

# WRITING EFFECTIVE HISTORY ESSAYS & IDS

## (or other history assignment)

### I. ESSAY

An effective history essay has **three dimensions**: a prose structure, thematic insights, and factual-illustrative support. **Essays must have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.** The introduction and conclusion may be only one sentence, but both are essential for an "A" essay, and they **must be distinct paragraphs.**

1. **INTRODUCTION** This is simply a brief **restatement of the essay topic** unless otherwise specified. **One or two sentences are usually adequate—keep it brief!** Exam essay topics will be written so the student does not have to invest time thinking of how to “begin” the essay—just restate the topic. The introduction **must** include all themes of the essay as well as any geographical or chronological parameters. **Copy the essay topic with little editing as the introduction –this is the only occasion where you may “plagiarize.”**

### 2. BODY

- **Organize the essay in the appropriate format.** There are only **2 basic** formats for organizing a history essay: chronological and topical. A *chronological format* develops the essay in sequential order over a period of time. A *topical (or thematic) format* develops the various topics or themes of the essay.
- **Identify each element of the topic and respond to it.** This offers a ready-made paragraph structure and lends coherence to the essay. **Notice point allocation** to help you determine how many paragraphs the essay should contain. You lose the points for any element you omit. Address the entire topic—concisely and cogently. Avoid (1) peripheral issues and (2) correct but unnecessary details. Examine the **complete time frame or geographical area** stated in the essay.
- **Incorporate material from the lectures, text, and auxiliary reading** into prose-style paragraphs that are *complete, concise, cogent, and correct*. You do not have to include every fact or example in your discussion of the topic; you don't have time to write that much—even if you know it—and I don't have time to grade it! An essay is not a list -- it is a discussion or evaluation of a topic. An essay with no factual support will not receive better than a “C”. When discussing a person, event, etc. answer three questions: 1) who/what did this do? 2) why did he/she/it do that? 3) what were the results or consequences—short-term and long-term? The last question is essential in an evaluation. It is best to consider results/consequences using the 5 themes in the course: political, economic, etc.

For example, if the essay says explain how Ptolemy and Antiochus influenced the societies they ruled, then explain what each man did, why he did it and what effects the actions or policies had on his society politically, economically, socially, etc.

- **Write in paragraphs!** Paragraphs have two elements: a topic sentence and support, both conceptual and factual. All paragraphs **must be clearly indented** and begin with a **topic sentence**--a thematic statement that indicates the focus of the paragraph (like the headline of a newspaper story). You can write the topic sentences before writing the complete paragraph; this gives you an outline for the essay. The themes identified in topic sentences must be clarified, elaborated, or supported by factual material and examples. This is like being the prosecutor in a criminal trial: you make an allegation and then proceed to prove it with facts that will convince the jury. *Develop only the theme of the topic sentence in the paragraph. For example, if you write a topic sentence such as "Women's lives changed greatly because of better education," the content of that paragraph must deal only with education. If you introduce another reason for change in women's lives, start a new paragraph with its own topic sentence.*
  - **Leave space** at the end of each paragraph—several lines or up to a page—before beginning the next paragraph. You may think of more material that belongs in an earlier paragraph, and you have space available to add the fresh thoughts and still have a well-organized essay.
3. **CONCLUSION** This should be two or three sentences that restate the topic unless otherwise specified. It must be a distinct paragraph.

## II. IDENTIFICATIONS

An identification must include four types of information: who or what the term was, when it occurred, where it occurred, and why it was significant (important). If you omit any of these, you lose points. All this information can be compiled before you take an exam. Mark your lecture notes with key terms (persons, events, ideas, location, etc) and compile the information about it in your study time. You may realize that you don't have complete information and can ask about it in the next class period.

**IDs are not mini-essays!** Write a concise paragraph of 2 or 3 sentences. Write sentences—not fragments. I will not read a full page to see whether you included all the required information.

Distinguish between what something was and why it was important. Use the five themes to determine why it was important: was it important for a political reason, an economic reason, etc. Some terms may be important for more than one reason; select the major reason (or two). Just telling what someone did is not necessarily what makes them important—the consequences of the action are what make the action/event significant.

Example: Constantine. Constantine was the Roman Emperor in 312-337. He was important because he made Christianity a legal religion in the Empire and built the new capital city of Constantinople in the East.

# STYLE & GRAMMAR GUIDE

1. **Leave 1-inch side margins (both sides) for the grader to write comments.**
2. Write complete sentences.
3. Use **past-tense verbs** for past events. Use the **correct past tense** form. For example, the past tense of the verb “to lead” [/ed] is “led”.
4. **Capitalize nouns correctly.** A title is capitalized when used with a person’s name: King George III, the king. Nouns and adjectives denoting religious or ethnic groups are capitalized, such as Irish, German, Catholic, Methodist.
5. **Use third-person** narrative unless specifically asked for your opinion.
6. Express numerical designations appropriately: Roman numerals are used for a succession of persons with the same primary name: “John II”—not John the second or John 2<sup>nd</sup>.
7. **Commas are not salt!**—do not mindlessly sprinkle them throughout your work.
8. Do not repeat phrases—it is boring and reflects a lack of substantive material for the content.
9. **Avoid exaggerations, distortions, and inaccuracies,** as they are evidence of simplistic thinking and writing. For example, don’t say something was “**the only**” one of its kind if it was merely “**the first**”; do not say “**all**” when it was “**some**”. Do not declare that something or someone was “**the most . . .**” unless you are knowledgeable of all other items/persons in that category.

## **COMMON SPELLING/ USAGE ERRORS TO AVOID**

“Alot” is not one word – it is 2 words: “a lot”. “Allot” is one word and has a different meaning than “a lot”.

“Of” is not a verb: do not use it instead of “have” (“He would have won the battle”, not “he would of won . . .”).

affect	effect		
aloud	allowed		
already	all ready		
altar	alter		
bear	bare		
council	counsel		
do	due	dew	
feudal	futile		
its	it’s		
lead (present tense verb)		led (past tense of verb lead)	lead (mineral)
loose	lose	choose	chose
medal	metal		
passed	past		
reign	rain	rein	
seamen	semen		
see	sea		
sight	site	cite	
their	there	they’re	
throne	thrown		
too	to	two	
weather	whether		
when	win		
which	witch		
who	whom	whose	who’s
your	you’re		

## **SAMPLE ESSAYS -- These are examples only!**

**1. ESSAY TOPIC: 50 POINTS** Explain how **climate, topography, and natural resources** influenced the development of early civilizations in **Africa and Europe**. [intro & conclusion, 2.5 pts. each; each topic 15 points]

**Introduction** 2.5 points

“Climate, topography, and natural resources influenced the development of early civilizations in Africa and Europe.” *The **brief** introduction states the entire essay topic and must be indented as a paragraph.*

**Body** each topic 15 points -- Write *distinct paragraphs for each topic*.

1<sup>st</sup> paragraph: “Climate was very important in the development of the earliest civilizations.” *The topic sentence is concise and clearly states the topic of the paragraph. Write factual evidence to explain how climate was important in Africa **and** Europe.*

2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph: “Topography was also a factor in the development of the first civilizations.” *Cite examples from Africa and Europe.*

3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph: “Finally, early civilizations could not have developed without natural resources.” *Cite examples from Africa and Europe.*

Include facts from the **entire geographical scope** of the essay. For example, in “Europe” include information about more than one society. **Leave several blank lines after each paragraph to write ideas/facts that you think of later in the exam period.**

**Conclusion** 2.5 points

“The essay has explained how climate, topography, and natural resources influenced the development of early civilizations in Africa and Europe.” *Keep it simple! **The BODY is the focus of the essay.***

**2. ESSAY TOPIC: 50 POINTS** General Washington and the new national government had to deal with three primary challenges in order to win the Revolutionary War. In the **introduction**, state the three challenges. Then select **one** of these challenges and explain how **General Washington and the national government** handled this challenge: what **actions they took or did not take, whether they succeeded or failed, and why**. [intro, 5 points; conclusion, 2 pts.; Gen. Washington, 17 points; national government, 26 points]

**Introduction** Note the specific content—to state all three challenges—gives the introduction **more points**.

“General Washington and the national government had to deal with three primary challenges in order to win the Revolutionary War. The challenges were financing the war, finding foreign assistance, and fighting the British army and navy.” *The introduction states the entire essay topic **concisely** and must be indented as a paragraph.*

**Body** --Select **one** of the three challenges you listed in the introduction. Write *distinct paragraphs for Gen. Washington **and** for the national government*—note the point allocation indicates that the latter requires more development.

1<sup>st</sup> paragraph: Discuss General Washington's efforts, using factual material to explain his actions, successes and/or failures.

2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph: Discuss the national government's efforts, using factual material to explain actions, successes and/or failures.

**Leave several blank lines after each paragraph to write ideas/facts that you think of later in the exam period.**

**Conclusion** "General Washington and the national government dealt with (whichever challenge you discussed) during the Revolutionary War. Despite many obstacles, they succeeded and won independence from Great Britain." *Keep it simple! The **BODY** is the focus of the essay.*

**3. ESSAY TOPIC: 50 POINTS** **Compare and contrast** two major persons, civilizations, events, etc. (such as Alexander the Great & Augustus Caesar or Roman Republic & Roman Empire in Civ. I, George Washington & Andrew Jackson in U.S. Formative).

### **Introduction**

**Body** Use the 5 key themes to discuss how they were **alike** and how they were **different**:

- in the political sphere
- in their economic life and policies
- in their social life and policies, etc.
- in the military and diplomatic situations each confronted
- in their personal backgrounds, with some explanation of how this affected their attitudes and actions
- in their religious, scientific, intellectual, artistic activities

### **Conclusion**