

How to...



WRITE AN EFFECTIVE HISTORY ESSAY

The first key to success on a history essay examination is thorough preparation. Ask yourself, have you read all of the assigned materials? Have you taken excellent notes in class lectures and discussions? Have you reviewed those notes and readings?

On most examinations, students will choose from multiple essay options. If this is indeed the case, begin by reading *all* of the options to determine which essay you can answer most effectively. Don't be too quick to choose an essay that initially looks good. By reading on, you might find one that suits you even better.

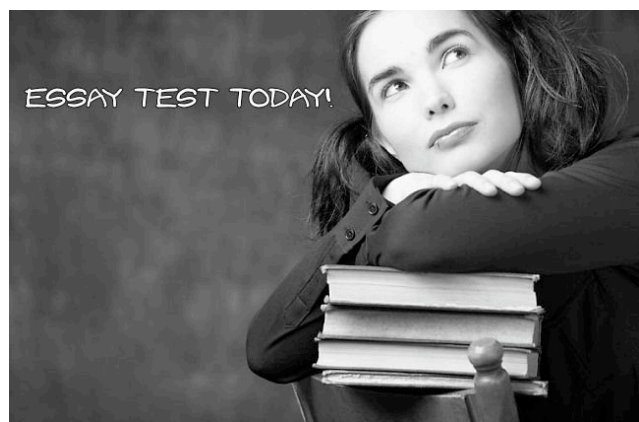
Once you have selected your essay, consider the following steps.

1. Read the essay prompt again, carefully. Many students make the mistake of not reading the question closely enough and thus leave out some aspect of the expected response.
2. Break the essay into its component parts. For instance, consider the following essay:

Describe the key values and beliefs of the Puritans who settled Massachusetts. What were their unique successes and what ultimately led to their failure? What is their importance in our history?

This essay clearly calls for four distinct sections. Section one will be a discussion of Puritan values and beliefs. Section two will describe their successes. Section three will discuss factors that led to their failure. And the final section of your essay will make conclusions about the impact of the Puritans on American history. To be successful, you need to address *each one* of these parts.

3. Make an outline. This is *very important*. Before you begin writing, first plan your answer

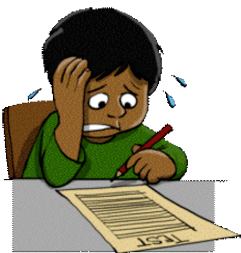


with an outline. Use bullets to remind yourself of key points you want to make in each section of the essay. Once you have done this, it will be *much* easier to write a strong essay. You will be under less pressure and will be less likely to forget to include key information you know well due to being caught up in the stress of writing a response under time constraints.

4. Look carefully at key *command words* in the essay. Different command words ask you to do different things: Examples include:

- **Describe** – This command asks you to give as much detail as you can about an event or issue.
- **Evaluate** – This command asks you to weigh evidence on two or more sides of an issue and come to a conclusion supported by historical evidence.
- **Compare** – This command asks you to discuss two or more issues or events and note similarities.
- **Contrast** – This command asks you to discuss two or more issues or events and note differences.
- **Discuss** – This command asks you to give details about a specific event or situation and also offer your opinion on its importance.
- **Analyze** – This command is very similar to being asked to evaluate. Again, look at multiple examples of historical evidence relating to the issue at hand and come to a conclusion based on that evidence.
- **Explain** – This command asks you to give a description, usually in logical steps, of how a historical event or situation occurred.

5. Begin with a solid introduction. You will likely not have the time to write an introduction as creative and lengthy for an in-class essay as you would for a take home paper, but you should still offer the reader an opening paragraph that relates the key points you will be making in the essay.



6. Pace yourself. Most essay examinations must be written in a specific amount of time. Watch the clock and be sure you are on pace to finish in time. If you do finish early, take time to proofread your essay.

7. Avoid making general statements not backed by specific examples or evidence. Whenever possible, use examples you have learned both in class and from out of class readings. Always check to be sure you have backed up any statements with ample evidence.

8. Avoid straying from the key components of your essay. Stick to your outline and be sure everything you write pertains to the key questions raised by the essay.

9. When you have finished all sections of your essay, write a conclusion. In this final paragraph, tie together major themes of your essay and restate major points you have made.

10. If your teacher provides a scoring guide for your essay, take time to look at each component of that scoring guide and ask yourself how well your essay meets each criterion.

It is important to remember that history essays are less about finding out what you *don't* know and more about giving you a chance to show what you *do* know. For most history essays, there is no definitive right or wrong response. The key is that your essay exhibits the following:

- accurate historical content
- solid historical thinking skills
- well-organized structure
- the ability to support key points or arguments with specific historical evidence.

