

Writing the Document-Based Question (DBQ) Essay

- The Document-Based Question (DBQ) essay tests your ability to analyze historical documents and think critically like an historian.
- The DBQ question looks like a standard free-response essay question. Following the question is a series of documents (usually 10-12 documents). These documents may be written sources, pictures, artwork, maps, graphs, or charts. Your task is to read and interpret the documents, and then use those documents to answer the question in essay format. Your essay will look like a “normal” essay (introduction, thesis statement, supporting paragraphs, and conclusion). The difference is that all of your supporting information (supporting arguments) will come from the documents.
- Your essay will be assessed on the following criteria: (see the attached rubric for a more detailed explanation)
 - a) Thesis statement – must be original and specific, not simply a rewording of the question
 - b) Use of the documents (must use a majority of the documents, documents must be used individually and specifically, documents must be used to support the thesis)
 - c) Accuracy of interpretation of documents
 - d) Analysis of bias and point of view in several documents
 - e) Organization of documents into groups

Before you begin to write:

1. As with the FRQ, the most important advice is to **ATQ - ANSWER THE QUESTION!** Pay attention to the **task words, content, and chronology** of the question. Check if there is **more than one part** to the question.
2. Read the documents carefully, and make notes in the margins, or underline important information in the document. To interrogate the document, ask the following questions:
 - What is the document? (newspaper article, diary entry, public speech, etc.)
 - Who wrote the document?
 - When and where was it written?
 - Why was it written?
 - Who was the intended audience for the document? (public or private)
 - What does the document say?
 - FINALLY: What does the document mean? How does it help you answer the essay question?
3. **Formulate a thesis about history**, not merely about the documents. Make sure your thesis answers all parts of the question.

Specifics for writing the DBQ:

1. Follow the same **organizational structure** and style suggestions for the FRQ.
2. **Focus your discussion on the documents** and the inferences you can draw from them.

3. If “Historical Background” information is provided, **DO NOT repeat it or summarize it** in your essay – it is provided solely to help YOU understand the documents. It is not a document itself.
4. Do not quote extensively – **LONG QUOTATIONS ARE BAD**. At the most, you should quote a sentence. The reader wants to see that you understand and can interpret the document – simply rewriting the document does not demonstrate this skill!
5. A good DBQ **ANALYZES and DRAWS CONCLUSIONS** from the documents. Avoid the “laundry list” approach; that is, do not merely summarize each document individually without connecting them to larger groupings.
6. Look for trends of **change over time** in the documents (they will always be listed in chronological order). Sometimes change over time is not a relevant factor in the question, so **LOOK** for it, but do not force it if it is not there.
7. Refer to the content, or the author, of the document so **specifically** in your text that the reader cannot help but notice the document you are referring to without you having to cite it in parentheses.
 - **ALWAYS use the name and identifying information** about the author when you use a document. Example: “According to English Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher,” or “A Catholic priest from Paris stated...”
 - **NEVER** cite a written document by the document number. If it is a written source, it should be referenced as shown above. (“Document 6” never said or did anything in history, but “Charles de Gaulle” did!) This shows that you are aware that the document was created by a real human being.
8. You must **refer to each document** in your groupings **individually and specifically**. (NEVER write “Documents 2, 5, 8, and 9 say...”, or “Willy Brandt, Winston Churchill, and Jean Monnett all believe...”). Cite each document by the author’s name, and **DISCUSS EACH DOCUMENT INDIVIDUALLY**.
9. According to the AP Readers, these are “**indicators of analysis**” that improve the quality of your essay:
 - analytical essay structure (thesis, discussion with evidence, conclusion)
 - organization of evidence (documents) into categories or groups, especially ones not specified in the essay itself
 - frequent reference to the terms of the question
 - combination/juxtaposition of the documents
 - recognition of contradictions, ambiguities, or nuances in the documents
 - reference to the **POINT OF VIEW** and the **PURPOSE** of the documents
10. Readers want to see that you can relate **one document to another**; that is, you can see that the documents are “talking to” each other, one document may support or refute another, or that the authors have similar backgrounds or biases. When you write about the documents, show that you see this connection between the documents. This can be done through organizing the documents into groups, or in directly linking one document to another (e.g., “Willy Brandt makes an argument similar to Winston Churchill’s...”).

11. You do not need to use any information outside of the documents to support your argument. If you have RELEVANT, SPECIFIC outside information that would DIRECTLY support your argument, include it if you have time.

Even more specific on the DBQ: Point of View

The DBQ requires that you show evidence of understanding **Point of View** (POV) and **bias** in at least three specific instances in your essay. Here are some ways to apply POV.

1. You can reference the **internal bias** you see in the document. Examples of name calling, loaded language, and other kinds of rhetoric can betray the prejudices or biases of the author.
2. You can reference **external bias**. What is the author's self-interest that makes him or her say things they way he or she does? Do people of certain groups usually construe issues in certain ways? Consider the author's gender, class, nationality, religion, political affiliation, occupation, status, ethnicity, age, etc., and then determine if what they are saying may be biased based on their self-interests.
 - **CAUTION:** You do NOT want to try to determine an ulterior motive behind every document, or make sweeping generalizations about categories of people. **The document will reveal if there is bias or not.** You cannot simply say: "Henry VIII is a man and therefore hates women, and therefore is biased," or "All British people despise the French, so naturally..."
 - Example of appropriate analysis of external bias:
"It is not surprising that X criticizes the growth of industry in Manchester, **since** he is a Romantic poet, and the Romantics detested the destruction of nature and its beauty."
3. You can write, "The author thinks (or says) X **because** he or she wants (or needs, or believes, or is) Y." According to the AP Readers, the idea is to "show awareness that the gender, occupation, class, religion, nationality, political position, or ethnic identity of the author may well have influenced the views expressed in the document." Again, make sure there is evidence within the document to support this.
 - Example:
"Baltasar Rusow, as a Lutheran pastor, was naturally upset by the celebration of a Saint's Day **because** Lutherans don't venerate saints."
4. **IMPORTANT: It does NOT count** as understanding Point of View if you **merely say what the author of a document thinks** (that is just summarizing the document, not analyzing it). You are using POV when your discussion **accounts for** what the authors are saying. Explain **WHY** someone holds a certain view, or speaks in a certain tone (as shown in the examples above).
 - Example of an attempt at POV that **WOULD NOT RECEIVE CREDIT:**
"Baltasar Rusow's point of view is that people should not venerate saints." (This merely summarizes the document - the example under number 3 shows analysis, and therefore would receive credit).
5. **It is not enough to merely say that someone was "biased" or "prejudiced."** To earn credit you must give your reader **EVIDENCE** for asserting that someone is biased. The evidence may come from the document itself, or from your understanding of the external bias of the author.
6. You must **NOT accept every document as fact**. Pay attention to the circumstances behind the creation of the document and the goals of the author.

7. You may **discuss the reliability and accuracy of a document**. According to the AP Readers, you should “critically examine the source for its reliability and accuracy by questioning whether the author of the document would be in a position to be accurate and/or would likely be telling the truth. The student can also evaluate the type of source, e.g., a personal letter or an official report, showing an understanding that different types of sources vary in their probability of reliability.”
- Examples:

“R. Lassels's report of the Carnival celebrations in Italy is probably accurate because as an outside observer, he is more objective.”

“R. Lassels's report of the Carnival celebrations in Italy is probably inaccurate because as an outside observer, he would not fully understand local customs.”
 - **Caution:** Sometimes students will write that a document is accurate because it comes from the time period that the question is asking about, and therefore reflects what people were thinking at the time. This is NOT ENOUGH to receive credit. All of the documents are from the time period – go beyond this and show a higher level of analysis.
8. You can **group some documents by type of author**. When you do so, you show awareness that certain types of authors, by being in that certain type, will share and express similar views. *Regardless of the number of documents in the group, this counts as ONE INSTANCE of analyzing POV.*
9. You may **group and evaluate documents by type of document**. Public documents such as government statistics may be compared to private documents such as diaries or letters. *Regardless of the number of documents in the group, this counts as ONE INSTANCE of analyzing POV.*
10. **Final important note:** “Bias” = noun, as in “Joe demonstrates bias.” “Biased” = adjective, as in “Joe is biased.” NEVER WRITE “Joe is bias,” “This document is bias.” NEVER!

Even more specific on the DBQ: Grouping Documents

You are required to explicitly organize the documents into at least three appropriate groups.

1. It takes at least **two documents** analyzed properly to make a group.
2. Your groupings need to be **RELEVANT and VALID** for the question being answered. You may not just discuss authors whose last names begin with “Q” and get credit for a valid grouping. You must demonstrate understanding of how the documents relate to one another.
3. Here are some ways to group documents:
 - SIMILARITY OF OPINION expressed by authors – e.g., economic concerns, social, religious, political, pro/con on an issue, etc.
 - TYPE, i.e., letter, book, diary, political platform, government document, statistics, newspaper account, business records, etc.
 - GENDER, EDUCATION, OCCUPATION, SOCIAL/ECONOMIC CLASS of the author
 - TIME PERIOD in which they were written (very effective for showing change over time)
 - IDEOLOGY, NATIONALITY, RELIGION of author
 - LOCATION of author, e.g., rural, urban, Paris
 - IDEAS contained in the document
 - Sometimes the wording of the question will indicate how to organize the essay and groupings (e.g., social, political, and economic concerns...)

4. You may make a group out of **two or more documents whose points of view disagree** with each other. The idea is to show that you can combine and juxtapose the ideas, and that you recognize that the documents are “talking” to each other.
5. It is best to **make each grouping a separate paragraph**, with a clear topic sentence addressing the common views or ideas within the documents. **DO NOT MAKE YOUR READER SEARCH FOR YOUR GROUPS – MAKE IT OBVIOUS WITH WELL-ORGANIZED PARAGRAPHS!**
6. Groupings should **flow naturally with the organization of your essay and the thesis statement**. Example: “Many politicians in the 1940s and 1950s were enthusiastic about the idea of greater European unity.” (Do NOT write, “One grouping of documents is people who liked the idea of unification,” or “Documents 6, 8, 10, and 11 form one group.”) Notice how the first example is a statement about HISTORY, which will then use the documents as evidence.

Final Thoughts:

- Think of writing an historical essay as similar to a lawyer presenting a case in court – you need to have a **clear position you are trying to prove**, and you need to have **specific, accurate, and convincing evidence to prove it**.
- **Always write your essays in blue or black ink!**

TASK WORDS & THEIR MEANINGS:

- **ANALYZE:** determine their component parts; examine their nature and relationship.
- **ASSESS/EVALUATE:** judge the value or character of something; appraise; evaluate the positive points and the negative ones; give an opinion regarding the value of; discuss the advantages and disadvantages of.
- **COMPARE:** examine for the purpose of noting similarities and differences.
- **CONTRAST:** examine in order to show dissimilarities or points of difference.
- **DESCRIBE:** give an account of; tell about; give a word picture of.
- **DISCUSS:** talk over; write about; consider or examine by argument or from various points of view; debate; present the different sides of.
- **EXPLAIN:** make clear or plain; make clear the causes or reasons for; make known in detail; tell the meaning of.

FORBIDDEN WORDS:

You should NEVER use the following words in your essay: I, stuff, things. Also, remember you are writing for an academic audience, therefore you should write in an academic manner with an academic tone.

* Some suggestions adapted from Jessica Young, Oak Park and River Forest High School, IL. Some examples of bias and POV taken from the College Board’s AP Central Online. Some of the examples were written by students at Eastview High School.