

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS STEVENSON HIGH SCHOOL



Adapted from the Teacher's Guide to the Advanced Placement Course in U.S. History

1. Begin by **reading the question** only. Make sure you **understand what is being asked** of you as a writer. You should do this by **clearly identifying the time period** and by **breaking down the question** into recognizable parts. For example, if the question requires that you address the political, economic and political dimensions of a particular event in history you must address all three in your essay to some degree. Prepare your outline accordingly.
2. **Brainstorm** before you create your outline. Jot down all the names, events, acts, and writings that come to mind for the period covered in the essay. Some of these terms will later be drawn upon as outside information in the essay.
3. Next, still **without looking at the documents**, you should **write a brief outline to address the question** asked. Most likely, you will know the time period in question and already have a sense of how to address the issues presented. Go to the documents before you write your essay only if you do not know anything about the topic. This is really an unlikely scenario.
4. **Go to the documents, read and highlight.** You should also **note next to each document any additional outside information triggered by the document itself.** You do not need to use all eight to ten documents to score at the highest levels on the DBQs but they should **use most of them.** You should remember not to quote extensively from the documents but should be intent on weaving the key ideas found in them into the text of their essay. Remember that you must always integrate useful and meaningful outside information into your essay. DBQs without a reasonable balance of documentary references and outside information will not be scored highly.
5. When writing commences, you should use standard historical writing format to address the issue. The thesis in the introduction should be clearly stated and reasonably sophisticated. In addition the sooner the thesis is stated the better.
6. Some teachers **suggest a concession statement** either early in the essay or in the next to last paragraph to confront the point of view the student does not intend to take. This is a good idea because it **demonstrates that the student understands the complexity of the issue** and offers the student an additional opportunity to weave into the essay the documents and outside information.
7. In **citing sources** two methods are appreciated. You should employ either the author/date method which cites the source of the document by simple reference to the author and the date or an internal citation method that puts the letter of the document after a discussion as a footnote. Some readers believe it is not necessary to include internal citations while others appreciate them because they serve as useful guides when reading becomes tiresome at the end of the day.
8. Although the conclusion is not the most important part of the DBQ, you will not help yourself by an ending that is banal or, worse still, a conclusion that differs significantly from your argument. **Conclusions should demonstrate how the issue discussed fits into the bigger picture of the American experience.**
9. Remember that **a clear, well-developed thesis that evaluates the relative importance of historical factors asked for in the question** and a well-written essay with effective analysis and a nice balance of outside information with references to the documents will always win the day.
10. Some other tips:
 - Avoid laundry listing...remember that it is not your objective to explain the documents but rather to **use the key ideas from them to prove your thesis.**
 - **Avoid simply restating the question in the introduction.** Your **thesis should be fresh and sophisticated** although you may want to include key words from the question in your introduction.
 - Make every attempt to **demonstrate your awareness of change over time** and that you are aware of cause and effect relationships.
 - Trust your instincts if you are well prepared. Include your flashes of intuition.

- **There is not necessarily a correct answer but there is always a good one.**
- **There is such a thing as a wrong answer.**
- Let the reader know that **you are aware of the controversial nature of the question.**
- Relax and **write with confidence** once you have determined your thesis and your approach.

DBQ Analysis

The following are representative comments made about DBQs. Please read through these and kindly guide yourself accordingly.

- Don't use excessive facts in the opening paragraph
- Don't make the introduction too lengthy
- Make sure **thesis** sticks with topic of the question, and isn't vague
- Make sure the **thesis** really addresses the question
- Make one clear **thesis statement** which clearly shows your approach in answering the question
- A good **thesis** clearly answers the question; it demonstrates your understanding of the question and its complexity
- **Thesis** must address the whole question
- Add more **analysis** to your essay; don't limit **analysis**
- Delve into the complexity of the question
- Integrate outside facts into your **analysis**
- Any use of documents found by a reader at the national grading should be credited (for example, Doc A)
- Protect yourself by clearly citing a document
- Don't use multiple documents for the same reference (it's called "document dumping" -- for example, Doc - A, B, D & F, for one statement!!) - - cite one document at a time
- Use good, relevant outside information
- Don't use "flowery" type of language - - this is a DBQ, not creative writing from English class
- Lead into your examples by introducing them first
- Use at least 80% of the documents
- Make sure you have excellent use of **substantial outside facts** to support documents
- Demonstrate a clear understanding of the time period
- Be cautious of sentence structure and grammar
- Put more transition words to make the paper flow better
- Don't make the documents talk, e.g., "In Document A," or "Like we see in Document K" -- these kinds of DBQ essays are sophomoric in structure and form, and generally demonstrate a lack of knowledge of the essay
- Periodically use "internal documentation:" Booker T. Washington in the Atlanta Compromise speech suggested that . . . "
- **Analyze** more rather than describing
- Documentation needs to support outside information
- Do not quote more than 10% of your essay -- extensive quoting is evidence that the student knows very little about the complexity of the history
- Don't take too long to get to the point of the essay
- The readers are reading each essay in 2-5 minutes (depending on the quality & length of your essay); failure to cite a document could cause the reader to miss your documentation and impact your overall score