

Writing the Document-Based Question (DBQ)

The APUSH exam format includes one document-based question. Students will have 60 minutes to answer it.

Guidelines

1. **Long-essay writing skills.** The initial mystery of answering a DBQ largely disappears if you remember that it builds on the skills for writing the long-essay question, including the skills of developing a clear thesis and roadmap, argumentation supported with relevant historical evidence, use of targeted historical thinking skills, and synthesis of your ideas. The difference between the long-essay question and a DBQ is that in the DBQ students must 1) analyze and use documents in your supporting arguments and 2) include contextualization.
2. **Focus on the question.** As in the long essay, it is essential that students develop a strong thesis that deals with all parts of the question. This sample DBQ illustrates how important it is to identify and address all parts of the question: *Analyze major changes and continuities in the social and economic experiences of African Americans who migrated from the rural South to urban areas of the North in the period from 1910 to 1930.* An effective answer would have to address the targeted HTS of continuity and change, and the historical social and economic conditions, in both the South and the North for the period.
3. **Use of documents.** The documents serve as an additional source of relevant evidence, in addition to your outside knowledge. There are seven documents, and to receive a high score, students will have to analyze all or all but one of the documents.

A serious mistake in answering the DBQ is to write little more than a descriptive list of the documents (“laundry listing”). For example, “According to Document A, blah, blah, blah” or “Document A says this, document B says this, etc.” The arrangement of the documents in the DBQ should NOT control the organization of the essay. Instead, analyze the documents in terms of evidence to be linked to the thesis, and integrate them into a well-organized and persuasive essay.

Remember that not all documents will have equal weight in supporting your thesis. Communicate to the reader your awareness of the bias or unreliability of a document or how a document which may not support your thesis fits into the context that is relevant to the question.

Brief references to the documents are enough. The readers already know the content of the documents, so NEVER QUOTE the documents.

Cite your document evidence. For example, “The Founding Fathers decided that slavery would not be allowed in the Ohio Territory. (Doc A).”

4. **Incorporate HIPP.** The grading of DBQs also requires an understanding of the background and context of the documents. Students are expected to include at least one or more of the following in their analysis of all or all but one of the documents:
 - **H**istorical context
 - **I**ntended audience of the document
 - **P**urpose of the document
 - **P**oint of view of the author

Here is an example of a successful HIPP: *“The historical context of the Clayton Antitrust Act was passed under Wilson’s administration when progressives were desperately seeking help in enforcing anti-trust laws under a relatively inefficient Sherman Antitrust Act. The new law would give some enforcement power over anti-trust laws to the federal government.”*

5. **Incorporate Synthesis.** For the DBQ synthesis can involve 1) extending or modifying the thesis with a counter-example, 2) recognizing and accounting for contradictory evidence in an argument, or 3) connecting the topic to another historical period, geographical area, context, or circumstance beyond that which is called for in the prompt.
6. **Outside Information.** Students can establish that they understand the era in question by setting the historical scene early in the essay using your “outside” information.
7. **Reading Period.** Use the reading first 15 minutes to read and make margin notes on the documents. Organize them and the relevant “outside information” that you can use to answer the question.

8. **Incorporate Contextualization.** Contextualization is required in one section of the rubric and may be used in two other places in the DBQ rubric on page 3:

- **HIPP analysis of document.** Contextualization may be included in Part B of the rubric, as part of the “HIPP” analysis. This is more of a “local” or “close” context of the document. For example, if the document is cover art of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, local context might be Harriet Beecher Stowe, the date of its publication 1852, the fact that it is anti-slavery novel, northern reaction to the book, etc..
- **Broader context.** The rubric in section C requires contextualization to “accurately and explicitly connects historical phenomena relevant to the argument to broader historical events and/or processes”. This might be connected to one of the seven themes (BAGPIPE). For example in an essay on the American Revolution, the broader context might be Politics and Power.
- **Example of Synthesis.** Contextualization may also be used in section D, the synthesis section, since there is a point available for contextualization as well. This type of contextualization involves the use of another time period. Note it does not have to be forward in time; it can also be backward. For example, in an essay on the American Revolution, then another context might be the southerners on the eve of the Civil War.

Notice all of these involve bringing in outside information.

9. **Sample Directions.** Each DBQ should be written using the following directions from the College Board:

Question 1 is based on the accompanying documents. The documents have been edited for the purpose of this exercise. You are advised to spend 15 minutes reading and planning and 45 minutes writing your answer.

Write your responses on the lined pages that follow the question.

In your response you should do the following.

- *State a relevant thesis that directly addresses all parts of the question.*
- *Support the thesis or a relevant argument with evidence from all, or all but one, of the documents.*
- *Incorporate analysis of all, or all but one, of the documents into your argument.*
- *Focus your analysis of each document on at least one of the following: intended audience, purpose, historical context, and/or point of view.*
- *Support your argument with analysis of historical examples outside the documents.*
- *Connect historical phenomena relevant to your argument to broader events or processes.*
- *Synthesize the elements above into a persuasive essay.*

College Board DBQ Rubric

Maximum Possible Points: 7

A. **Thesis: 0-1 point** (Skills assessed: argumentation and targeted historical thinking skill)

States a thesis that directly addresses all parts of the question. The thesis must do more than restate the question.
1 point

B. **Analysis of historical evidence and support of argument: 0-4 points**
(Skills assessed: use of Evidence, argumentation, and targeted historical thinking skill)

Analysis of documentation (0-3 points)				
Offers plausible analysis of the content of a <u>majority</u> of the documents, explicitly using this analysis to support the stated thesis or a relevant argument.	OR	Offers plausible analysis of BOTH the content of a <u>majority</u> of the documents, explicitly using this analysis to support the stated thesis or a relevant argument; AND at least one of the following for the <u>majority</u> of the documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intended audience, • purpose, • historical context, and/or • the author’s point of view 	OR	Offers plausible analysis of BOTH the content of <u>all</u> or <u>all but one</u> of the documents, explicitly using this analysis to support the stated thesis or a relevant argument; AND at least one of the following for <u>all</u> or <u>all but one</u> of the documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intended audience, • purpose, • historical context, and/or • the author’s point of view
1 point		2 points		3 points

AND/OR

Analysis of outside examples to support thesis/argument (0-1 point)
Offers plausible analysis of historical examples beyond/outside the documents to support the stated thesis or a relevant argument. 1 point

C. **Contextualization: 0-1 point** (Skill assessed: contextualization)

Accurately and explicitly connects historical phenomena relevant to the argument to broader historical events and/or processes.
1 point

D. **Synthesis: 0-1 point** (Skill assessed: synthesis)

Response synthesizes the argument, evidence, analysis of documents, and context into a coherent and persuasive essay by accomplishing one or more of the following as relevant to the question:						
Appropriately extends or modifies the stated thesis or argument	OR	Recognizes and effectively accounts for disparate, sometimes contradictory evidence from primary sources and/or secondary works in crafting a coherent argument	OR	Appropriately connects the topic of the question to <u>other</u> historical periods, geographical areas, contexts, or circumstances	OR	(World and European History) Draws on appropriate ideas and methods from different fields of inquiry or disciplines in support of the argument
1 point		1 point		1 point		1 point