly does not happen in 23 minutes with appropriate commercial interruption. Students should read everything they can get their hands on and turn off the television. That is the best advice I can give."

If all this sounds intimidating, read on! There are a few simple things you can do to improve your grade on your AP essays.

Reasons to Be Cheerful

AP graders know that you are given only 90 minutes to plan and write two separate essays. They also know that is not enough time to cover the subject matter tested by the question. The fact is, many very long books have been written about any subject that you might be asked about on the DBQ and the long essay questions. That is why the College Board includes this statement:

> "As with the long essay, responses to the document-based question will be judged on students' ability to formulate a thesis and support it with relevant evidence."

In other words, expressing good ideas and presenting valid evidence in support of those ideas are important. Making sure you mention every single relevant piece of historical information is not so important, or even possible.

Remember that the graders are not given a lot of time to read your essays. One of them explains the grading experience this way:

> "There were about 545 graders drawn from colleges, universities, high schools, and prep schools. We had about 70 tables of readers. A table leader presides over each group. A typical schedule looks like this: 8:30 A.M. to 10:00 reading; 10:00 to 10:20 break; 10:20 to 12:00 reading; 12:00 to 1:00 lunch; 1:00 to 3:00 reading; 3:00 to 3:20 break; 3:20 to 5:00 reading. We read for six and a half days. Before grading the essays, we read sample packets selected by the table leaders, who arrive a few days before the rest of us. With the sample packets we try to establish standards using a 0 to 9 scale. When the table leader believes we all have 'locked into' the standards, we commence reading. The table leader occasionally samples our finished product in order to ensure accuracy. Also, a computer correlates the essay scores with the grade received on the multiple-choice section. The AP authorities emphasize accuracy rather than speed. In the six and a half days, I read 995 essays. I do not know how this rate relates to other readers... We look for responsiveness to the question. For the DBQ, we seek a clear thesis statement and supporting evidence."
>
> Charles Quirk, University of Northern Iowa

Think about it. Professor Quirk averaged almost 150 essays a day—a little more than two minutes per essay. True, they are not writing comments, but at any rate, readers cannot look for anything profound or subtle. What they can do is look for evidence that you have something reasonably intelligent to say and that you know how to say it. Furthermore, the graders read many awful essays. (Not everyone, remember, is preparing for this test as well as you are.)

It is true that you can get the best possible score only if you have mastered the material. However, regardless of how well-prepared you are, you can improve your score if you follow the guidelines on the following pages. They will tell you how to avoid the mistakes all graders hate and how to use writing and organizational techniques they love.

Before we get to those guidelines, a final word from Darril Wilburn, a high school history teacher in Bardstown, New York. We think it is inspirational:

> "On essay questions I stress two things: using detail and staying positive. You must be able to substantiate your ideas and thoughts with detail (factual, of course). This will go very far in impressing the reader that you do indeed know what you are talking about.... On staying positive, I ask the students not to think of the essay questions (or any part of the exam for that matter) as something you lose points on. Think of each question and each bit of detail and each morsel of fact as an addition to your score; do not think of everything you leave out as being a subtraction from your score. This helps you stay focused and keeps stress levels lower (unless, of course, you do not know anything; then you deserve to be nervous). You can also play a mind game with yourself: 'How many points can I gather on this question?' This also keeps stress low."

Focus on what you know, rather than on what you do not know. Turn the test into a game.

Things That Make Any Essay Better

There are two essential components to writing a successful timed essay. First, plan what you are going to write before you start writing! Second, use a number of tried-and-true writing techniques that will make your essay appear better organized, better thought-out, and better written. This section is about those techniques. Remember: An essay that is better written and better organized usually earns a higher score than an essay that rambles but is packed with facts.

1. Choose

Read the question carefully. For the DBQ, read each of the documents. You will be required to write one DBQ and one long essay. While there is no choice regarding the DBQ, you will be asked to select one question from a pair of long essay questions. The DBQ requires you to interpret a variety of documents and integrate your interpretation of these documents with your knowledge of the topic or time period. Being familiar with these instructions is useful in preparing for the exam, but you should reread all of the instructions very carefully on the actual day you take the exam to ensure that you are doing what is required of you.

2. Think

Brainstorm for one or two minutes. In your test booklet, write down everything that comes to mind about the subject. (There is room in the margins and at the top and bottom of the pages.) Look at your notes, and consider the results of your brainstorming session as you decide what point you will argue in your essay; that argument is going to be your thesis. Remember: Your thesis must respond to the

question. Utilize your notes to prove your thesis, but do not choose an argument that you know is wrong or with which you disagree. Finally, sort the results of your brainstorm. Some of what you wrote down will be "big picture" conclusions, some will be historical facts that can be used as evidence to support your conclusions, and some will be garbage.

3. Outline

Try to have at least three body paragraphs. You should go into special detail in each of the paragraphs on the DBQ. (Remember: You will have the documents and your outside knowledge to discuss on the DBQ.) Your first paragraph should contain your thesis statement as the last sentence. Your second, third, and fourth paragraphs (if there are three topics in the prompt) should contain three arguments that support that statement, along with historical evidence to back those arguments. The fifth paragraph should contain your conclusion, and you must specifically answer the question here if you have not already done so. Before you start to write your outline, you will have to decide what type of argument you are going to make. The following is a list of some classic arguments:

- **Three Good Points**
  This is the simplest strategy. Look at the results of your brainstorming session, and pick the three best points supporting your position. Make each of these points the subject of one paragraph, respectively. Make the weakest of the three points the subject of the second paragraph, and save the strongest point for the fourth paragraph. If your three points are interrelated and there is a natural sequence to arguing them, then by all means use that sequence, but otherwise, try to save your strongest point for last. Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that tells the reader which topic you are going to address in that paragraph. Then spend the rest of the paragraph supporting it. Use specific historical examples whenever possible. Your first paragraph should state what you intend to argue; your final paragraph should explain why you have proven what you set out to prove. Don't forget to use transitions to make your examples and argument more cohesive and stronger.

- **The Chronological Argument**
  Many questions lend themselves to a chronological treatment. Questions about the development of a political, social, or economic trend can hardly be answered any other way. When you make a chronological argument, look for important transitions and use them to start new paragraphs. A five-paragraph essay about the events leading up to the Civil War, for example, might start with an introductory discussion of slavery and regional differences in the early 19th century. This is also where you should state your thesis. The second paragraph might then discuss the Missouri Compromise and other efforts to avoid the war. The third paragraph might mention the expansionism of the Polk era and how it forced the slavery issue, and the fourth

paragraph might cover the collapse of the Missouri Compromise and how the events that followed—the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scott case—led the country into war. Your conclusion in this type of essay should restate the essay question and answer it. For example, if the question asks whether the war was inevitable, you should answer "yes" or "no" in this paragraph. However, remember that simply writing "The Civil War was inevitable" is not a thesis.

- **Comparison**
  Some questions, particularly on the free-response section, ask you to compare events, issues, and/or policies. Very often, the way the question is phrased will suggest the best organization for your essay. Take, for example, a question asking you to compare the impact of three events and issues on the United States' decision to enter World War II. This question pretty much requires you to start by setting the historical scene prior to the three events/issues you are about to discuss. Continue by devoting one paragraph to each of the three, and conclude by comparing and contrasting the relative importance of each.

  Other questions will provide options. If you are asked to compare the political philosophies of two presidents, you might use each paragraph to compare and contrast both presidents' views on a single subject. For example, you might compare the two presidents' philosophies regarding the interpretation of the Constitution (loose or strict) in one paragraph, their differing approaches to foreign policy in one paragraph, and their ideas about the American economy in another paragraph. In the final paragraph, you can draw your conclusion (e.g., "their similarities were more significant than their differences," or vice versa), but be certain you state your argument in your thesis at the beginning of the essay.

- **The "Straw Man" Argument**
  In this essay-writing technique, choose a couple of arguments that someone taking the position opposite yours would take. State their arguments, and then tear them down. Remember that proving that your opposition is wrong does not mean that you have proved you are correct; that is why you should choose only a few opposing arguments to refute. Summarize your opponent's arguments in paragraph two, dismiss them in paragraph three, and use paragraph four to make the argument for your side. Or, use one paragraph to summarize and dismiss each of your opponent's arguments, and then make the case for your side in your concluding paragraph. Acknowledging both sides of an argument, even when you choose one over the other, is a good indicator that you understand that historical issues are complex and can be interpreted in more than one way—which teachers and readers like to see.

No matter which format you choose, remember to organize your essay so that the first paragraph addresses the question and states how you are going to answer it. (That is your thesis.) The second, third, and fourth paragraphs should each be organized around a single argument that supports your thesis, and each of these arguments must be supported by historical evidence. Your final paragraph then ties the essay up into a nice, neat package. Your concluding paragraph should also answer the question.

4. Write

- **Keep sentences as simple as possible.** Long sentences get convoluted very quickly and will give your graders a headache, putting them in a bad mood. Do not antagonize your reader! Remember that good writing does not have to be complicated; some great ideas can be stated simply. NEVER use a word if you are unsure of its definition or proper usage. A malapropism might give your graders a good laugh, but it will not earn you any points, and it will probably cost you.
- **Write clearly and neatly.** As long as we are discussing your graders' moods, here is an easy way to put them in good ones. Graders look at a lot of chicken scratch; it strains their eyes and makes them grumpy. Neatly written essays make them happy. When you cross out, do it neatly. If you are making any major edits—if you want to insert a paragraph in the middle of your essay, for example—make sure you indicate these changes clearly.
- **Define your terms.** Most questions require you to use terms that mean different things to different people. One person's "conservative" is another person's "liberal" and yet another person's "radical." What one person considers "expansionism," another might call "colonialism" or "imperialism." The folks who grade the test want to know what you think these terms mean. When you use them, define them. Take particular care to define any such terms that appear in the question. The introductory paragraph is a good place to include any definitions. Almost all official College Board materials stress this point, so do not forget it. Be sure to define any term that you suspect can be interpreted in more than one way.
- **Use transition words between paragraphs and within paragraphs to show where you are going.** When continuing an idea, use words such as *furthermore, also,* and *in addition.* When changing the flow of thought, use words such as *however* and *yet.* Transition words make your essay easier to understand by clarifying your intentions. Better yet, they indicate to the graders that you know how to make a coherent, persuasive argument.

- **Use structural indicators to organize your paragraphs.** Another way to clarify your intentions is to organize your essay around structural indicators. For example, if you are making a number of related points, number them ("First... Second... And last..."). If you are writing a compare/contrast essay, use the indicators "on the one hand" and "on the other hand."

- **Stick to your outline.** Unless you get an absolutely brilliant idea while you are writing, do not deviate from your outline. If you do, you will risk winding up with an incoherent essay.

- **Try to prove one "big picture" idea per paragraph.** Keep it simple. Each paragraph should make one point and then substantiate that point with historical evidence.

- **Back up your ideas with examples.** Yes, we have said this already, but it bears repeating. Do not just throw ideas out there and hope that you are right (unless you are absolutely desperate). You will score big points if you substantiate your claims with specific, historical examples.

- **Try to fill the essay form.** An overly short essay will hurt you more than one that is overly long. Try to write five solid paragraphs.

- **Make sure your first and last paragraphs directly address the question.** Nothing will cost you points faster than if the graders decide you did not answer the question. It is always a safe move to start your final paragraph by answering the question. If you have written a good essay, that answer will serve as a legitimate conclusion.

CRACKING THE DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

The DBQ is an essay question that requires you to interpret a mix of textual and visual *primary source* documents. (There are 6 or 7 documents in a DBQ.) These documents will include many, if not all, of the following: newspaper articles and editorials, letters, diaries, speeches, excerpts from legislation, political cartoons, charts, and graphs. The documents will *not* include excerpts from current textbooks. Occasionally, one or two of the documents will be taken from something "classic" that you may have previously seen, but generally the documents will be new to you. However, they will discuss events and ideas with which you should be familiar. All the documents will pertain to a single subject. The documents are usually between a quarter and a half page long, although occasionally you will see something longer.

The DBQ, which is approximately 55 minutes long, is part of the second section of the test. At the beginning of the DBQ, you will be handed a green booklet, in which the essay question and documents are printed, as well as a separate form on which to write your essay. You are advised to spend the first 15 minutes of the section reading the documents and planning your essay.

To give you an idea of what you can expect on your DBQ, let's look at what appeared on a recent test. The question asked students to decide whether liberal opponents, conservative opponents, or President Woodrow Wilson bore the responsibility for the Senate's defeat of the Treaty of Versailles. The nine documents (note that until recently, the DBQ could include up to nine documents) included excerpts from the following:

- a speech by a conservative senator, denouncing the League of Nations
- an editorial from the then-liberal magazine *The New Republic,* criticizing the Treaty of Versailles
- a speech by President Wilson, defending the League of Nations
- a letter from Herbert Hoover to Wilson, urging him to compromise with the Senate
- an editorial cartoon from a newspaper, opposing the League of Nations
- an article by economist John Maynard Keynes, discussing the European victors' opposition to Wilson's Fourteen Points
- a 1920 speech by Wilson, asking voters to support the League of Nations
- a 1921 article by W. E. B. Du Bois, criticizing Wilson for his handling of the treaty negotiations with the Senate
- a 1922 article by Jane Addams, discussing the necessity of the League of Nations

As you can see, a typical DBQ may contain documents you might have seen prior to the exam. (The first Wilson speech, for example, is famous.) However, the DBQ also includes documents you certainly have not seen before. Each of the documents, though, represents a political position you have studied. Many are written by famous people about whom you should know quite a bit (Keynes, Addams, Du Bois, Hoover), even if you do not know precisely how they felt about the Treaty of Versailles before reading the documents. In other words, you will not be starting from square one, even when the documents are new to you. Each document should trigger a memory of some historical figure, event, or trend in U.S. history.

Is There a "Right" Answer to Each DBQ?

No. DBQs are worded in such a way that you can argue any number of positions, and often the question is a historiographical one that historians have been debating for years. In the example on the previous page, the documents provide evidence for those who would blame the failure of the Treaty of Versailles on Wilson, liberals, conservatives, or some combination of the three. So long as you support your argument with evidence, you can argue whatever thesis you want. Often, however, the documents will "drive" a particular thesis, and it becomes more difficult to try to argue the other side.

Similarly, there is no "checklist" of facts and ideas against which DBQs are graded. Here's an excerpt from the College Board's official material:

> "The document-based question will typically require students to relate the documents to a historical period or theme and, thus, to focus on major periods and issues."

Readers are supposed to take into account the strength of your argument and the evidence you offer in support of it. In other words, if you forget to mention a good, illustrative historical event but manage to back up your point in some other way, you will not be penalized.

However, in order to earn the most credit for your essay, you must include *outside information*. You will notice that your DBQ contains the following instruction:

> Support your argument with analysis of historical examples outside the documents.

Use the Documents AND Your Knowledge of the Subject

The outside information includes historical facts and ideas that are relevant to the question but not mentioned in the DBQ documents. For example, in the Treaty of Versailles DBQ described on the previous page, any information offered about the writers' backgrounds would count as outside information, as would information about the war itself. Of course, to receive credit, that information would have to help explain who was responsible for the failure of the Treaty of Versailles in the United States. Some students make the mistake of throwing everything they know about a subject into their essays, whether or not it pertains to the question. That type of information receives partial credit, at best.

GETTING STARTED ON THE DBQ: THE QUESTION

Start by reading the question. This direction may seem obvious, but it obviously is not, given how many students write essays on subjects that are only marginally related to the question being asked. Students miss the question because they become anxious during the exam. They panic. They think they are going too slowly. In an effort to speed up, they read half the question, say to themselves, "A-ha! I know what they're going to ask!" and stop reading. Do NOT make this mistake! The question is probably the shortest thing you have to read on the DBQ. Take your time; savor it. Explore its nuances. Essays that address the question fully earn huge bonuses; essays that ignore parts of the question are doomed to much lower scores.

Here's a sample question:

1. To what extent did the constituencies and agenda of the Progressive movement of the early 1900s represent continuity and/or change in relation to both the reform movements of the 1830s and 40s and the Populist movement of the 1890s?

The first question you should ask yourself is this: Do I have an opinion about this subject? The second question is this: What must I discuss in order to write a successful essay?

Of the two questions, the second is much more important. You can construct a position later, after you have gathered the information you want to include in your essay. First, you need to figure out what issues you must address and what data you will use in your discussion.

To begin with, you should notice that the question asks you to compare three movements—the Progressives, the Populists, and the reformers of the 1830s and 1840s. Your essay will obviously have to mention all three groups. Equally important, the question asks you to consider the constituencies and the agendas of these three groups in drawing your comparisons. Also, you must decide whether the Progressives were more similar to the Populists or to the reformers. Finally, you must include a discussion of the given documents and your outside knowledge in your essay.

Some people find it helpful to circle and underline key elements of an essay question. If you did that, your question probably looked something like this:

1. To what extent did the constituencies and agenda of the Progressive movement of the early 1900s represent continuity and/or change in relation to both the reform movements of the 1830s and 40s and the Populist movement of the 1890s?

However you decide to approach the question, it is essential that you do not rush. Read carefully to make sure that you understand what issues must be addressed in your essay. Then determine how to organize the information you are going to collect from the documents and from memory for inclusion in the essay.

Organizing Your Essay: Grids and Columns

Many DBQs ask you to draw comparisons. For those questions you can always organize your thoughts in a grid. Drawing a grid helps in seeing all sides of an argument, which is important because DBQ graders will reward you for acknowledging arguments other than your own. Consider the question from earlier; here is how you could grid this question:

	Constituency	Agenda
Antebellum Reformers		
Populists		
Progressives		

As you remember appropriate outside information and as you read the documents, take notes in the appropriate boxes. When it comes time to write your essay, you will find it easier to compare and contrast the three movements because your information will already be organized in a way that makes similarities and differences more obvious.

If you cannot draw a grid for a question, you can instead set up column headings. Because every DBQ can be argued from at least two different positions, you can always set up two (or more) columns, designating one for each position. Consider the DBQ about the Treaty of Versailles, which we discussed earlier in the chapter. You could create one column entitled "It was Wilson's fault," one entitled "It was liberals' fault," a third entitled "It was conservatives' fault," and even a fourth for information that you know belongs in your essay but that you cannot yet classify (give that the title "To be classified").

Good essays do not just flow out of your pen by accident. They happen when you know what you are going to say *before you start writing.* Although, given the time constraints, it is difficult (if not impossible) to prepare your entire DBQ essay before you begin writing, pre-organization and a good outline will get you much closer to that goal.

A Sample Question

Let's take a look at another question. Circle and/or underline the key elements of the question; then create a grid (or columns) in which to organize your information.

1. From the end of World War II through the Eisenhower administration, many Americans feared that communism threatened the existence of the United States. Using BOTH the documents AND your knowledge of the 1940s and 1950s, assess the reasons for and the validity of those fears.

Your question should look something like this:

1. From the end of World War II through the Eisenhower administration, many Americans feared that communism threatened the existence of the United States. Using BOTH the documents AND your knowledge of the 1940s and 1950s, assess the reasons for and the validity of those fears.

Your thesis must address the reasons for and validity of the Cold War fears, and your essay will have to address the Red Scare, the widespread fear of a communist takeover that Americans experienced during the early Cold War. (Remember that the second Red Scare in the age of McCarthyism during the 1950s followed the first Red Scare in the 1920s.) You will, of course, have to include analysis of both the documents and outside information, and your essay should cover the years between the end of the war and the end of the Eisenhower administration. Last (and what most students miss), you must answer two questions: Why did Americans fear a communist takeover? And, how valid were their fears?

Because the question does not ask you to draw any comparisons, you might want to organize your information in columns titled "Valid reason," "Not a valid reason," and "Maybe valid/maybe not." However, the question naturally lends itself to comparisons among the various perceived and real threats to the United States, which means that you could use a grid instead. Americans feared communist attacks both from communist nations and from subversives in the government. You could, therefore, draw a grid, giving your rows the headings "Threats from other countries" (e.g., the USSR and China), and "Threats from within the United States" (e.g., the Communist Party of the United States of America). This analysis would leave you with a grid that looks like the following:

	Valid	Not valid	Maybe valid/ maybe not
Threats from other countries			
Threats from within the United States			

Once you have created your grid, begin collecting information for your essay. At this point, you are probably eager to start reading the documents. Resist the temptation. You have one more important job to do before you start reading.

Gather Outside Information

Most students read the DBQ documents first and then try to think of outside information to supplement their essays. This is a mistake. The reason? *The power of suggestion*. Once you have read the documents—a chore that can take six to eight minutes—those documents will be on your mind. If you wait until after you have read them to think of outside information, you will not be able to get the documents out of your head. Invariably, you will think of things you have already read about, rather than things you *have not* read about, which is precisely what outside information means.

Plus, reading and processing the documents is a big task. Once you have accomplished that, you will want to get started right away on organizing and writing your essay while the documents are fresh in your mind. You *do not* want to stop to think of outside information to include in your essay. And you certainly do not want to be trying to come up with outside information *while* you are writing your essay. So do it *before* you read the documents. The only exception to this strategy is the unlikely event that you are totally unfamiliar with a topic. In that case, the documents might jog your memory.

Look at your grid or columns and brainstorm. In a separate blank space in your green booklet (*not* in your grid/columns), write down everything you can think of that relates to the question. Spend two or three minutes on this task, then look at what you have written, cross out what you know you cannot use, and enter the rest into your grid/columns in the appropriate spaces.

Chances are that some of the outside information you think of will be mentioned in the documents, which means that it will not be outside information anymore. That is no big deal. In fact, you should think of it as something good. If some of what you remembered shows up in the documents, that means you are on the right track toward answering the question!

This is what a brainstorming grid for the communism question might look like:

	Valid	Not valid	Maybe valid/ maybe not
Threats from other countries	–Soviets develop H-bomb –U.S.-Soviet confrontations: containment, Greece, Marshall Plan, Truman Doctrine –Korean War heightens tensions –fall of Cuba		–Chinese revolution –fall of Hungary: Soviet aggression, or Soviets protecting border? –U.S. involvement in Vietnam –Guatemala's ties to USSR
Threats from within the United States	–there was an American Communist party –though small, party was influential in powerful labor unions –some evidence of espionage: the Rosenbergs	–Rosenbergs' punishment too great for crime, shows U.S. paranoia –Loyalty Review Board; McCarthy's list of State Dept. subversives; blacklisting; bomb shelters –postwar affluence made Americans more conservative	–Alger Hiss case

1. Choose

After you have gathered outside information to include in your essay, you are ready to read the documents. As you read, keep the following things in mind:

- **The order in which documents appear is almost always helpful.** Very often, the documents in the DBQ appear in chronological order. When they do, it often indicates that the College Board wants you to trace the historical development of the DBQ subject. On such questions, you do not have to write an essay that adheres strictly to chronological order, but chronology should play an important part in the development of your thesis. When the documents appear in an order other than chronological, they are usually organized so that you can easily compare and contrast different viewpoints on a particular event or issue. On these questions, one of your main goals should be to draw those comparisons.

- **Watch for inconsistencies within and among the documents.** The documents will not necessarily agree with one another. In fact, they are almost certain to present different viewpoints on issues and almost as certain to present conflicting accounts of a historical event. Some documents might even contradict themselves! This is intentional. The AP is testing your ability to recognize these contradictions. You are expected to resolve these conflicts in your essay. To do so, you will have to identify the sources of the documents. (See below.)

- **Identify the sources of the documents.** Why do two accounts of the same event contradict each other? Why do two economists, looking at the same data, come up with dissimilar interpretations? It is because the people giving these accounts—the sources of the documents—have different perspectives. Identify the sources and explain why their opinions differ. As you explain these differences, look for the following differences between sources:

    - political ideology
    - class
    - race
    - religion
    - gender

    Consider the question of whether communism posed a serious threat to the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. An urban Northeastern intellectual, a wealthy Midwestern industrialist, and a Chinese immigrant on the West Coast would offer very different answers to that question. The graders will be looking specifically to see if you have tried to explain those differences.

To make sure you're giving an in-depth document analysis (and the best way to get full credit!) use HIPA.

H – historical context
I – intended audience
P – purpose
A – author or artist's point of view

- **Look for evidence that could refute your argument.** Once you have decided what your thesis will be, you will be looking through the documents for evidence to support your argument. Not all the documents will necessarily back you up. Some may appear to contradict your argument. Do not simply ignore those documents! As you read them, try to figure out how you might incorporate them into your argument. Again, let's consider the communism DBQ. Suppose you argue that Americans overreacted to the communist threat. Now suppose that one of the documents presents evidence of subversive communist activity in the United States. You might be tempted to pretend that the document does not exist. However, you will be better off if you incorporate the document into your essay. For example, acknowledge that America was not immune to communist subversion but that the threat was nowhere near as great as most anticommunists claimed. By doing this, you will be acknowledging that this historical issue, like all historical issues, is complex and multifaceted. This acknowledgment is good. AP readers are instructed to look for evidence that you understand that history has no simple answers and to reward you for it.

As you read the documents, be aware that each one holds a few morsels of information for your essay. Do not fixate on any one document, as you can't afford to waste the time. Try to use as many documents as possible. Don't panic if you are initially confused by a document. Remember: The AP puts each document in the DBQ to serve one or two purposes, rather than five. Think about it and try to figure out why they've included this document, and you'll have a pretty good idea of why it's in the DBQ and how to fit it into your essay. Unless you are clueless (which is unlikely), you will be able to find a way to include each document in your essay, which is better than leaving it out entirely. However, it is better to leave a document out than to misinterpret it. And be confident. If you're in an AP History course, you're smart enough to figure out why the document has been included in the DBQ. Often, the documents "speak" to one another. You, the historian, should enter that dialogue.

Also, as you read the documents, take note of any outside information that the document reminds you of, scribble it into the margins around the document, and enter it into your grid/columns. Again, don't panic if, after you read the question, you can't think of any outside information. Stay calm; you will remember more after looking at the documents. Even though brainstorming first is best, if you freeze, you should go to the documents, and let the documents get you going on the outside info.

2. Think

As you finish reading the documents and prepare to formulate your thesis, remember that while you do not have to answer this question by falling squarely on one side or the other of the issue, it's best to lean one way, with a nod to the other side. A safe, effective route to take on your DBQ essay is to indicate that there is

evidence to support both sides of the argument. A good lawyer acknowledges there is other evidence, but he or she is confident that there is stronger evidence to support his or her side of the case. Try to develop a case as you write your essay, using the documents and outside knowledge as mounting evidence. "To what extent" questions should prompt you to determine if something is more this way than that way. Most questions can be rephrased as "to what extent" questions and doing so is often a useful strategy in developing a thesis.

Before you decide on your thesis, GO BACK AND READ THE QUESTION ONE MORE TIME! Make sure that your thesis addresses all the pertinent aspects of the question.

3. Outline

Having a distinct outline for your essay will better ensure that all of the material flows properly and that you address all of the parts of the essay questions. Create an outline with one Roman numeral for each paragraph. Decide on the subject of each paragraph and on what information you will include in each paragraph. Do not rely on your grid/columns if you do not have to. The grid/columns are good for organizing your information but are less efficient for structuring an essay.

4. Write

Go back and reread the section in this chapter titled "Things That Make Any Essay Better" to review good essay-writing techniques. Follow this advice: Don't write flowery introductions or conclusions—just say what you are going to say. The readers want to get right to the point and see how much you know. Remember to back up your thesis statement with lots of facts, even if you are stretching it, because the graders want to hear solid evidence and not a lot of fluff. Also, make sure to remember what is being asked in the question, and refer to the question several times during the essay writing, as it is easy to wander away from your main point.

Stay confident. Everyone else taking the test, all across the country, is at least as nervous about it as you are.

GRADING OF YOUR DBQ ESSAY

The document-based question (DBQ) is scored with a maximum score of 7 possible points allocated across the following areas: thesis (1 point), analysis of historical evidence and support of argument (4 points), contextualization (1 point), and synthesis (1 point). The DBQ score represents 25 percent of the total exam score. Your essay is being graded with a rubric similar to the one shown below. Remember that the graders are looking quickly for the elements of the essay, which address the core themes in this rubric. The general grading approach is described in

Part III of this book. We have included the rubric here to assist you in optimizing your writing approach.

DBQ Scoring Rubric		
(Note: Numbers marked with an asterisk [*] are based on a document-based question that contains 7 documents.)		
Task	**Points Possible**	**Description**
Thesis and Argument Development	2	1. Presents a thesis that can be backed by historical evidence and responds to all parts of the question. The thesis must be at least one sentence, located in either the introduction or conclusion. **(1 point)** 2. Develops and supports a cohesive argument that addresses historical complexities and shows the relationships among historical evidence. **(1 point)**
Document Analysis	2	1. Uses at least 6* of the documents to support the thesis or a relevant argument. **(1 point)** 2. Explains the significance of the author's point of view or purpose, audience, and/or historical context for at least 4* documents. **(1 point)**
Using Evidence Beyond the Documents	2	1. *Contextualization*: Places the argument within the broader historical context—events, developments, processes, etc.—relevant to the question. Note that this requires an explanation (consisting of several sentences or a full paragraph), not just a brief mention. **(1 point)** 2. *Evidence Beyond the Documents*: Gives an example or additional piece of evidence beyond what is found in the documents to support an argument. Note that the example must be different from the evidence used to earn other points on the rubric, and include an explanation of how that evidence supports or qualifies the argument. **(1 point)**
Synthesis	1	Extends the argument by explaining the connections between the argument and ONE of the following: a. A development in a historical period, era, or geographical area that is different from the one in the question b. An AP U.S History course theme and/or approach to history (e.g., political, economic, cultural) that is not the focus of the essay c. A different discipline or field (e.g., economics, art history, anthropology)
		Maximum Points: 7

CRACKING THE LONG ESSAY QUESTION

The other essay question in Section II of the test is a long essay question. You will be asked to choose one of two different essay prompts. These questions will usually take the form of a historical statement or stance, which you must support, modify, or refute its interpretation in a written essay. Similar to the DBQ, you are expected to develop and defend a relevant thesis. Many of the design and outlining approaches for the DBQ described earlier in this chapter are applicable for this essay. However, unlike the DBQ, you are provided no documents. In other words, all information you use will be that which you come up with. You are expected to take approximately 35 minutes to write your essay, and the long essay question will constitute 15 percent of your total AP Exam score.

A simple, defendable thesis, accompanied by an organized essay filled with strong analysis of the given subject, should result in a high score. Do not write an essay that is simply descriptive, in which you regurgitate everything you know about the essay prompt. Purely descriptive essays rarely get scored well as they fail to analyze, assess, and evaluate the given subject. Here is an example of a long essay question:

1. Compare and contrast the impact of religion on the American colonies during the First Great Awakening and in the Second Great Awakening (1800–1860).

   In the development of your argument, explain the reasons for the similarities and differences.

As you can see, long essay questions are designed to prompt analysis and evaluation of subject matter that you have learned in class. The subjects should be familiar; the questions are straightforward. The long essay is scored with a maximum score of 6 points allocated across the following areas: thesis (1 point), use of evidence in support of argument (2 points), application of historical thinking skills (2 points), and synthesis (1 point). The long essay constitutes 15 percent of the total exam score. Similar to the DBQ, a grading rubric is available and will be similar to the one shown on the following page.

Long Essay Scoring Rubric		
Task	**Points Possible**	**Description**
Thesis	1	Presents a thesis that can be backed up by historical evidence and that responds to all parts of the question. The thesis must be at least one sentence, located in either the introduction or conclusion.
Using Targeted Historical Thinking Skills	2	*Skill #1—Comparison:* Develops and supports an argument that a. Describes the similarities and differences among historical figures, developments, processes, or events. **(1 point)** b. Explains the reasons for the similarities and differences among historical figures, developments, processes, or events. OR (depending on the essay prompt) Evaluates the significance of historical figures, developments, processes, or events. **(1 point)** *Skill #2—Causation:* Develops and supports an argument that a. Describes causes and/or effects of a historical event, development, or process. **(1 point)** b. Explains the reasons for the causes and/or effects of a historical event, development, or process. **(1 point)** *[**Note:** If the question asks about both causes and effects, you must discuss both in order to earn the full 2 points.]* *Skill #3—Continuity/Change over Time:* Develops and supports an argument that a. Describes historical continuity and change over time. **(1 point)** b. Explains the reasons for historical continuity and change over time. **(1 point)** *Skill #4—Periodization:* Develops and supports an argument that a. Describes how the historical development from the essay prompt is different from and similar to developments that preceded and/or followed it. **(1 point)** b. Explains the extent to which the historical development from the essay prompt is different from and similar to developments that preceded and/or followed it. **(1 point)**

Using Evidence	2	1. Addresses the essay topic with specific examples and a broad range of evidence. **(1 point)** 2. Uses specific examples and a broad range of evidence to completely and effectively support or justify the stated thesis or a relevant argument. **(1 point)**
Synthesis	1	Extends the argument by explaining the connections between the argument and ONE of the following: a. A development in a historical period, era, or geographical area that is different from the one in the question b. An AP U.S. History course theme and/or approach to history (e.g., political, economic, cultural) that is not the focus of the essay c. A different discipline or field (e.g., economics, art history, anthropology)
		Maximum Points: 6

Choose

Choose the questions about which you know the most, NOT the ones that look easiest at first glance. The more you know about the subject, the better your final grade will be.

Think, Outline, Write

Because we have already covered this information, here are brief directions to structure your essay. First, read the question and analyze it. Second, create a grid or columns and take notes. Third, assess your information and devise a thesis. Fourth, write a quick outline. Lastly, write your essay. If any of these instructions are unclear, reread the previous parts of this chapter.

A Final Note

This section is short because we have already discussed what you need to know to write successful AP essays, not because the long essay questions are unimportant. The long essay question is worth 15 percent of your total test score and is very important. Many students are tempted to ease up or invest all of their time in the DBQ, because it is so challenging. Do not make this mistake. Reach down for the last bit of energy and finish strong.

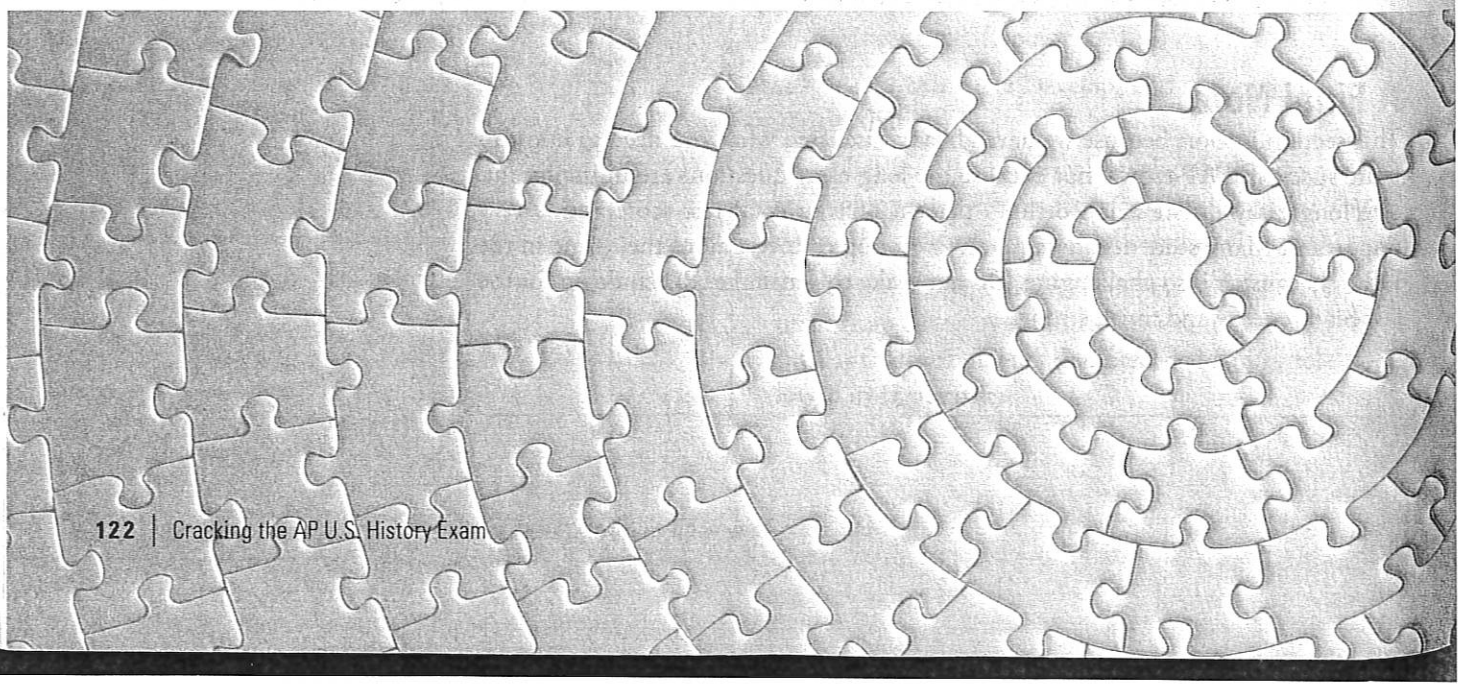
Summary

Overview

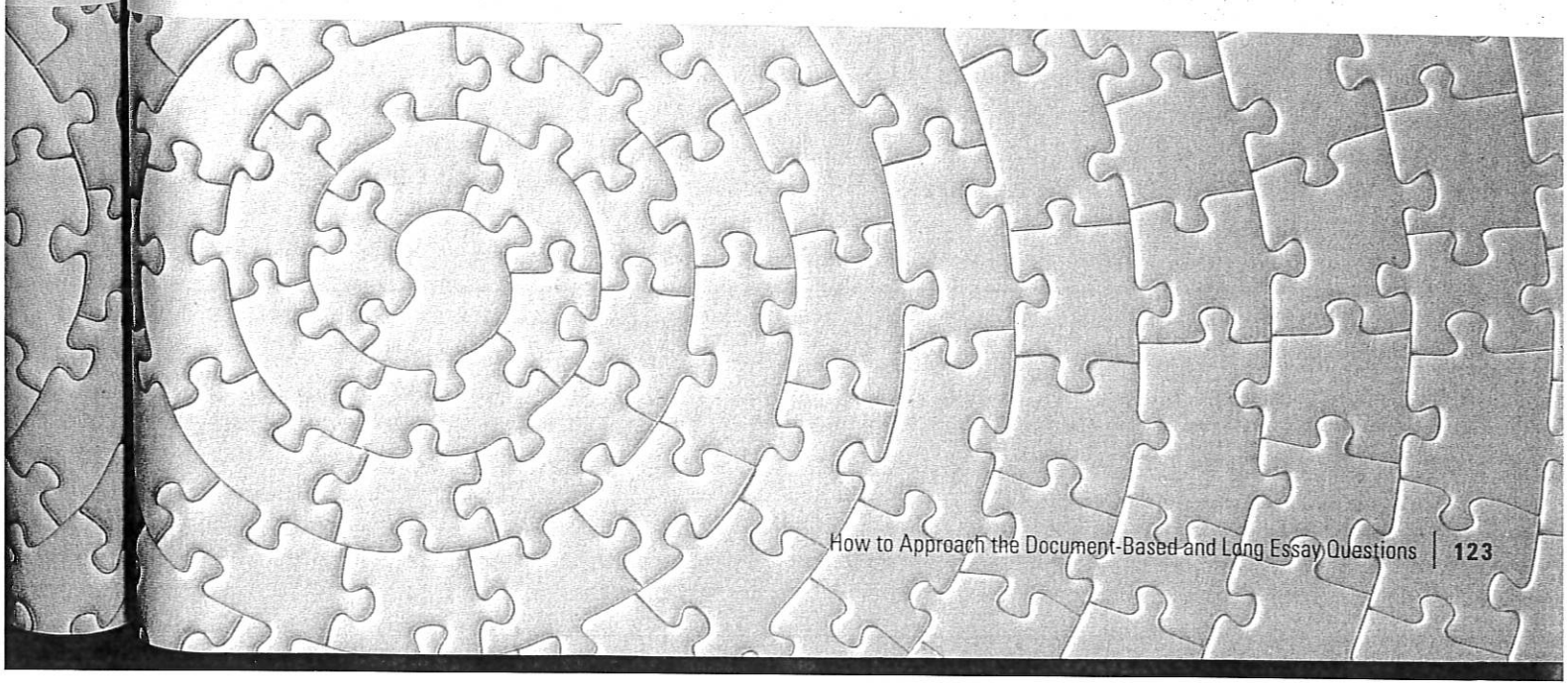
- Read the questions carefully. You must answer the specific question asked in order to receive full credit.
- Do not start writing until you have brainstormed, developed a thesis, and written an outline.
- Follow your outline. Stick to one important idea per paragraph (say, comparisons only or social issues only). Support your ideas with historical evidence.
- Write clearly and neatly. Do not write in long, overly complex sentences. When in doubt, stick to simple syntax and vocabulary.
- Use transition words to indicate continuity of thought and changes in the direction of your argument.
- Proofread your essay to make sure you have answered the question and to catch any errors or omissions. Watch out for any careless errors in names or years. Did you write Theodore Roosevelt when you meant to write Franklin Roosevelt? Did you say that the Declaration of Independence was written in 1876 when you meant to write 1776?

The Document-Based Question

- The DBQ consists of an essay question and 6 or 7 historical documents. Most likely, you will not have seen most of the documents before, but they will all relate to major historical events and ideas and will remind you of what you have learned about this topic. The DBQ is expected to take you 1 hour (including the time of planning and reading the documents).
- There is no single "correct" answer to the DBQ. DBQs are framed so that they can be successfully argued from many different viewpoints.



- Read the essay question carefully. Circle and/or underline important words and phrases. Once you understand the question, create a grid or columns in which to organize your notes on the essay.
- Before you start reading the documents, brainstorm about the question. This way you will gather the all-important outside information before you submerge yourself in the documents.
- Read the documents. Read them in order, as there is usually a logic to the order in which they are presented. Pay attention to contradictions within and among the documents and to who is speaking and what sociopolitical tradition he or she represents. If you have already decided on a thesis, keep an eye out for information that might refute your thesis, and be prepared to address it in your essay.
- Decide on a thesis; then write an outline for your essay.
- Try to summarize key points from as many of the documents as you can in your essay. Weave in as much outside information as you can.

The Long Essay Question

- The long essay section consists of a pair of questions. You must answer one question from the pair. The eras covered in this section will depend upon what eras were covered on your DBQ.
- Choose the questions about which you know the most, not the ones that look easiest.
- Analyze each question you choose. Circle and/or underline important words and phrases. Once you understand the question, create a grid or columns in which to organize your notes on the essay.
- Decide on a thesis; then write an outline for your essay.
- Follow your outline. Stick to one important idea per paragraph. Support your ideas with historical evidence.
- Write clearly and neatly. Do not write in overly complex sentences. Toss in a couple of "big" words that you know you will not misuse. When in doubt, stick to simple syntax and vocabulary.
- Use transition words to indicate continuity of thought and changes in the direction of your argument.