

The **Document Based Question** is the most significant part of the APUSH course & exam for two reasons. First, it is the question on the exam that every student must answer, no choices, no excuses. But the DBQ also represents the essence of historical scholarship, and that is the second and main reason it is so significant.

History is not merely coming to a conclusion from a set of documents, but a more complex analysis of earlier secondary source interpretations of a historical topic, challenged or confirmed with a selection of key documents from the time period. While primary sources are the building blocks of history, it is the analysis of them that is key. A collection of documents does not tell us the past; they are merely artifacts of the past, the tools historians use to uncover the past.

Students often look at the DBQ essay in the same way people look at the field of history: as a puzzle of documents that merely need to be arranged.

This view of the DBQ and history as a puzzle is simplistic, misguided and just plain wrong, WRONG, WRONG!

The most important part of the historical process is the research question and the most important part of the DBQ is the prompt. The successful DBQ Essay, like a successful historical interpretation, begins with a historical question, and the answer to that question must be built upon a solid foundation of outside analytical & factual information and supported by a selection—perhaps 75%—of the documents to reinforce or revise the analysis & factual support. This is more than the model of the successful DBQ Essay; this is Historical Analysis.

Step One—Generate Outside Information

- ⊕ **Look for the Familiar in the Prompt**—Essay questions do not materialize out of thin air; they are typically a means for assessing your ability to convey a particular historical interpretation. If the prompt reminds you of an argument you read or an analysis from class lectures/discussions, that is no accident, and you should let that guide your essay.
- ⊕ **Generate a Database of Specific Content**—From the textbook chapters, class content and/or any other sources, generate a list of outside information (20 –30 terms) that must be covered in a high quality essay on the specific subject of the DBQ. Sometimes these terms will be referred to explicitly in the prompt and a major part of your analysis. Other times they will be merely implied in the prompt and mentioned in your essay.

Step Two— Evaluate the Documents

- ⊕ **Familiarize Yourself with All of the Documents**—Quickly read through & interpret all of the documents, summarizing each in the margins, highlighting specific content—quotes, statistics, etc.—and rating each one for use in your essay.
- ⊕ **Decide How to Use the Documents**—Decide which documents will be essential to your essay, which ones could add a little support, which ones challenge your interpretation. Determine which documents are not included but would be helpful.

Step Three— Generate Your Analysis

- ⊕ **Create a Thesis & Generate an Outline**—Your thesis should be based on your outside information, and not on the documents. As always, the thesis should include two parts: 1) A general response to the prompt and 2) A road-map of your analysis. Your outline should at the very least include the topic sentences for each of your body paragraphs.
 - ⊕ **Place the Documents**—You should attempt to use 75% of the documents. There is no single way to use a document, and you should not feel that you must use them all in the same manner or balance them throughout the essay.
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Document Warning: Outside information is as important as the documents in a DBQ. In fact, Document Based Question is misnomer—**DO NOT BASE YOUR ESSAY ON THE DOCUMENTS!!**

**Do not be lured by the documents in front of you!
Avoid document temptation!**

The documents can assist you in writing your essay, but they can also lead you astray.

The Ubiquitous Essay Hint: Don't let the prompt fool you!

Whether it is because they are intimidated or merely lazy, student writers tend to see essay prompts in very simplistic terms. Every essay prompt can be used to create the structure of the essay, but the best student writers view the prompt as a way to approach the subject of the prompt. And some of the best analysis on the subject of the prompt is not referred to directly by the authors of that prompt. This does not mean, however, that you cannot include that analysis.

Do not merely respond to the prompt. Always write the essay that best addresses the subject, make sure you cover everything the prompt asks for, but never limit yourself to what is asked for explicitly. Take control of the prompt and write the essay it deserves