

## THE HISTORY ESSAY EXAMINATION

### What to look for

First, read the question carefully and understand what is being asked. Many writers write “around” a question because they do not understand 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 involvement of the United States in World War I.”

Other questions, however, many unnerve a reader simply because they are written in an intimidating manner. The result in such cases is usually an aimless rambling 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. “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, you are being asked for an evaluation of Washington’s contributions—a critical assessment made by yourself and based on the knowledge you have acquired, not memorized, from the lectures and readings—with references to the indispensability of such contributions.

### Types of questions

You may be asked to “discuss,” “trace,” “compare and contrast,” “write an essay,” “evaluate,” etc. Do not be taken off guard by the imperative verb, for all you are being asked to do is deal with a historical problem, usually one which scores of scholars already have written thousands of pages, no five of these “experts” in total agreement. The verb within the question is the professor’s way 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 sea power in gaining 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 to be 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.

Another type of questions uses interrogative words such as “what,” “why,” “how,” etc. This type is the easiest to comprehend because it is the type of question used most frequently in everyday life. Examples: “How are you?” 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 popular with professors. An example of this sort of question 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 understanding of the historical period, an imaginative mind, and a good deal of empathy.

## Method of answering

To the historian (so long as you are studying history, you are a historian), the most important part of writing is the thesis, a consistent and logical argument that runs throughout the essay. Some questions lend themselves more readily to a thesis. Nevertheless, if your essay is to be worth reading, you must develop and support a thesis. You are probably familiar with the first four notes Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but if you listen closely to the symphony, you will notice that Beethoven continually returns to those original four notes as if to remind his listeners of the boldness of the introduction. You, too, must present a bold introduction, in this case your thesis.

There is a general format for essays that will prove useful not only in history, but in any non-science course requiring essay tests and term papers. This format is:

- I. Introduction
- II. Body
- III. Conclusion

- I. The **introduction** to your essay should be bold, direct and assertive; it should present in general or specific terms the point you intend to prove. This is the presentation of the thesis. 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 that in the long run appears to have been indispensable.”

or perhaps:

“No man is ever indispensable, least of all George Washington is 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 as the Father of our Country.”

- II. The **body** of your essay is where you bring in supporting facts; 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 validity of your opening position-your thesis.

The three most common ways to construct the body of an essay are:

1. the chronological
2. the categorical
3. the stages-of-development.

Others formats exist, but these three are most common.

1. To use the chronological approach, simply present the facts supporting your thesis in chronological order. In the 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.)

2. When using the categorical approach, order the proof within the body of your essay according to categories of action rather than by dates. In this approach, the artificial word, “STAMPIERE”, is useful 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)

Rarely do all these categories apply to single question. This method is especially useful in answering broad general question 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 often 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 reach interesting, unique and rewarding conclusions.

3. Use the stages-of-development approach when 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 to the present.” Here you could break down the period 1920-1966 into smaller stages of development:

1920-1941: Isolationism  
 1942-1945: World War II  
 1945-1947: Years of Indecision  
 1947-1966: Cold War

III. The **conclusion** of your essay examination can be a time to explain the ramifications of 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, and I have proven with facts the rectitude of my assessment. Therefore, what I have contended is correct.”