

reading. Don't end an essay with a smiley face, "The End", or a dramatic signature. These give the impression the student is trying to get by on personality instead of knowledge.

### **General Guidelines for Writing Historical Essays**

Use the following guidelines to help you write a more direct, coherent, descriptive, and analytical essay:

1. **Stick to the question.** Make sure you are answering what is being asked and are sticking to the time scope of the question.
2. **Write concisely.** Make conceptual arguments in your essay, provide factual support, and move on. Avoid the temptation to write everything you know or to tell a pleasant story. Remember, you are not writing a history of the period; you are answering a specific question about this period in US history. Some students pound a single point, incorrectly believing that constant restating adds to an essay. Avoid lengthy discussion of minor or peripheral material. A good essay is not filled with superfluous (unnecessary) detail. Ask about every sentence: Will this help me communicate my point to the reader? If the answer is no, leave the sentence out. A concise essay in which every word has a purpose is better than an essay bloated with fillers and flowery language in an attempt to impress the reader. Don't write about a subject; write to persuade.
3. **Don't use slang terms.** A good historical essay does not use slang. Avoid "things", "stuff", and "a lot".
4. **Avoid abstracts.** Be careful of abstract words such as democracy, progress, success, and individualism. Certain abstract words carry a wide range of definitions and connotations. Take the time to define an abstract word; it helps you focus on that aspect of the word the essay question intends.
5. **Use adjectives and adverbs.** Use effective adjectives and adverbs to enhance the descriptive power of your essay. These expand and enhance the essay's thesis. For example: "Smith's letter strongly portrayed Jackson's belligerent attitude toward the Bank of the US". Use adjectives to convey the amount of generality or specificity needed for a particular sentence. "The US has a democratic government." Is it a parliamentary democracy, representative democracy, or direct democracy? Do you mean political, economic, social, or religious democracy? Do you mean democratic in results or in opportunity? However, sometimes a single adjective sufficiently describes a noun, e.g., "fascist leaders", or "marginal farmers".
6. **Make a mental and/or written outline.** Organization is the key to a good essay. Delay writing your essay until you have had time to organize your thoughts and outlined your answer. Jot down all the concepts and facts pertaining to the answer. Organize these facts into major sections or paragraphs. Then write your essay.
7. **Do not use absolutes.** Do not use absolute words - never, all, only, none, every, etc. Rarely in history is the evidence so absolutely conclusive that you can prove that there were no exceptions. At least one point will be deducted on your essays for the use of these words.
8. **Proofread.** When you are finished, briefly read your essay. Check for grammatical errors and misspellings. The omission of one word, particularly the word "not", may change the meaning of your essay. A student occasionally begins an essay with one argument, realizes he has better support for the opposite viewpoint, and changes the remainder of the essay without changing the introduction. For example, an essay states that slavery was the sole cause of the Civil War by agreeing with the statement in the introduction, but then contradicts that thesis in the body of the essay by discussing multiple causes. Go back and change the introduction.
9. **Assume your reader is uninformed.** Spell things out. Don't take it for granted that he or she knows what you mean or what you are talking about. You have never met the person who is going to read and grade your essays. Explain your key points clearly; don't assume that people know what you know. When you mention someone in the essay for the first time, include both the first and last name.
10. **Define or explain all key terms.** If the question deals with terms, such as "liberal", "conservative", "sectionalism", or "manifest destiny", an essential part of your analysis should be an explanation of these terms.
11. **Use transition words.** A judicious use of transitional words and phrases such as: "therefore", "however", "thus", "despite", "because", "instead", "although", "rather", "furthermore", "nevertheless", and "finally" carries the reader smoothly from one sentence or paragraph to the next.
12. **Write in the third person.** Do not use "I", "me", "we", or other personal pronouns in order to avoid personal feelings and impressions. You must use historical facts and logical reasoning to support the thesis. At least one point will be subtracted on your essay if you use personal pronouns.
13. **Avoid progress reports.** For example, "It is now time to conclude"; "Enough of this"; or "Let's get into it".
14. **Use key words and phrases that indicate judgment and analysis.** These might include: controversial, turning point, inevitable, more importantly, ironic, key, significant, primary, secondary, deliberate, dramatic, predominant, imperative, any indicator of degrees of causation, etc. A student who uses judgment/ analysis indicates a higher degree of sophistication than a straight narrative composition that only recites facts. Prioritize your organizational

- points and indicate primary vs. secondary causation or some aspect of varying degrees of importance for your list. It is rare that anything ever happened or didn't happen due to factors that shared the exact degrees of relevance. Distinguish between the significant and the less important.
15. **Use "wonderful" verbs.** The verbs used are a critical element in presenting a more sophisticated and descriptive essay. Your choice of verb reveals your judgment and analysis of the facts. Use a variety of "wonderful verbs", such as revealed, illustrated, implied, demonstrated, portrayed, exemplified, indicated, symbolized, depicted, etc. Compare, for example: "The assassination caused the war..." vs. "The assassination provoked the outbreak of war..." or "The diary showed the prejudice..." vs. "The diary usually illustrated the deep prejudices".  
  
Reduce your use of all forms of the verb "to be" (am, is are, was, were, have been, being, etc.) Change them to more active verbs. Avoid vague verbs such as "felt" and "says".  
  
Remember! **Affect** is most commonly used as a verb and refers to the action of influencing something else. **Effect** is most commonly used as a noun and refers to something that happens because of some action or event.
  16. **Use the active voice.** Use the active voice rather than the passive voice because it states cause and effect more strongly. "Edison created" is in the active voice; "was created by Edison" is in the passive voice.
  17. **Show your awareness of the complexity of history.** There are a multiplicity of events, emotions, ideas, etc. that impact human history. Avoid simplistic comments, e.g., something is "bad", "good", "great", "fantastic", etc. Stay away from the idea of single causation.
  18. **Write using the PAST TENSE.** The events occurred.
  19. **Do not use abbreviations.** George Washington was not "GW"; Andrew Jackson was not "AJ". However, actual nicknames such as JFK or LBJ are acceptable.
  20. **Never write conversationally.** Don't talk to the reader. Never state what you are going to tell the reader. Do not use rhetorical questions.
  21. **Spelling and capitalization.** Spelling and capitalization; spelling and capitalization!!!!
  22. **Do not use metaphors that have no bearing on the issue.** Avoid comments like, "That's why we have the country we do today." Or "If the Pilgrims had never landed here, we could not have become the great, freedom-loving nation that we are today."
  23. **Watch out for repetitions.** Avoid repetitive tendencies in word or phrase usage and sentence structure.
  24. **Justify your arguments.** Express facts and demonstrate why the reader should believe your conclusions.
  25. **Use personal pronouns sparingly.** Avoid vague references, such as "them" and "others". It's pretty easy to confuse the reader if he or she has to struggle to figure out who "them" is/are/or could be.
  26. **Avoid "lumping".** Be cautious about placing too much unity into the thoughts and actions of the many, i.e. "The colonists felt...the Indians hated...the Europeans wanted". Could there be subsets within the groups? Which groups felt, hated or wanted? It's like saying "all teenagers are..."
  27. **Don't inject yourself into history.** Don't use "we" when you really mean, "Americans who have been dead for a long time". "We" didn't evict the Cherokee from Georgia, win World War I, give women the right to vote, build railroads, land on the moon, etc. The US citizens of the past did.