

Elements of an Effective History Exam Essay

(1) **Reflect before writing** – Keep in mind that an exam essay is an exercise in argumentation, not regurgitation. Yes, you absolutely must draw upon – and demonstrate a mastery of – historical evidence from the readings and lectures (see #3 below) – not as an end in itself, though, but rather as a means to the larger end of defending a thesis. Thus, do NOT jump right into writing, rushing to dump all the discrete historical details you know about the question onto the page. Instead, reflect on the question for a bit. As you do so, think of and jot down some quick notes on the thesis you want to establish, the evidence you plan to marshal to support your thesis, and the organizational structure that will best allow you to present your essay's argument.

(2) **Develop a clear, analytically rigorous thesis statement in response to the question** – Your thesis is the analytic heart and soul of your essay and should be clearly laid out in your essay's introductory paragraph. Your thesis is the argument / interpretation you propose to advance / defend over the course of your essay. If history is, as an old adage goes, philosophy reasoning by example, then the thesis statement of any historical work (such as a history exam essay) is the philosophy as yet embellished by example, the analysis as yet buttressed by evidence, the spool of interpretive thread that you will subsequently unravel and weave throughout the body of your essay (for more on weaving your thesis, see #4 below). Depending upon the length of your essay, your thesis may vary in length from a single sentence to a few sentences. To illustrate, here is a sample essay question followed by 4 thesis statements, each of which is better than the one that precedes it:

Exam Question: How and why did Anne Hutchinson pose a threat to the established structures of power and authority in Puritan Massachusetts?

Bad Thesis: Anne Hutchinson posed a threat to the established structures of power and authority in Puritan Massachusetts. (*Note how this thesis statement simply rephrases the assignment question in the form of an answer, offering no clue as to what exactly the writer intends to prove.*)

Better Thesis: Anne Hutchinson posed a threat to the power and authority of the Puritan leadership because she was a woman, a popular preacher, and because of her religious convictions. (*Note how this thesis is more specific than the previous one, but is still too broad, especially for a short essay. It also provides little brief insight into why the stated factors posed such threats.*)

Even Better Thesis: The leaders of Anne Hutchinson's community not only felt uneasy about Anne Hutchinson's role as a public figure, but were further threatened by her belief that individuals could communicate directly with God. (*Note how this thesis is even more specific and focused than the previous two. Still, it could go a bit further in shedding light on the omnipresent "why" question.*)

Still Even Better Thesis: While many Puritan leaders were uneasy about the involvement of women outside the traditional female sphere, Anne Hutchinson's preaching that every individual had the ability to communicate directly with God posed a threat to the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Massachusetts, which based its power and authority on its role as mediator between God and the congregation.

(3) Marshal and explicate historical evidence, demonstrating a mastery of historical details (i.e., names, dates, places, etc.) from the lectures and readings in the service of defending your thesis – Your thesis is only as strong as the evidence you mount in its defense. Evidence does not stand alone; it does not speak for itself. Rather, it requires explication. It requires, as well, that you connect it to your thesis. Remember that you bring evidence in support of your thesis and evidence that's evidence that does not serve that purpose should be excluded.

(4) Weave your thesis throughout the body of your essay – Once delineated in your introduction, be sure to weave your thesis throughout the body of your essay. In other words, explicitly connect your supporting evidence to your thesis statement. Think of this weaving-your-thesis process as a kind of helping hand you provide your reader on a tour through the forest and trees of your essay. Your thesis, in a sense, offers your reader a glimpse of the forest, while your supporting paragraphs and the evidence contained therein provide your reader with a tour of the trees within the forest. As you weave your thesis, you're moving your reader back and forth between the forest and the trees, thus insuring that your reader never loses sight of the forest for the trees. Another way of conceptualizing this weaving-your-thesis process is as the analytical thread that runs throughout your essay. If your thesis is an analytic statement and your supporting evidence the descriptive proof of your thesis, weaving-your-thesis is what you do when you connect your description with your analysis, your evidence with your argumentation.

(5) Adhere to a logical organizational structure, reflected in your essay's paragraph breaks – A good thesis can get lost in bad organization. Part of the reflecting you should do before you write, then, should involve the development of an organizational structure / outline that will best allow you to support your essay's thesis. Think here about the most logical way to divide your essay into paragraphs / sections, as well as the transitions that will smoothly transport your reader from one section to the next. Often the organization of your essay will flow naturally from the nature of the question, which underscores once again the importance of reflecting before you write. As a general pattern, history essays first say what they're going to do (in the introduction), do it (in the body of the essay), and say what they just did (conclusion). Though this is somewhat formulaic and needn't always be heeded, it's especially useful for in-class essays where your exam reader will be reading hordes of student essays and will better appreciate and more easily follow those that are impeccably – even if formulaically – organized. To illustrate, here is a sample essay question followed by 2 approaches to outlining it:

Exam Question: The "social construction of race" involves many inter-related ideas about group differences and is shaped by various legal/political, social/cultural, and economic developments. Define the "social construction of race" and develop an argument for what you consider to be the **two** or **three** most important factors that contribute to the "social construction of race." Flesh out your argument by comparing/contrasting the "social

construction of race" with reference to **three** racial and/or ethnic groups – 1 historically deemed "white," 1 "provisionally white" or "in-between," and 1 "non-white." Focus on the years 1840 to 1930 and support your answer with evidence and examples drawn from lectures, readings, and films.

Outline Option #1:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Definition of social construction of race
 - B. thesis
- II. Contributing Factor #1
 - A. Group #1
 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - B. Group #2
 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - C. Group #3
 1. supporting evidence/examples
- III. Contributing Factor #2
 - A. Group #1
 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - B. Group #2
 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - C. Group #3
 1. supporting evidence/examples
- IV. Contributing Factor #3
 - A. Group #1
 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - B. Group #2
 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - C. Group #3
 1. supporting evidence/examples
- V. Conclusion
 - A. restate thesis; discuss how your essay has borne out your thesis

Outline Option #2

- I. Introduction
 - A. Definition of social construction of race
 - B. thesis
- II. Group #1
 - A. Contributing Factor #1
 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - B. Contributing Factor #2
 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - C. Contributing Factor #3
 1. supporting evidence/examples
- III. Group #1
 - A. Contributing Factor #1

- 1. supporting evidence/examples
- B. Contributing Factor #2
 - 1. supporting evidence/examples
- C. Contributing Factor #3
 - 1. supporting evidence/examples
- IV. Group #3
 - A. Contributing Factor #1
 - 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - B. Contributing Factor #2
 - 1. supporting evidence/examples
 - C. Contributing Factor #3
 - 1. supporting evidence/examples
- V. Conclusion
 - A. restate thesis; discuss how your essay has borne out your thesis

(6) **Pay heed to style / form as well as substance / content** – Just because you've marshaled and explicated a wealth of historical evidence on behalf of a clear, analytically rigorous thesis doesn't guarantee success. Style / form helps bring substance / content to life. Among other things, keep in mind the importance of varying your sentence structure, varying your sentence length, varying your verb choice (avoid the passive voice and over-reliance on "to be" verb constructions), and developing smooth transitions between logically organized paragraphs.