

Writing the DBQ

1. Remember that a historian's task is to explain change.
2. Read the question.
3. Establish the time frame of the question, e.g. 1860-1900, two decades preceding the Civil War (1841-61), late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (1880-1920). Usually the time frame is specific and tied to an important event, but occasionally the time frame is less precise. Do not go beyond the time frame of the question, except in your conclusion.
4. Determine the category or categories of analysis: social, political, economic, cultural, foreign policy.
5. Make a list of all the key terms that you know related to the question. This is your "outside information."
6. If you can, jot down a working thesis. You can modify it as you read the documents. Your thesis must explain change.
7. Read each document. Start with the tag first, then read the document. The tag alerts you to the point of view reflected in the document. For example, if the context of the question is Reconstruction and the writer is a Republican senator from Massachusetts, you will know that he is likely a Radical Republican and an opponent of President Andrew Johnson. You must read the document in an informed manner.
8. Notice the tension between documents. Documents will reflect various points of view. Remember that your job is to explain these differences, not resolve them.
9. Documents often trigger outside information. Make note of the outside information on your list and add new outside information.
10. Note how the documents trace change over time and be prepared to explain it.
11. As you write, avoid the "laundry list" approach. Students often summarize documents in essay form rather than using the documents as a historian. Documents, like outside information, are evidence. The evidence means nothing until the historian interprets it. Your job is to write an essay that explains change through the interpretation of evidence.
12. Write a thesis. All evidence, outside information and documents, must help prove your thesis.
13. Avoid restating the question. This is not a thesis. Your job is to answer the question.
14. Use as many documents as you can. Parenthetically cite documents at the end of sentences. (A, B)
15. Avoid lengthy quotes. If you must, quote only a phrase.
16. Your introduction should contain a thesis and a road map of your argument. Tell the reader where you are going. Be concrete and specific.
17. Do not repeat your introduction in your conclusion. Your conclusion is your "So What" section of the essay and you may move beyond the time frame of the question at this point. For example, in a question on the Cold War, you might conclude by pointing toward the collapse of the Soviet Union or to the current problems in US foreign policy. The only caveat is that you stay within the scope of your thesis. Remember, historians explain change.