



Essay Skill

Identifying Types of Essays

Practicing the Skill

Factual Recall

One of the primary skills in writing an essay is to identify the purpose of a question. You must decide what type of prompt you are confronting and determine what it requires you to do to answer it successfully. There are several types of essay prompts that are likely to appear on your classroom examinations and on the annual Advanced Placement Exam.

Some common categories of prompts are:

While this prompt is uncommon on the AP free-response section, you may find your teacher uses it to test your comprehension of lecture notes or textbook readings. This type of question requires you to name, list, summarize, or outline facts and organize them either chronologically or thematically in an answer.

Example "Summarize the major factors that allowed Portugal to rise as a fifteenth- and sixteenth-century colonial power."

Change Over Time

Almost all essays have an element of change in them, but some ask you specifically to account for change within a time frame and to explain the factors that brought about this transformation.

Example "Between 1492 and 1540, how and why did Spain alter its colonial system of administration?"

Definition and Application

These essays ask you to define characteristics, traits, ideas, labels, or terms and then use specific examples to demonstrate how the definition affected a historical event. These prompts call for dealing with such ideas as liberal, conservative, and democratic ideals, imperialism, and nationalism and explaining their role in a historical issue. It is important to delineate the terms clearly because the definitions help to you outline and form your argument in this type of essay.

Example "Discuss the Black Legend and how it provided motivation to Spain's European rivals."

Cause and Effect

These essays are prevalent on the AP Examination and require you to identify causes of events and to LINK them to historical outcomes. You should always consider short- and long-term cause-and-effect relationships with this type of prompt and make sure to rank the causes in terms of their relative importance.

Example "How did the need for labor in the Western Hemisphere transform trade relations in the Atlantic world?"

These essays involve an analysis of similarities and differences between events and topics. When you see this type of prompt, make sure you analyze both the pros and cons of the issues. Remember that when you draw contrasts between topics, you are also comparing them.

Compare and Contrast

Example "In what ways were Native Americans' lives changed by their encounters with French, Spanish, and English colonizers?"

These prompts call for you to assess the relative importance of events and/or personalities involved in a historical happening. Usually the prompt provides a choice of several factors to evaluate and weigh.

Evaluation

Example "Evaluate the importance of THREE of the following individuals in changing the economic relationships in the Atlantic world."

- Christopher Columbus
- Prince Henry
- Hernando Cortés
- Jean-Baptiste Colbert

This type of prompt is not a question; rather, it is a point of view about a historical problem. It asks you to judge whether the statement accurately reflects the historical record. The prompt may end with the instruction to assess its validity, or it may begin with the phrase "To what extent did . . ."

Evaluation of a Statement

Example "The greatest benefit of the Columbian Exchange was the civilizing influence it brought to Native Americans."
Assess the validity of this statement.

Working in small groups, develop an essay prompt for each of the following subjects in your notebook. When you have finished, discuss your work with the entire class.

Applying the Skill

1. An evaluation prompt about the role the conquistadors played in developing the Atlantic world
2. A comparison-and-contrast prompt about the ways Spain and England ruled their colonies
3. A cause and-effect-prompt about the impact of slavery in the Atlantic world
4. A change-over-time prompt about French colonial motivations between 1500 and 1650
5. An evaluation of a statement about the role of religion in the creation of the Atlantic world