

The material below was put together by an apus teacher in NC. Mr. Hierl is also an AP teacher trainer and one of the lead graders of DBQ and free response portions of the exam. All credit goes to Mr. Hierl.

General Tips on Essay Writing

1. Writing is thinking on paper. It doesn't matter how well you say nothing, it's still nothing. There is ONLY one best choice and arrangement of words to express a given idea.
 2. You are writing to impress an AP reader who will have approximately two minutes with your essay. You must convince the reader at the outset that you are an intelligent life-form.
 3. Read the question carefully and focus your discussion on directly answering that question. Be certain you answer the question you are asked. AP Free response questions in recent years have tended to emphasize the following:
 - Analyzing or assessing the DEGREE to which a statement is true
 - Analyzing or assessing the IMPACT of an event or concept on some aspect of American society
 - Analyzing or assessing the RELATIVE IMPORTANCE of various factors on an event or concept
 - Analyzing or assessing the EXTENT to which a historical stereotype is true for a given period or concept
 - Analyzing or assessing the REASONS that cause a particular movement to develop
 - COMPARING and CONTRASTING differing attitudes toward a general concept or particular policy or comparing and contrasting a factor or factors from different time periods.
- REMEMBER – analyze means examining HOW and WHY
4. Begin with a well-developed thesis statement that does more than repeat the question. It should (1) answer the question, (2) take a position, and (3) establish organizational categories. This will help to establish a logical flow and (hopefully) a predictable sequence to the reader.
 5. Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence which defends your thesis, directly answers the question, and supports it with as much specific factual information as you can put together. Use names, dates, places, events, and appropriate historical terminology. Do not merely list or describe information – use it to prove your thesis. Explain how and why the specific information supports your point of view (interpretive commentary). Avoid "vomit" essays in which information is "thrown-up" in a random manner and not related back to your thesis.
 6. Keep the essay focused on answering the question. Combine thoughts into clear, concise, sophisticated sentences. Make important factual information the subject of your sentence. A complete historical thought is a cause/effect relationship so show cause/effect relationships in single sentences. Be concise – avoid wordiness!
 7. End each paragraph with a clincher sentence that ties the entire paragraph directly back to the thesis statement.
 8. Always focus on the complexity of history. Demonstrate an understanding of the concept of multi-causation/ multi-effect. Bring as much depth and breadth into the essay as possible.
 9. Essays must always be written in dark blue or dark black ink. Penmanship, spelling, and grammar make a difference because they subconsciously affect the reader's ability to extract information and may interfere with the essay's logical flow. Use only past tense and DO NOT attempt to make your essay relevant to today's world. Use only third person. Avoid starting sentences with pronouns.
 10. Long essays are not always good essays, but short essays are almost never good essays. Don't be locked in to preconceived notions of length or five paragraphs. Budget your time. It is imperative that you give each essay your best shot. In all likelihood a higher score will be awarded when both free response questions are attempted than by concentrating on one to the exclusion of the other.
 11. The question every reader asks themselves at the end of an essay is, "How sophisticated a knowledge of history has this student demonstrated in this essay?" The demonstrated level of sophistication will ultimately determine the grade.

REMEMBER THE CORE STRUCTURE