

THE WRITING OF A HISTORY ESSAY EXAMINATION

I. What to Look For

The first step in the successful writing of a history essay examination is to make certain that you read the question carefully and understand what in essence is being asked. Many writers spend their time writing "around" a question because, by failing to grasp immediately the essence of a question, they fail to perceive what the professor wants discussed.

Some questions require little more than an eighth-grade education to comprehend - for example: "Trace the course by which the Thirteen Colonies came to declare their independence from Great Britain": **or** "Write a history of the gradual slippage of the United States toward involvement in World War I."

Other questions, however, may intimidate a reader simply because of the language in which they are written. The result in such cases is usually an aimless rambling in an essay filled with words and memorized facts (sometimes lists of memorized facts), void of ideas and understanding. Example: "Without the contributions of George Washington, the rebelling Colonials would never have won the Revolutionary War. Discuss." In this query you are **not** being asked to recite a memorized factual summary of the contributions of George Washington to the revolutionary effort, nor are you being asked to spit back the major battles of the War. Rather, and here is where the word **essence** is applicable, you are being asked for an evaluation of George's contributions - a critical assessment made by yourself and based upon the knowledge which you have acquired, not memorized, from the lectures and readings - with references to the indispensability of such contributions.

II. Types of Questions

Depending upon the professor, you may be called upon to "discuss," "trace," "compare and contrast," "write an essay," "evaluate," etc., etc., etc. Do not be taken off guard by the imperative verb because in essence, you are merely being asked to deal with an historical problem which no five "expert" scholars agree on anyway. The verb within the questions is the professor's method of channeling your answer in a certain direction. Note the following example questions, all treating a single problem, yet each a little different because of the **imperative verb**:

- a. "Discuss the role of sea power in gaining the eventual victory over the British in the Revolutionary War."
- b. "Compare and contrast American and British sea power accomplishments during the Revolutionary War."
- c. "Trace the development of American sea power showing how it proved decisive during the Revolutionary War."
- d. "Write an essay on the effectiveness of American sea power during the Revolutionary War."
- e. "Evaluate American sea power during the Revolutionary War."

A second type of query is that which utilizes the **interrogative words** such as "what," "why," "how," etc. This type is the easiest to comprehend because it is the type of question which is used most frequently in everyday life. Example: "How are you this morning?", and "How did American sea

power facilitate the victory over the British in the Revolutionary War?", and "What are you doing this weekend?", and "What accounts for the effectiveness of American sea power during the Revolutionary War?"

A third type of question, the "What if you were," or "Let's pretend" type, is less frequently used by professors. An example of this sort of query is: "If you were John Paul Jones writing during the Revolutionary War, how would you phrase a note to the Continental Congress requesting appropriations for further naval supplies?" This kind of question calls for an understanding of the historical period, an imaginative mind, and a good deal of **empathy** (a word to which I shall return!)

III. Method of Answering

To the historian (and that means you by reason of your major or simply because you are enrolled in a history course) the most important part of his writing, be it an examination, book, or polemic, is the **thesis**. To the ordinary world (non-historians) what the historian calls a thesis is nothing more than "the point he's trying to make." But to us of the in-group a thesis is a thesis. For instance, in answering the question about George Washington's contributions to the War effort, you may have contended that he was not indispensable. To you, that was a statement of your opinion, interpretation, point of view, etc. But to the historian that was your thesis! Consequently, from now on you will not write an opinion in an examination; you will write a thesis in your examination.

Every examination essay should have a thesis, a consistent and logical arrangement which runs throughout your entire essay. Some questions lend themselves more readily to theses. Nevertheless, if your essay is going to say anything worth reading, there should be a thesis consistently developed within. Most of you are familiar with the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but if you listen closely to the Symphony, and the First Movement in particular, you will notice that Beethoven continually returns with those original four notes as if to remind his listeners of the boldness of the introduction. You too, in writing an essay, must present a bold first four notes, in this case your thesis, and develop throughout the essay the proof of those four notes (thesis).

In presenting your answer to an examination question, there is a general format which, if mastered early in your academic career, will prove useful not only in history, but in any non-science course in which essay tests and term papers are assigned. This format is:

1. Introduction
2. Body
3. Conclusion

A. The introduction to your essay should be bold, direct, and assertive - it should present in general (or specific) terms the point that you intend to prove in your essay. This, to the historian (and you), is the presentation of the thesis. (Remember Beethoven's first four notes!) An example of such a presentation in answer to the George Washington query is:

"Throughout the Revolutionary War period George Washington, as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, waged a war against great odds in attempting to evict from North America the legions of British troops intent upon quashing a pesky colonial uprising. From 1776 until eventual victory in 1783, Washington played a decisive role in prosecuting the war, a role which, in the long run, appears to have been indispensable."

or perhaps:

"No man is ever indispensable, least of all George Washington in his role as Commander-in-Chief of the Colonial Army during the Revolutionary War. Certainly Washington made contributions to the Colonial effort, but in the long run, others in the Army could have performed at least equally as well as the Father of his Country."

- B. The Body of your essay is the place in which the facts which you have learned can be put to use; however, you have already drawn from that reservoir to some extent simply by taking a stand - presenting a thesis - in the Introduction. Here in the Body you must prove the validity of your opening position - your thesis.

There are three general ways in which the Body of an essay can be constructed. These methods of approach are: 1) the chronological, 2) the categorical, and 3) the stages-of-development. Others may be used, but these three are the most common.

1) Using **the chronological approach** you simply present the factual proof of your thesis in chronological order. With reference to our George Washington example, proof of Washington's indispensability might be structured something like:

"In 1776, it was George Washington who played an indispensable role when he ..." (and here would follow details of Washington's actions in that year).

"Again in 1778 one can discern the indispensable character of Washington when he ..." (more specifics).

"Finally, in 1783 at Yorktown, Washington's indispensable action in the securing of ..." (more).

(Note carefully that in each paragraph in which fresh, chronologically-arranged information was presented to prove my thesis, I included a direct or indirect reference back to that thesis - i.e., the indispensable role played by George Washington during the War. This is what Beethoven does, too.)

2) In **the categorical approach** the proof within the Body of your essay is ordered according to categories of action rather than by dates. In this approach the artificial word STAMPIERE is a useful device for remembering the general categories in which you may present proof of a thesis.

S = social

T = technological

A = administrative

M = military

P = political

I = intellectual

E = economic

R = religious

E = external (foreign policy)

Very seldom, if ever, are all of these categories applicable to a single question. This method is especially useful in answering broad general questions such as: "What changes took place in America during the Jacksonian era?" Here you might discuss the era with reference to the social, administrative, political, intellectual, economic, religious and external developments. The categorical approach and STAMPIERE, plus a good deal of **empathy**, can many times enable you to write a creditable essay even though your command of the cold facts is not admirable. For instance, by saying to yourself "if I were alive in the Jacksonian era, what would I notice?" you can many times reach interesting, unique, and rewarding conclusions.

3) In **the stages-of-development approach** you are usually being asked to treat complex developments over a long period of time. By using the stages-of-development approach you are able to simplify questions and deal with recognizable smaller spans of time within the overall period under study. For instance, this approach is most appropriate for a question such as: "Discuss the course of American foreign policy from 1920 until the present." Here you could break down the period 1920-1966 into the smaller stages of development:

1920-1941: Isolationism

1942-1945: World War II

1945-1947: Years of Indecision

1947-1966: Cold War

IV) The Conclusion of your essay examination can be a time for ramifications upon your thesis, a time for corollaries, or a time for simple reiteration of the points presented in the Introduction and proven in the Body. Whatever it is, the Conclusion will baffle you only if you do not know what you have been writing. In general, the Conclusion need be nothing more than a space in which you say in so many words: "I said such-and-such in the beginning, I have proven with facts the rectitude of my assessment, therefore what I have contended is correct."