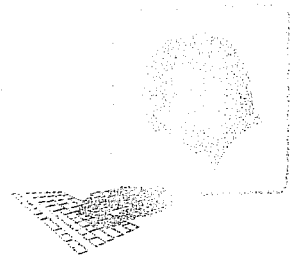


Essay Skill



Identifying Critical Words in an Essay Question

One of the most basic skills in essay writing is determining what the question is asking. As a first step, you should always look for the important components of the prompt. When examining an essay question, you should ask three questions:

1. What is the time period of the question?
2. What am I to do with the question?
3. What content is appropriate in answering the question?

Every essay question will have these three elements in it. The time frame will either be stated clearly or alluded to; you will be given a task to perform; and the content area or areas will be apparent.

Below are some common phrases and words that are likely to appear in free-response questions.

What to Do

1. **Evaluate/assess the validity:** This is just a fancy way to ask, "Is this statement accurate or inaccurate about a historical problem?" The student is to weigh the pros and cons of the issues and decide the relative accuracy of the statement. Most AP questions use this phrasing.
2. **Analyze the extent to which:** This asks a student to make an argument that divides and separates the events and ideas of a problem in order to weigh whether a statement accurately describes a historical period. It is very similar to the process of assessing the validity of a statement.
3. **Discuss:** Consider and argue the pros and cons of an issue. The student should present all sides of the debate and make some evaluation of the issue.
4. **Compare:** Look for similarities between events, causes, persons, or ideas.
5. **Contrast:** Look for differences between events, causes, persons, or ideas.

Content Areas

These are the most common content areas that essay questions ask students to draw from as they support their argument.

1. **Political:** dealing with governmental issues, voting, parties, legislative action, and partisan affairs
2. **Diplomatic:** dealing with relations between the United States and other countries
3. **Economic:** dealing with financial issues, income, money, business activities, production, and distribution of goods and services
4. **Social:** dealing with people living together and their relationships with other people in recreational, educational, and communal settings

5. **Cultural:** dealing with works of art and literature and their expressions of the interests, skills, and dispositions of a time period
6. **Intellectual:** dealing with ideas, thoughts, understandings, and reasoning

The following statement has been broken into its three components. After reviewing it, you should discuss it among your classmates to make sure you understand the process of identifying key parts of an essay.

Practicing the Skill

"Although the thirteen American colonies were founded at different times by people with different motives and with different forms of colonial charters and political organizations, the seeds of democracy grew in America."

Assess the validity of this statement.

Time period: 1607–1734 (Why is this the period to write about?)

What to do: decide whether this statement is accurate about colonial development

Content: political activities in the colonial period

Look at the statement below and complete the accompanying exercise in your notebook. This can be discussed by the entire class or within your study group, depending on how you are using the book.

Applying the Skill

"In the seventeenth century, the cultivation of tobacco made a profound impact on the social and economic development of the Chesapeake colonies."

Assess the validity of this statement.

Time period:

What to do:

Content: