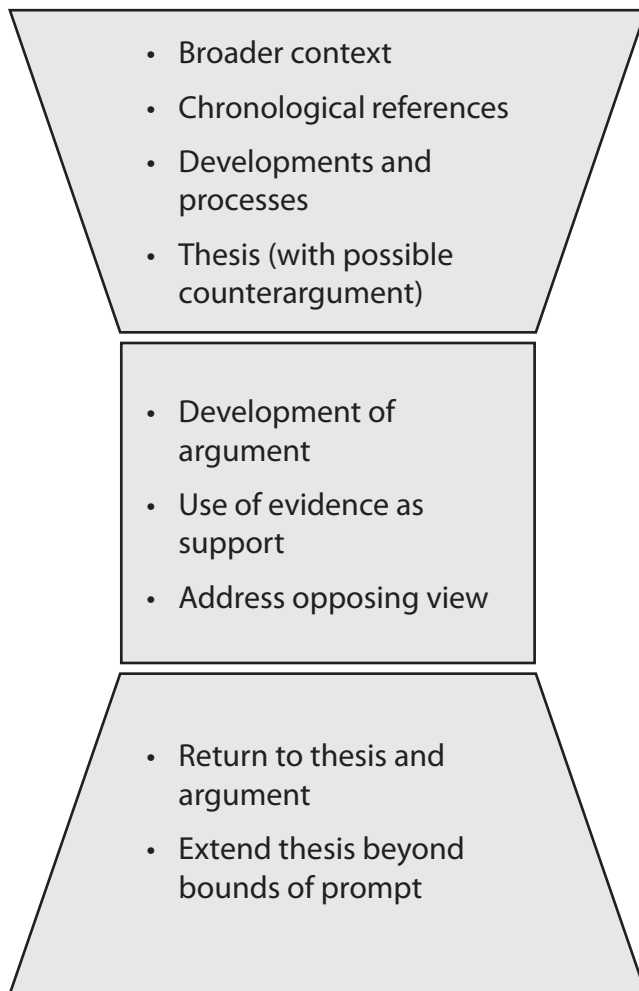


CROSSCURRENTS

WRITING CONCLUSIONS

FINISHING STRONG

Endings matter. How and when you conclude a story, relationship, or essay will color the impression of all that came before. The conclusion to an essay should act as a punctuation mark to a coherent presentation of your argument, much like a dismount signals—with panache—the end of a gymnastics routine. Before we address strategies for conclusions, a word about introductions and the essay in its totality are in order. Consider the diagram below.



When writing in response to a history prompt, it is vital to establish the specifics of time and place, avoiding empty phrases like “throughout history” and “back in the day.” You should begin by identifying the broad processes and developments—e.g., cultural, economic, political, social—that define a particular era and that tee up your thesis. There’s no need to recite a litany of specific examples; however, you should indicate and define relevant concepts, like “exploration,” “industrialization,” and “decolonization.” With your context established, it is time to narrow your focus and state your thesis at the end of your introduction. A powerful thesis provides direction to what comes after, by taking a clear position and providing a line of reasoning, or the basis for the reader to accept your claim.

In the body paragraphs that follow—usually 2–4 under timed conditions—you will support and refine your argument with a limited number of strategically selected examples. The goal is not to “show what you know” or race through your study outline. Instead, keep your eyes on the prize: delivering a convincing presentation of your argument, like the summation of an attorney’s case. With this accomplished, you then turn to the conclusion. In my experience as a teacher and reader for the AP exam, many students struggle to establish a direction for their final thoughts on the topic in question.

As a springboard for examining effective strategies, we look at a prompt for the AP® World History: Modern exam.

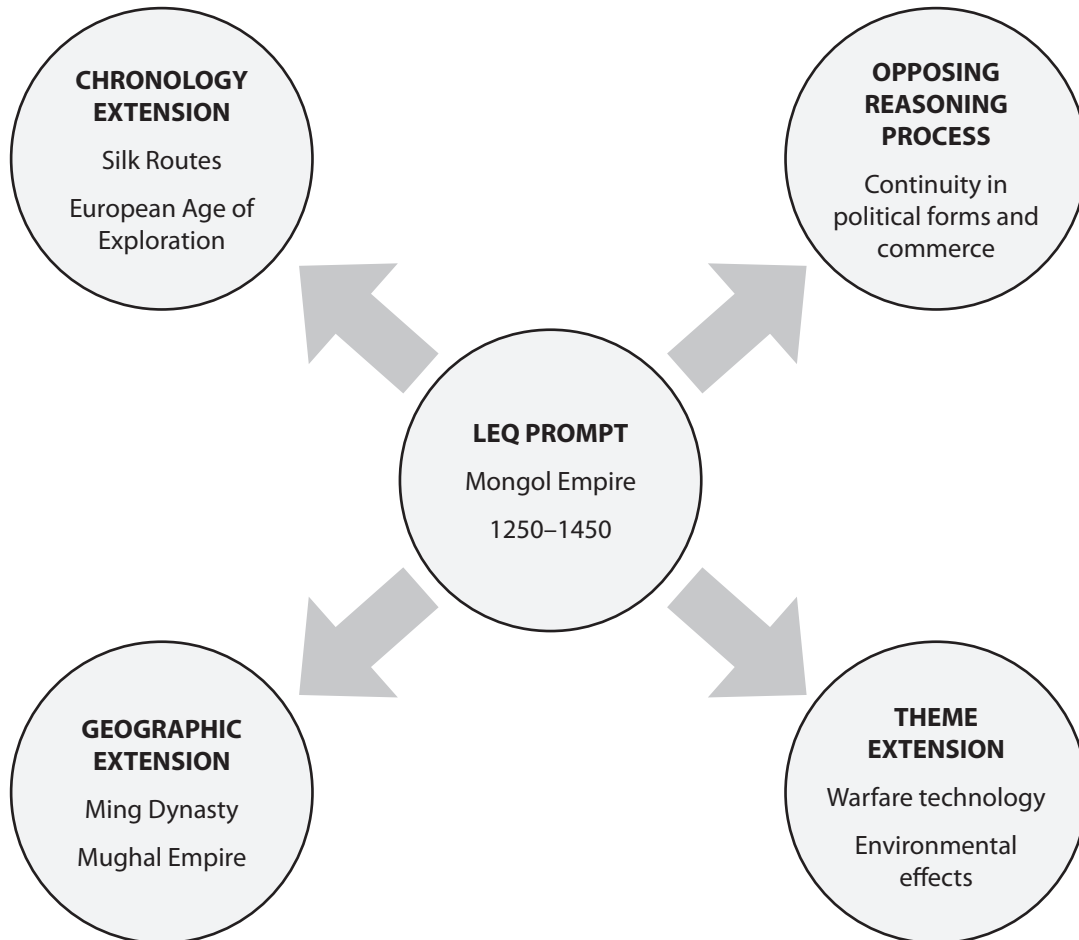
In the period 1250–1450, the expansion of the Mongol Empire affected political structures and economic exchanges across Eurasia.

Develop an argument that evaluates the extent to which the Mongols affected the political stability and economic productivity of Eurasia during this period.

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Here we will focus only on the conclusion. Keep in mind that an effective summation extends, or broadens, the essay's argument outside the bounds of the question. It is *not* primarily a rhetorical exercise, nor a vehicle for political editorials or facile connections to current events. On the College Board rubrics for the long-essay (LEQ) and document-based (DBQ) questions, several

strategies are specified. The chart below provides several ways in which you can extend and amplify your essay's argument. Successful application of these strategies will help earn you the so-called "complexity" point on the rubric, which is the point least awarded to students taking any AP history exam.



For our limited purposes, we will not demonstrate each one of these strategies. However, we will provide three examples of possible conclusions. As you read, please rank these from strongest to weakest. When finished, scroll down to study the commentary for each sample

Sample 1

When you travel to the capital of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, there's a giant statue outside the city of the founder of the Mongol Empire, Genghis Khan. It is the largest statue in the world of a man on a horse and looks toward Khan's birthplace. The statue shows the

greatness of Genghis and his empire. Some people think that almost 10% of Asians are related to this great founder. With his new military practices and amazing conquests, Genghis Khan created the largest land empire in history. Tourists can easily see his legacy in that giant statue on his trademark horse, but his true influence lies in all of the places and peoples whom he conquered with the Mongols.

Sample 2

Though the Mongols wrought much destruction upon the peoples they conquered, most of the existing po-

litical and economic structures remained intact. Trade continued along the Silk Roads, and despite their nomadic lifestyle, the Mongols saw the importance of garnering wealth from these contacts that linked up East Asia with the Middle East and Europe. In addition, the Mongols often adapted themselves to the long-standing cultures that surrounded them. A good example is their establishment of the Yuan Dynasty in China. Its rulers, like Kublai Khan, maintained the importance of Mandarin as the language of intellectuals and the imperial examination system based on Confucian classics. Sure, the Mongols were influential, but their impact stands more in their ability to adapt to and absorb the cultural practices of civilizations that they conquered.

Sample 3

The Mongols exercised a powerful influence over the Eurasian landmass. Their armies conquered far and wide, and in so doing, facilitated cultural diffusion across the largest geographic extent in world history. Islam spread into Central Asia, and Chinese goods continued to flow along the Silk Routes, stimulating European interest in the riches of the East. In fact, Marco Polo visited the Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty of China; so impressed was he with the civilization that he encountered that his travel account lit the fire of interest in further European contacts with Asia. At the same time, it is quite possible that the Black Death spread to Europe along Mongol trade routes. Despite Europe's loss in population during this pandemic, the Mongols indirectly advanced the subsequent age of European exploration (1450-1600), one of their most important legacies over the long-term.

Commentaries

Sample 1: Though clearly written, this is the weakest sample. The writer captures our attention with the image of Genghis Khan's statue and anecdotes about his genetic influence. On the credit side of the ledger, the conclusion provides an intimation of a thesis ("Genghis Khan created the largest land empire in history."); however, this general thesis is never modified or applied to other specific historical settings or periods. The final sentence offers a tantalizing notion of the Mongols' impact, but it is not developed adequately. Overall, this is not a poor effort, but the conclusion would have benefited from a clearer sense of purpose.

Sample 2: On the plus side, this "middle" conclusion succeeds in modifying the argument by noting the many continuities surrounding the Mongol conquests, such as the influence of Chinese culture in the Yuan dynasty. However, the sample misses the opportunity to restate and reinforce its argument. In fact, it is not clear upon reading this conclusion exactly what the student had argued in the rest of the essay. Though the conclusion would likely earn the complexity point for modifying the argument with continuities, this strategy would work more effectively by connecting back to the changes the essay established in the introduction and body paragraphs.

Sample 3: This, the strongest sample, takes a similar tack as Sample 2. It discusses the influence of the Mongols on China, but extends this further to include a discussion of how Mongol control of Eurasia stimulated the European age of exploration, which followed (1450-1600) upon the chronology specified in the prompt. In addition, the student notes both positive (exploration) and negative (Black Death) effects on surrounding cultures. What distinguishes this sample from the previous one is its effective restatement of its thesis (conquests, cultural diffusion, spread of Islam) to set up the extension of the argument over time (a subsequent period) and space (Europe).

As you consider these strategies, let us offer this takeaway. Historical essays, particularly in an AP setting, center on establishing a claim. Moreover, writers must "demonstrate a complex understanding" by applying one of the strategies illustrated above, either in the body or conclusion of their essays. Oftentimes, students will offer substantial content knowledge but fall short of earning all of the points on the rubrics (usually the complexity point). This shortfall can usually be explained by a student losing focus on the central aim: making and modifying an argument.

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