

Understanding the New AP US History DBQ Rubric

Just like a touchdown and extra point, the new AP US History DBQ is worth seven points. The DBQ is 25% of your final score on the exam, so it is crucial for you to understand the changes to the rubric, as well as how to write the best DBQ possible.

Total Possible Points: 7

Thesis and Argument Development: 0-2 points

This strand of the rubric targets your historical argumentation skills. To do well on this strand, you must:

- Write a thesis that is “historically defensible” (i.e. that you can back up with historically accurate arguments. In other words, you must use *facts*)
- Respond to ALL parts of the question
- Use this thesis to develop a cogent argument that takes into account historical evidence AND demonstrates a relationship between different types of historical evidence

It is that last bullet point that may confound you the most. Remember, the question will be complex and ask about relationships between different types of evidence.

You may be asked to demonstrate how different types of evidence contradict one another, corroborate or strengthen one another, or change one another. The important thing is that you demonstrate a strong understanding of all the evidence as well as how each piece is related to the other.

A few more helpful tips...

You may be used to writing a standard five-paragraph essay with one opening paragraph, of which the thesis is the last line. Forget this style.

For a DBQ, you must locate your thesis in either the introduction OR conclusion of your essay, but remember: your intro and conclusion can be LONGER than one paragraph. This flexibility gives you room to write a thesis that explicitly addresses all parts of the question, makes an accurate and well-supported argument, and uses complex reasoning to illustrate historical relationships and reasoning. In other words, a thesis for a DBQ will never look like a spitback answer, like “World War One started on July 28, 1914.” You can expect your thesis to be longer than that, and in fact, the College Board takes into account that your thesis may well be longer than one sentence.

Document Analysis (0-2 points)

This strand of the rubric targets your ability to analyze evidence and use the evidence to support the argument laid out in your thesis.

The DBQ is comprised of multiple documents. These can include primary sources, secondary scholarship, images, text... You may not be familiar with all of the documents, but you must be able to use what you know (either background information or context clues from the documents themselves) in order to make a coherent historical argument that *supports your thesis*. You must use at least **six** of the documents to support your thesis.

Of those six, you must be able to explicitly explain **four** of the documents. An explicit explanation can comprise a discussion of:

- The point of view evinced in the document (what argument does this document support or negate?)
- The author's purpose (what was the creator's aim in writing or disseminating this document?)
- The historical context (where is this document coming from? What was it used for?)
- The audience (who was meant to see this document, and why?)

Again, all discussions of the documents must demonstrate that you can use the documents to *strengthen your argument and support your thesis*.

Using Evidence Beyond the Documents: 0-2 points

This skill targets your ability to contextualize and argue historically.

There are two strands here. Contextualization means that you must locate your argument within a larger historical context; i.e. you must explain how the argument connects to other historical events or processes.

So if the question is about, for example, warfare during the Civil War versus the French and Indian War, you must give enough background information about one or both of those events to convince the grader that you know what you are talking about when you make claims about one or both of those processes.

Take note:

- When contextualizing, you will be using information you *already know*. You cannot merely summarize the information that is already in the documents, but must instead give an account of the relevant historical time periods or evidence.
- To properly contextualize, you will need to write more than just one sentence. The College Board expects at least a paragraph of contextualization, if not more.

Related to contextualization is your ability to give evidence from beyond the documents themselves. In other words, though you may have used outside evidence in the previous strand (Document Analysis), you must now refer to *additional* evidence that explains the documents and their relationship to your broader historical argument. Don't just summarize information you have already given.

Again, to do this properly, you must be able to write at least a paragraph giving additional context on the specific documents. One sentence will not cut it.

Synthesis (0-1 point)

The final strand is your ability to synthesize. This just means that you can show a relationship between *your* argument and a different type of argument.

Those different "types" of argument can comprise of:

- A relevant development in a different time period, situation, area, or era. (For example, if the argument is about President Lincoln's suspension of certain liberties during the Civil War, you might want to point to President Adams' Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, President Roosevelt's Alien Enemies Act, which was in fact an extension of the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, and the continuing argument over government usurpation of civil liberties in the present day. These are relevant to one another and show continuity even though they happened in vastly different time periods in response to different issues.)
- A different approach to history (i.e. if your argument focuses on *economic* history, you may want to synthesize this with a *social* approach to history)

While the AP World and AP European history tests also award the synthesis point for your connection of your argument to a different field of study (anthropology, art history, government and politics, etc.), the AP US History exam will only award the synthesis point in the cases outlined by the bullet points above.

As with contextualization, you can only earn a point for synthesis if your synthesis is well-developed and clear. In other words, you must do more than merely *refer* to a different historical time period, development, process, or approach.

You must instead write a well-thought-out paragraph (at least) that demonstrates that you are familiar both with the event/issue about which you are writing the essay as well as the event/issue/process/approach you are attempting to synthesize.

Go do it!

The DBQ can seem daunting. You are supposed to be able to juggle multiple skills (argumentation, contextualization, periodization, synthesis... as well as actual content knowledge) and use them all at once to make a concrete argument.

However, the more you practice, the easier this will become. Do not put pressure on yourself to write a perfect DBQ on your first, second, or third try. This rubric is broken into component skills so that you can test yourself on each one. While they are all related – and while no knowledge exists in a vacuum – give yourself the freedom to focus on different skills each time you practice. Don't put pressure on yourself to do a perfect job right away. Instead, focus on one or two skills at a time.

Some helpful tips...

Though this question tests your ability to think and describe relationships and arguments in context of one another, there is no replacement for content knowledge.

Flashcards that list the salient facts about a big event (or relevant document) can be very helpful here.

Don't get hung up on trivia like dates or names; it's more important to be able to describe the *point* of the Alien and Sedition Acts than to be able to list the date they were passed.

With enough practice, you will be able to make a well-supported historical argument in time for the AP exam. Spend time in and out of class practicing how to write these, and you might even come to enjoy the process come May.