Doc Holley's

AP WORLD HISTORY DBQ ESSAY   WRITING TIPS

Introduction : The AP World DBQ essay tends to be on the tough side compared to the other two essays (Compare and Contrast or Change and Continuity over Time.) You must memorize EACH CONSTITUENT PART.

REMEMBER: The DBQ ASSUMES NO PRIOR KNOWLEDGE OF THE SUBJECT. This means that you are crafting and making something "like an argument" using documents available, even if it is about a subject about which you know little or nothing.

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THE BASIC POINT STRUCTURE   (I will expect this to be memorized).

1) Has an acceptable thesis in the first paragraph.

2) Understands the basic meaning of the documents. Misinterpreting one of them is allowed. MISINTERPRET does NOT mean OMIT.

3) Supports thesis with evidence from ALL documents. OR

4) Supports thesis with evidence from ALL DOCUMENTS BUT ONE.

5) Analyzes "point of view" in at least seven documents.

6) Documents have three distinct groups or more.

7) The essay, in the last paragraph, identifies and explains the need for an additional document.

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1. The Thesis (1 point)

The DBQ thesis should not be difficult to execute.   A good thesis makes something "like an argument" based on the documents…something that IS controversial and provocative, but will NOT:

A) Just restate the prompt.   You must "word-smith" the prompt.

B) Just cite documents. You must analyze and demonstrate contextual understanding.

C) Be half done. What do I mean by that? The thesis is "in the prompt." You will talk about what the prompt WANTS you to talk about. A prompt may have one or two parts to it, and the thesis *must reflect all parts of the prompt*. You will not go off on some tangent and talk about something else or you will lose the point. A thesis that fails to address all parts of the prompt gets nothing.

D) IN THE DBQ, THE THESIS SHOULD BE THE FIRST PARAGRAPH.

EXAMPLE:

"Using the following documents, analyze Han and Roman cultural attitudes towards the use of technology, and how class affected those attitudes."

If you look closely, you can see that the prompt is asking for analysis of two things - "attitudes" and "how class affected attitudes."

The first word you should key upon are the word "CULTURAL ATTITUDES." This is what the prompt demands of you, no more and no less. This easy prompt appeared a few years ago, and while students wrote very good essays about Roman and Han inventions and how trade spread them across their regions, they got no points. Why? That's not what the question asked them to do.

The second, "class," is telling you what else you need to analyze somehow. "Class" can mean many things. The easiest approach is to look for documents written by different people of different social rank.

A good thesis, then, might look something like this, discussing BOTH PIECES REQUESTED. (Please note that this is not necessarily accurate, historically).

"Analysis of the documents indicates that the Han Dynasty and the Roman Republic and Empire had very different social attitudes towards technology, those attitudes often formed by social rank. In Han China, peasants held a very favorable attitude towards new technology because the sources indicate new inventions really helped them more efficiently execute very difficult farming chores. The Han upper class valued technology insofar as it promoted efficiency, plenty, and thence social order. In Rome, however, the upper class, which did not do manual labor, disdainfully looked at technology as a "mean" pursuit beneath the dignity of the elite because of its association with lower orders, whereas the number of slaves doing hard work in farming and manufactures also meant that the Roman lower classes also tended to look at technology as something beneath the dignity of the Roman citizen."

In the first sentence, you have basically restated the prompt. This alone would be insufficient. BUT, you then go forward to explain what you wrote, give a summary of your argument, and, most critically, *deal with both pieces of the prompt in a coherent way*.

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2. GROUPING THE DOCUMENTS   AND   BASIC MEANING, "ALL OR NOTHING!"

So many students lose this easily earned point by simply failing these steps, and the points are a LOW BAR, meaning they don't need all that much to earn.

A) *ALL THE DOCUMENTS MUST BE USED*. This is very different from the AP Euro and American examinations. **YOU MUST USE THEM ALL**. If you read someplace else that you may "use all but one," IGNORE IT. **ALL MEANS ALL**.

B) *YOU MUST HAVE AT LEAST THREE (3) DISTINCT GROUPS THAT FIT YOUR THESIS*. **THREE MEANS THREE**! Not one, not two, **THREE**. NO GROUP SHOULD HAVE A SINGLE DOCUMENT. Minimum of TWO DOCUMENTS PER GROUP.

C) *DOCUMENTS MUST BE CITED*. This is easy. Use this: [Doc. 3]. Easy.

D) DO NOT use a single document in a group. Use more than one. We used to teach that a document could be an "outlier" and the writer could group this one apart and explain why it did not "fit." DO NOT DO THIS.

E) You MAY use a document more than once. I don't necessarily encourage it because of time, but it is allowed.

F) What do I mean by "understanding basic meaning," which counts as a point?

The "understanding the basic meaning of the documents" point is really a holistic measure that depends on how the documents are grouped and how they are cited as evidence. If you have decent groupings, and you use each document as evidence in the manner described following, you will earn this point, no problem, even if you screw ONE of them up. So if you have eight documents, and you use seven correctly, you get the point. But see what happens if you leave one out *and* screw one up? You have basically used six. You get nothing.

G) "Doc Holley, this document makes no sense."

This is a common problem. Sometimes, a document is very cryptic. It might be short. It might be written by some "Joe Schmo" no one has heard of. It might be written in an older linguistic style.   Take comfort. Here is an idea to help you.

When you bump into one of these, when you use this document as evidence, do not use it extensively. An explanation of a document you do not understand runs a ridiculously high risk of being wrong and lead to a finding of "misinterpretation." Find some key words, a key argument, a tone. Fit it in creatively without a lot of fanfare in a way that supports what you are trying to say. Looking at WHO wrote it and WHO they were really helps you do this.

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3. EACH DOCUMENT MUST BE CITED AS EVIDENCE FOR YOUR ARGUMENT.

These are two easily earned points so many students fail to get. It's basically the "argument" or at least the controversial, provocative topic that matches your thesis statement. Each time you use a document, you must show why you have used it in the way you chose. You never use a document without tacking on this key bit of information that shows the reader that you understand what the document says and that you can use it in a way that supports what you are trying to say. And it's simple. For example, assuming the prompt is about German military aggression:

"Document three is a letter from Maria Theresa of Austria to her friend, the future Queen of Saxony. In this letter, she expresses deep worry about Prussian designs on Saxon and Austrian territory. This letter is evidence of Prussia's extreme militarization under Frederick the Great and his willingness to use his military to dominate central Europe."

See? This does not quote the document; it does not summarize the document. It uses the document to make a larger point. But the key is, YOU MUST DO THIS FOR EACH AND EVERY DOCUMENT. If you screw one up, but still have "good evidence" for the others, you still get a point. If you screw one up and leave a document out on top of that, you get nothing.

Evidence points are pretty easy to get. It only takes a few words of explanation. There is no need to be elaborate, but you must be specific.

QUOTING OR SUMMARIZING A DOCUMENT IS NOT EVIDENCE!

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 4. THE POINT OF VIEW

As you may have already figured out, if you have a good thesis, three good groups, have used every document appropriately, and cited evidence for why you used the document the way you did, you are already "sitting pretty" on four to five points. Now the hard part:

The "Point of View" point is notoriously hard to get. You only need two valid ones, but I would write three to take out some "insurance' in case one of them is wrong or inadequate. YOU SHOULD EXPLICITLY USE THE WORDS POINT OF VIEW. Here's a bonus. Even if you mess it up, the reader can still attempt to use it for a piece of evidence.

There is also no easy place to "fit" POV. I suggest one of two ways.

One, you end each group paragraph with a "point of view" sentence and a brief explanation as to why you think it is important to your analysis. And I said BRIEF. Personally, I think this is the easiest.

Two, you have a "point of view" paragraph that has three points of view with a brief explanation as to why they are important to your overall essay.

"Point of view" is more than just bias, a word I never want you to use. Point of view is the sum of AART = ATTRIBUTION, AUTHOR, RELIABILITY, and TONE. In other words, "WHAT he is, WHO he is, WHY should I trust him, and HOW does he sound?"

Here is an example.   "The fog comes in on little cat feet."   - Robert Frost, 20th Century American Poet

Here is a possible POV sentence built from this.

"Great American poet Robert Frost's point of view about fog is written in his metaphoric poetic sensibility. Even though it is obviously not a literal, scientific description of what fog is or why it moves, it is safe to assume that he thought of this line while personally watching fog roll in, moved by its quiet and stealth."

Frost is identified by name and the sentence explains who he is. "Poetic sensibility." This is attribution.

Frost is identified by who he is, "Great American poet." This is identification of author.

The writer assumes that Frost has firsthand experience of fog, a very reasonable assumption based on the poem, which makes him more or less RELIABLE in describing it.

By asserting that Frost was being metaphorical and not literal, the writer correctly identifies TONE by showing he knows the difference between literal fact and metaphor.

The words "point of view" are used specifically, and the POV identified, "moved by its quiet and stealth."

I think the best way to remember how to do this and use it well under a time constraint is in the form of a "mad lib."

POV MAD LIB

(Person writing the document), a (RELEVANT description of the person), point of view about (group subject) is (emotional or analytical state) because (explanation of why the person thinks the way he does). (Person) is (reliable/not reliable) because (explanation). Example:

"Adolf Hitler's point of view about the Jews of Europe while Chancellor of Nazi Germany was one of revulsion and disgust because of his ongoing and firm belief that they were a genetically "dirty," barbaric race responsible for all the world's evils. While Hitler's point of view about Jews is a reliable source in understanding Nazi ideology because he was mostly responsible for shaping its racial theories, his point of view about Jews is not reliable when evaluating the state of Jews' actual influence in the world because of the rabid hatred that led him to believe that they wielded more power than they actually had."

Hitler – Author   Chancellor of Nazi Germany/Nazi Leader - Attribution

Racial theories of the Nazis, Extent of Jewish "power" - Reliable/Not Reliable identified FOR A VALID REASON.

Hatred, racist, revulsion, disgust - Tone

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5. The Extra Document

Only a bare handful of students get this point, not because they don't try, but because they don't do enough.

This should be the LAST paragraph of the essay, and explicitly use the words "extra document." **YOU SHOULD ATTEMPT TWO OF THEM**. If you screw one up, you still get "another bite at the apple."

Most students will do something like this:

"I would like an extra document from a lower class woman because she knows what it is like to have a family and have to feed them." Or perhaps, "I would like an extra document from a peasant because the documents do not have a point of view from a member of the lower class." Or, "I would like a journal written by a soldier to see what it was like to actually fight in these wars."

Not nearly good enough. Here's what you should do.

Look at the documents and who wrote them. Last year, all of the documents were from crowned heads, Indian chieftans, generals, and government officials. People of rank.

While the point of view of a "peasant" or a "woman" might be interesting, how does that person fit in this kind of company, based on what you have? Not at all.

So, the first step is to pick an imaginary person who would be "at home" in the documents as a whole, someone whose opinion is relevant and important.

Second, that person should be somehow described. "A Confucian scholar," "a Buddhist Monk," a "member of a joint-stock company," a "white colonist." Again, the description should be relevant to the discussion as a whole.

Third, the document needs to be specific to the overall theme. If, for example, the DBQ was about movies, why would you want a letter or a painting? You would more likely want another kind of movie or an article written by a film critic, perhaps, or a scholarly article written by a professor of cinema history.

Once you have decided that, THEN you need to explain WHY you need the document for a more complete analysis. It should look something like this.

EXTRA DOCUMENT MAD-LIB

"An extra document that would help the analysis would be a (specifically identified type of document) written by a (specifically described person). This document would be helpful to the analysis because (rationale)."

Here is an example.

Assume the prompt deals with philosophy of governance and "deserving the power you hold" across the centuries, and you have all kinds of documents from political philosophers, practitioners of non-violence, rulers who believe in a monarchical police state, autocratic crowned heads, and communist revolutionaries. Quite an assembly.

With a little thought, though, it is not hard to see that there are many people not represented. There are no fascists/reactionaries. There are no socialists. There are no proponents of representative democracy. There are no anarchists. There are no "back to nature politics be darned" "hippie" types. So many students ask for an extra document from someone or something already there. And that's silly. It gets you nothing.

So, the extra document paragraph might look something like this.

"An extra document that would help my analysis is from, for example, a political treatise written by a fascist or Nazi political scientist, someone who believes that "deserving the power you hold" is a weak idea and that "power" should be seized without regard to "deserving it." This extra document would be useful because it would explain the point of view of a political theoretician who, unlike all the others, believes that somehow justifying the "right" to hold power is nonsense and calls the rationalizations of the other authors into question."

Here's how it breaks down.

The extra document is relevant to the discussion and specifically identified. ("Political treatise").

The person you want it from is relevant to the discussion and specifically identified. "fascist/Nazi political scientist."

You have explained "why" you need the document. (Fascists often believe in taking power without regard to ideas like "popular will," a point of view not represented in the documents.)

You have explained why it would be useful and specifically tied it back to the other documents and the prompt. ("Unlike all the others," "[alternative] point of view").

HISTORICALLY CORRECT SPECIFICITY IS THE KEY!

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LET'S PULL IT ALL TOGETHER!

Here's the format you will use for ALL DBQs written in my class.

Paragraph One - Thesis, all parts of the thesis in place with a summary of your grouping arguments.

Paragraph Two - Document group one. At least two documents. Each document explained as evidence. POV sentence the last sentence that specifically uses the worlds "point of view."

Paragraph Three - Document group two. Same format as paragraph two.

Paragraph Four - Document group three. Same format as paragraph two.

Paragraph Five – An extra document or two extra document sentences.

STOP. Look back and ask yourself:

1) Have I used ALL the documents and cited them?

2) Have I used ALL the documents as evidence with an explanation?

3) Does my thesis address ALL parts of the question?

4) Do my POV sentences follow the "mad lib" format Doc Holley gave me?

5) Do my extra document sentences follow the "mad lib" format Doc Holley gave me?

It's easier than it sounds. Just takes a little practice. No, it takes a LOT OF …

PRACTICE…PRACTICE….PRACTICE !