

CROSSCURRENTS

WRITING DBQ BODY PARAGRAPHS

For the constructed responses in the AP history courses (DBQ and LEQ), the body paragraphs serve as the meat of one's essay. Introductions frame the topic with historical context and identify a line of argument to support a claim (thesis). Conclusions allow the writer to extend that argument by connecting it to a related period, geographic area, or course theme. However, it is in the body paragraphs where the writer establishes the connection between evidence and thesis that allows the reader to be persuaded of their claims.

Common Problems

In my experience as an AP instructor and reader for the exam, many students do not fully exploit their content knowledge on written responses due to lack of purpose or direction. This can be particularly true of the DBQ, where the main goals are: **1)** to focus your argument around the sources (not a predetermined agenda) and **2)** to use the sources explicitly as evidence to support your claims. Instead, many students will tend toward one or more of the following, less successful, approaches:

- Quoting the documents extensively (i.e., more than a phrase)
- Establishing a pattern of quote > summary > paraphrase
- Treating the documents one-by-one (and perhaps in numerical order) without any interaction among them
- Not establishing how the sources connect back to a thesis
- Relying on generic (and largely meaningless) phrases such as “This shows that...”

When constructing your response, consider going back periodically to your thesis and to the rubric (i.e., the instructions before the prompt) to keep yourself and your argument on track.

Strong Body Paragraphs

AP exams do not specify an ideal number of body paragraphs for a DBQ, but you should have at least two, and given the time constraints (60 minutes), probably not more than four. More than that, your body paragraphs should exhibit a sense of unity, both with your selection of documents in that “group,” as well as how you use the evidence to bolster your analysis and overall argument. Remember that the body paragraphs are where you actually support and refine your thesis using the evidence of the documents, as well as any outside content. In my experience, effective body paragraphs will:

- Begin with a clear topic sentence, which relates back to the thesis
- Use between 2–5 sources to support the argument explicitly
- Cite the documents by noting the author or title of the work and by placing the number in parentheses after its use (Doc. 5, e.g.)
- Rely on transitions to convey the relationship between the sources as they relate to the thesis/argument
- Incorporate specific examples beyond the documents to support the argument, usually called out with a phrase such as “An example not in the sources that supports the claim X is...”
- Integrate 2–3 examples of source analysis, relying on: Historical Situation, Intended Audience, Purpose, and Point of View
- Attempt to bring the documents “into conversation” by showing how they Corroborate, Contradict, or Qualify/Modify one another in relation to the argument
- Loop the documents by explicitly connecting their contents/claims to the argument or another source (e.g., “The author’s claim that national identity is based on race supports...”)

An Example

Do-it-yourself (DIY) videos are widely popular on YouTube. I can tell you how to change the headlight in a car, but you are more likely to follow and understand the directions by watching it done directly. So while the above might be helpful fodder for your reflection, better yet is a specific example. So let's do that. Below is a sample paragraph based on the 2022 AP[®] U.S. History DBQ. You can access the documents by using the link or QR code below. With the example and corresponding annotations, I will demonstrate the application of the above suggestions and avoidance of the common problems.



AP[®] U.S. History 2022 Free-Response Questions: Scan the QR code or visit www.sherpalearning.com/crosscurrents/apush-2022-frqs (see pp. 8–11)

First, the prompt:

Evaluate the extent to which the United States developed a national identity between 1800 and 1855.

All DBQs consist of seven documents, which given the nature of the task, will vary in how they apply to the question and arguments they suggest. Keep that in mind as you plan and write your response. Expect to find nuance and subtlety, not to mention evidence that supports an opposing view. Though another student might reach different conclusions using the same evidence, you can still uphold your claims while recognizing those opposing views. After all, the most sophisticated and complex arguments will address (rather than conveniently ignore) opposing evidence. These strategies should be evident in the sample below.

HISTORICAL ANNOTATIONS

Notice how the topic sentence takes a clear stance but also builds complexity into it by noting the opposing view.

Note how the tone of the document is connected to an outside source, the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

Document 4 here is effectively tied to Document 5 in noting the minority status and pleas of both the Cherokee and African-American Maria Stewart.

Sample DBQ Body Paragraph

Though the United States grew in power between 1800 and 1855, its desire to bind its disparate states and peoples together in one nation failed to overcome inherent divisions based on social and racial differences. The United States was founded on a strong sense of mission, which was expressed in this era through the expansionist justification known as Manifest Destiny. American expansion, however, engulfed the native peoples, such as the Cherokees. To save their civilization, the Cherokees adopted a constitution (Doc. 4), which echoed the U.S. Constitution's Preamble and even adopted a system of private property. Nonetheless, the Cherokee were removed by President Jackson, in defiance of the Supreme Court, because they did not fit the racial definition of "national identity," an example outside the documents that demonstrates the contradictions inherent in the concept. The appeal of the Cherokee finds a poignant echo in the speech of Maria Stewart (Doc. 5) before a mostly white crowd of New England Anti-Slavery advocates. Stewart bemoans the lack of education and opportunity for even free-born African-Americans, before invoking the memories of

HISTORICAL ANNOTATIONS

This introduction to Doc. 4 contextualizes it with a content example that would count as Source Analysis through Historical Situation.

The writer uses "nonetheless" to show the contrast between the appeal of the Cherokee for recognition to the outcome with their removal under President Jackson. The latter reference serves as an Evidence Beyond the Document point.

Once again, the writer pays attention to the rhetorical devices of the speaker, in this case, how Stewart establishes her ethos by connecting her appeal to archetypes of American ideals.

the Pilgrims and Washington to connect rhetorically with her audience. As an African-American and a woman, Stewart would appreciate the appeal made by Reverend Samuel Fisher (Doc. 7) on behalf of female intellectual abilities, regardless of their status as “mother, sister, wife, daughter.” Considering that this article appeared in a women’s periodical, Fisher tailored his words to affirm the dignity of his female audience. Though women, Blacks, and Native Americans were often left behind in the pursuit of national greatness, American leaders often relied on appeals to national grandeur in times of crisis. During the patriotic War of 1812, the U.S. House’s Committee on Foreign Relations (Doc. 2) issued a statement of unity at this time of rallying round the flag, insisting the war’s aim was to “vindicate the rights and honor of the nation.” Such rhetoric is a staple of all wartime proclamations intended to rally the public toward the cause of unity in the face of foreign threats. But even this conflict met with opposition, such as that of New England Federalists, who even threatened secession due to the war’s interference with their commercial interests. The United States often expressed a strong self-identity as a unique nation, but such grand pronouncements often papered over the divisions within America.

This length is recommended if you feel the need to quote the sources to support your argument.

Once again, the writer deploys a transition to recognize an opposing view, which will be represented by the last document in the paragraph.

Though brief, this sentence earns Source Analysis with an effective intended audience (and point of view) analysis.

Another Evidence Beyond the Documents reference here serves to modify the argument by showing opposition in time of war.

Again, notice the transition connecting the two sources. These can be said to corroborate each other in calling for female opportunity and equality.

In noting the intended audience and purpose, this reference earns another Source Analysis point.

Here we have the 4th document in the paragraph (enough to earn 2 points for Use of Evidence with the documents). In this case, Doc. 2 is used as a stand-in for an opposing view, which, if done well, can count as earning the Complexity point. Again, note the brief but effective quoting of a phrase from the source.

With the final sentence, the writer restates the thesis in different way and perhaps sets up the focus of the next paragraph.

Final Thoughts

As you may have noticed, the sample above wastes no motion in setting up its analysis or introducing the sources. It uses the evidence with a clear purpose and makes concise connections among the sources. The next paragraph could reinforce the ideas of this paragraph, or it could present an opposing view which is then refuted. With practice, these strategies will become intuitive and orient your focus toward effective argumentation and interpretation, the real goal of a college-level history course.

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