

THESIS WRITING – THE COMPARATIVE ESSAY

Students in AP World History are expected to be able to write three different types of essays: a document-based question (or DBQ), a change-over-time essay, and a comparative essay. You can probably gather from the names what you need to do in each essay – the document-based question provides you with a set of documents on which to base your essay; the change-over-time essay asks you to analyze the changes and continuities that occurred within a certain period of time; and the comparative essay asks you to compare and contrast two episodes, cultures, religions, or other historical phenomenon from a given period.

Writing a thesis for an AP World History essay is a little different from other theses you may have learned to write in English or Oral Communications. Luckily, there is a basic format you can use for each of the three essays.

The key to writing a good AP World History essay is to tell the reader what you are going to talk about before you talk about it. The AP World History Exam refers to this as your thesis. The scoring rubric (the guidelines readers use to score your essays) requires readers to answer the following questions about each of your essays:

- Do you have a comprehensive, analytical, and explicit thesis?
- Is your thesis acceptable?

So how does a person write a comprehensive, analytical, and explicit thesis? What needs to be included? What is an “acceptable” thesis and what is an “unacceptable” thesis? Put simply, an analytical thesis will use specific details that will allow the reader to understand exactly what you are talking about. A good thesis is never just one sentence; it is a group of statements. Therefore, you will start with a general sentence, but you have to then follow it up with additional sentences that provide all the necessary elements described above. Together, these statements must

- restate the prompt and define terms, context, and chronology of events under discussion
- address each part of the question (include both a similarity and a difference or both a continuity and a change)
- Make a transition statement to the body of the essay with a sentence like “The historical evidence would indicate that ...”

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A strong analytical thesis will serve as a “road map” for the remainder of your essay and show the reader that you are on target with answering the question.

The Prompt

Each AP World History Essay exam will have a prompt, or question, that you will write on. An example of a prompt would be this:

Compare the economic, social, and political characteristics of ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt.

The first thing to remember is that when it says “compare,” what the prompt really means is for you to both “compare” and “contrast.” AP exam readers will expect you to know this! You will need to note both similarities and differences.

The Thesis

The first sentence of your thesis should be a restatement of the prompt.

Before you begin writing, you should first underline important information in the prompt. In the sample above, you would want to underline the words social, political, economic, ancient, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. You will then use those words to create the first sentence of your thesis. Here is how that might look:

“Two ancient civilizations, Mesopotamia and Egypt, created complex societies with distinct social, political, and economic characteristics.”

The second sentence of your thesis should address both a similarity and a difference. You will simply list them in the thesis. Do not analyze them. Save them for analysis later in your paper. Here is how your second sentence might look:

“One similarity is that both civilizations developed strong economies based on trade with other cultures. One difference is that the Mesopotamians traded with people across the Indian Ocean in South Asia, while the Egyptians traded with their neighbors to the south in Nubia.”

The third and final sentence of your thesis should be the transition into your essay. It is here that you will help your reader get from your introduction into the bulk of what you have to say. Here is how your third sentence might look:

““The historical evidence would indicate that the two civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt had some subtle differences, but were, for the most part, nearly identical.”

In conclusion, here is what an entire thesis statement on this topic might look like:

- “Two ancient civilizations, Mesopotamia and Egypt, created complex societies with distinct social, political, and economic characteristics. One similarity is that both civilizations developed strong economies based on trade with other cultures. One difference is that the Mesopotamians traded with people across the Indian Ocean in South Asia, while the Egyptians traded with their neighbors to the south in Nubia. The historical evidence would indicate that the two civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt had some subtle differences, but were, for the most part, nearly identical.”