

Writing the Long Essay Question (LEQ)

The Long Essay Question

The AP American history exam requires you to write a long essay within thirty-five minutes. You will have a choice between two questions that focus on the same historical thinking skill (HTS) but may apply to different time periods and thematic learning objectives. Each essay will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- **Thesis.** Develop a thesis that makes a historically defensible claim (relevant argument) and responds to all parts of the question.
- **Argument Development: Using the Historical Thinking Skill (HTS).** Develop and support the thesis using the targeted historical thinking skill. The HTS may be comparison, causation, continuity and change over time, or periodization.
- **Argument Development: Using Evidence.** Support the thesis by using specific examples of relevant evidence to fully and effectively substantiate the stated thesis. Responses must include a broad range of evidence that, through analysis and explanation, justifies the stated thesis.
- **Contextualization.** Situate the relevant argument by explaining the broader historical events or developments relevant to the question.
- **Synthesis.** Extends the relevant argument of the essay by explaining the connections between the argument and a development in a different historical period and explain how it applies to the thesis.

The following steps have proved useful in developing the skills needed to answer the AP long-essay question under the pressure of a limited time frame.

Step 1: Analyze the Question

Take the time to consider what the question, which is also called the **prompt**, really asks.

- **Identify the subject of the essay prompt.** It may be a specific historical identify, such as Puritanism, the Confederacy, or the New Deal. It may be a historical concept such as republicanism or liberalism. It may be a process, such as industrialization or western expansion.
- **Identify the date range.** Be sure that your response addresses this era. A common problem for students is providing historical information from the wrong era. You may want to circle the time period.
- **Identify the required tasks.** Every essay requires that you use relevant evidence to develop an argument about the past. You must go beyond simply listing factual information. How you extend that information is identified in the main verbs of the prompt, such as compare, describe, explain, analyze, and so forth. Your answer must do what the prompt asks you to do. You may want to underline the main tasks required.
- **Identify all parts of the question.** Be sure to identify all the parts of the question that need to be addressed. Two, three, or more aspects of a question may be embedded in one sentence. Consider the following question: *Evaluate the relative importance of domestic and foreign affairs in shaping American politics in the 1790s.* You must deal with both foreign and domestic affairs.

Step 2: Identify the Targeted HTS

Each essay prompt will have a targeted HTS, which should shape the arguments and choice of evidence.

- **Causation.** Describe causes AND/OR effects of a historical event, development, or process and explain specific reasons for the causes AND/OR effects. Evidence should go beyond what happened to explain reasons why they happened. You may be asked to write on either cause or effect, or both.

Sample essay prompts include: "Explain how intellectual and religious movements impacted the development of colonial North America from 1607 to 1776." Or "Evaluate the causes and consequences of the growing opposition to slavery in the United States from 1776 to 1856."

Phrases that are commonly used to identify causation include: "This led to...", "immediately causing...", "a proximate cause being...", "the deep-rooted causes were...", "a change took place between... and... because", "The underlying causes of... had been...", "If it were not for...", "Consequently", "The main/only reason...happened is because...", "This stemmed from..."

Identify the targeted HTS in the question (continued)

- **Continuity and change over time (CCOT).** Describe historical continuity AND change over time, and explain specific reasons for the historical continuity AND change over time. A sample essay prompt might be: "Evaluate the extent to which American foreign policy contributed to maintaining continuity as well as fostered change with regard to US involvement in world affairs from 1796 to 1823."

Phrases that are commonly used to identify CCOT include: "Dating back to...", "Though it evolved into...it still...", "... still persisted in the form of ...", "One thing that remained constant was...", "Over time...", "This all changed when..."

- **Periodization: Turning point style.** Describe the ways in which the historical development specified in the prompt was different from and similar to developments that preceded AND followed. Explain the extent to which the historical development specified in the prompt was different from AND similar to developments that preceded AND followed, providing specific examples to illustrate the analysis. A sample essay prompt for periodization might be: "Evaluate the extent to which the Mexican American War was a turning point with regard to the expansion of slavery in the United States."

Periodization: Characteristics of an era style. Describe the ways in which the historical development specified in the prompt was different from and similar to developments that EITHER preceded OR followed. Explain the extent to which the historical development specified in the prompt was different from AND similar to developments that preceded OR followed, providing specific examples to illustrate the analysis.

NOTE: Limit your time frame for periodization to events occurring 20 years before and 20 years after the topic of the essay. For example, for the Mexican American War (1846-1848) only consider evidence from 1826 – 1868.

In terms of the difference between CCOT and periodization, just remember that periodization calls for changes and continuities related to one event, while CCOT focuses on a multiple events over a period of time.

Phrases that are commonly used to identify periodization include: "The real turning point of... was...", "... can be considered the beginning/end of...", "... can all be classified with the...era/period...", "The ... era/period can be considered one of ...", "The true beginning of...is...", "...was a time of...", ... and ... serve as the beginning and end of the period because..."

- **Comparison.** Describe similarities AND differences among historical individuals, events, developments or processes, explaining the reasons for their similarities AND/OR differences OR, DEPENDING ON THE PROMPT, evaluate the relative significance of the historical individuals, events, developments, or processes.

Don't fall into the trap of simply describing Topic 1 in a body paragraph and Topic 2 in a separate body paragraph. Students assume that readers will be able to recognize the similarities and differences between the two topics on their own. Your comparisons need to be explicit.

A sample essay prompt might be: "Compare and contrast goals and strategies of African American leaders in the 1890s to 1920s with the goals and strategies of African American leaders in the 1950s and 1960s.

Phrases that are commonly used to identify comparison include: "Similarly", "Likewise...", "although", "even though", "despite...", "In contrast to", "Conversely...", "Unlike...", "However," "On the other hand," "To a much lesser extent". Use clear signal words that you are shifting from similarity to differences. For example, "Despite these similarities during times of financial crisis, the two presidents differed dramatically. For example, "These similarities, however, were much less crucial than differences in x, y, and z."

Step 3: Organization

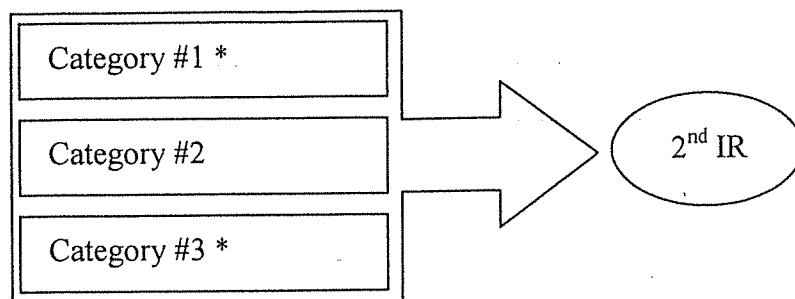
1. Historical Causation (Cause or Effect): CE

Prompt: Evaluate the major causes which led to the development of a Second Industrial Revolution.

Step One: Organize the causes around three Themes or Categories (connect to the Learning Objectives).

Step Two: Rank or prioritize the categorized causes in order of importance, determine the two major causes (*) and the one minor cause.

Step Three: Within the body of your essay, you must address why these were the causes of the topic under investigation.



Sample Essay Prompts:

Evaluate the political, economic, and social reactions of Americans to the end of Reconstruction (1877).

Explain how intellectual and religious movements impacted the development of colonial North America from 1607 to 1776.

Evaluate the causes and consequences of the growing opposition to slavery in the United States from 1776 to 1856.

NOTE: You will probably ONLY be asked to write on either cause or effect, NOT both.

2. Historical Continuity and Change Over Time: CCOT

Prompt: Evaluate the extent to which US foreign policy goals contributed to maintaining continuity as well as fostered change from the end of WWI (1918) to the end of the Korean War (1953).

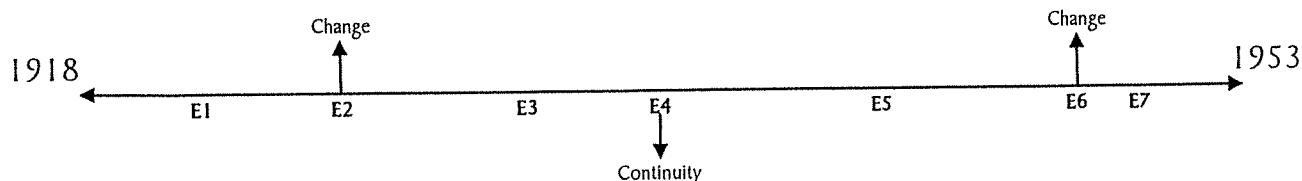
Step One: Label start and stop dates on timeline.

Step Two: Identify significant events (5-7) on the timeline, related to the topic.

Step Three: Determine whether there was MORE continuity or change within the period.

Step Four: Select three of the most significant of the events. Make sure you maintain the 2/1 ratio (e.g., if you are arguing there were more continuities, then you need 2 examples of that, for 1 change, or vice versa).

Step Five: Within the body of your essay, you must address why there were continuities and changes.



Sample Essay Prompts:

Evaluate the extent to which the goals of Reconstruction (1865 – 1877) regarding African Americans were achieved by 1900. Be sure to address both continuities as well as changes during this time period.

Evaluate the extent to which the goals of conservatives contributed to maintaining continuity as well as fostered change from the 1950s through the 1980s.

Evaluate the extent to which American foreign policy contributed to maintaining continuity as well as fostered change with regard to United States involvement in world affairs from 1796 to 1823.

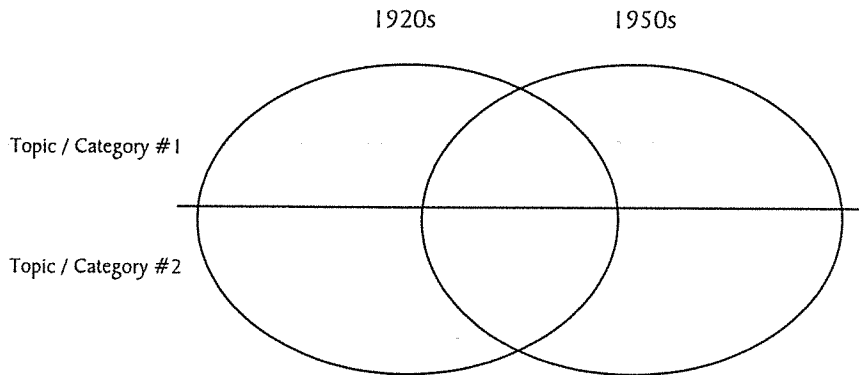
3. Historical Comparison (Compare and Contrast): CC

Prompt: Compare and contrast the decades of the 1920s and the 1950s.

Step One: Bisect your Venn diagram in half and organize the similarities and differences around two Themes or Categories (connect to the Learning Objectives).

Step Two: Determine whether there are more similarities or differences between the two concepts of the topic.

Step Three: Within the body of your essay, you must address why there are similarities and differences.



Sample Essay Prompts:

Compare and contrast domestic and foreign policy goals of conservatives in the 1950's with conservatives in the 1980's.

Compare and contrast reactions of Americans to immigration in the 1840s-1850s with immigration in the 1910s-1920s.

Compare and contrast goals and strategies of African American leaders in the 1890s-1920s with the goals and strategies of African American leaders in the 1950s-1960s.

NOTE: You will probably NOT be given the categories, but sometimes you might.

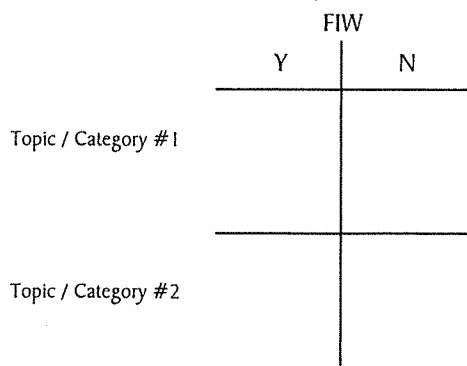
4. Periodization (Turning Point): TP

Prompt: Evaluate the extent to which the French and Indian War was a Turning Point with regard to American and British relations.

Step One: Bisect your T-Chart in half and organize the boxes around two Themes or Categories (connect to the Learning Objectives).

Step Two: Determine whether there is more evidence to support that it was (Y) or was not (N) a Turning Point.

Step Three: Within the body of your essay, you must address the extent to which the event under investigation was a TP.



Sample Essay Prompts:

Evaluate the extent to which the Mexican American War was a Turning Point with regard to the expansion of Slavery in the United States.

The Declaration of Independence was a Turning Point in American History. Support, Modify, or Refute this statement.

NOTE: Limit your time frame before and after the event to 20 years. So for the FIW, 1754 to 1763 (only consider 1734 – 1783).

Step 4: Develop the Thesis

A strong thesis is an essential part of every AP History essay answer. Often, students have difficulty taking a position or are afraid of making a mistake. But AP readers are looking not for the one "right answer" but rather for a writer's ability to interpret the evidence and develop historical support for that interpretation.

A thesis must be more than a restatement of the question. It requires taking a position on the question and a focus on the appropriate HTS. The following thesis is from an essay written in response to the 1790s question: *During the 1790s, foreign affairs contributed more to shaping American politics than did domestic issues.* This statement is straightforward and simple, and it takes a position on the question and the issue of causation.

Step 5: Write the Introductory Paragraph

The introduction, or thesis paragraph, is the key to the success of the essay as it sets up the historical argument and the historical thinking skill that the author will provide evidence for throughout the rest of the writing. Therefore, it is imperative that students demonstrate a clear thesis and a concise plan of attack in their introductory paragraph. Many students can improve their essay by using basic organizing principles for writing an introductory paragraph. The main parts of the introduction include the background, thesis, and the organization categories or "roadmap" (BTR).

1. **Background Statement.** Students should include a brief explanation or broad general statement about the key theme, time frame, topic, or idea of the essay that provides the historical context for the essay. The essay on the 1790s, for example, could reference the administrations of George Washington and John Adams.
2. **Thesis.** A thesis is an argument or a hypothesis; it is the point of your essay. It is a clear, precise topic sentence that lets the reader know your answer to the essay's question and the HTS. You must include your thesis in the introductory paragraph. Don't be too broad, including ideas that the essay will not address, or too narrow, omitting ideas or limiting the eventual scope of the essay.
3. **Roadmap.** This sentence(s) provides a list of the main arguments used in your essay. These organizational categories (or points of development) provide a kind of "roadmap" to the reader, are used to prove the thesis, and provide the structure to the essay.

In the question above on the 1790s, the student might have continued the thesis statement, "*During the 1790s, foreign affairs contributed more to shaping American politics than did domestic issues*" with the following roadmap: "*While the young nation struggled with questions about powers in the new Constitution, ideological conflicts over the French Revolution, foreign policy divisions created by the Napoleonic Wars, and our relations with Great Britain did more to divide Americans and promote the formation of two political parties during the 1790s.*" This organization statement guided the development of the essay.

How much specificity to include in the roadmap should be a balancing act. On the one hand, you don't want to be too general, but on the other hand you don't want to be too specific. Let the reader know where you are going, but don't give away all your information. Consider the following prompt: *Evaluate the extent to which the Articles of Confederation were effective in solving the problems that confronted the new nation.*

- **Too General:** The Articles of Confederation was successful as a first attempt at building a government. However, the Articles of Confederation did not provide an effective answer to the problems facing the new nation. The Articles of Confederation was weak politically, socially, and economically.
- **Too Specific:** Under the Articles of Confederation, the Land Ordinance of 1785 and Northwest Ordinance of 1787 created a well-organized system for dealing with newly acquired territories and a plausible means to increase government revenue in a time in which the country was facing massive debt. However, the Articles of Confederation proved unable to handle the problems faced by the country after the American Revolution. It established a decentralized government with limited sovereignty, creating a league of friendship, with limited effectiveness; it was unable to foster any sense of nationalism; it contained a lack of leadership and a lack of independent judiciary; it lacked provisions for raising revenues and collecting taxes from the states, as well as failing to handle the abuses of paper money, with no control over interstate commerce; and could not protect the country from rebellions like Shays' Rebellion.
- **Just Right:** The Articles of Confederation created a well-organized system for dealing with newly acquired territories and providing a financial means to increase needed revenue. However, the Articles of Confederation was not effective in solving many of the problems faced by the newly formed United States. It established a loose confederation of states that lacked a sense of national unity, it created internal gridlock that failed to establish a system of checks and balances, and it created a government that did not have the powers to conduct basic governmental business.

By the end of the first paragraph, the reader should not only know the thesis but also have a clear idea of the main arguments that will be developed in the body of the essay in support of the thesis. The introduction should include four to five sentences.

Step 6: Write the Supporting Body Paragraphs

The body of the essay should contain accurate, specific, relevant evidence that is chronologically correct, supports the thesis or argument, and establishes a clear link between the evidence and the thesis.

- **Number of body paragraphs.** The number and length of the supporting paragraphs forming the body of the essay should vary depending on the thesis, the main points of your argument, and the amount of historical evidence.
- **Follow the roadmap.** The number and order of the body paragraphs MUST follow the order stated in the organizational categories of the roadmap found in the introduction.
- **Each body paragraph must have a topic sentence.** In each paragraph, start with a topic sentence which connects directly to the argument in the thesis paragraph, the historical thinking skill, and the organizational category of the paragraph. .
- **Provide evidence to support your thesis.** Be sure to cite specific examples of people, laws, literature, ideas, and other evidence that are applicable to the essay. But don't just tell a story with a list of unrelated "laundry list" of facts. You must **analyze** and **interpret** the evidence you have gathered and explain how that information supports your thesis. A quick way to see whether you have provided analysis in your answer is to see whether it includes the word because.

Generally, an "A" paper will contain at least nine strong pieces of evidence, each of which usually takes at least two or three sentences to explain. Almost always these require proper nouns with an explanation of what they are and how they relate to the question.

Any content in the paragraph that doesn't support the topic sentence doesn't belong there. Just because something is interesting does not mean that it fits into your "roadmap".

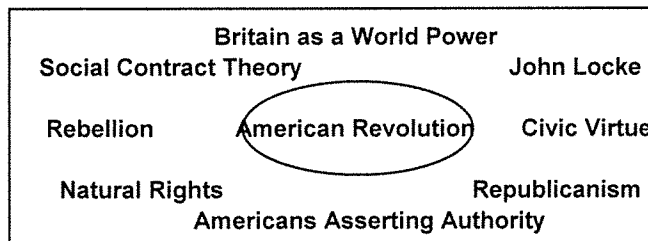
- **Focus on the HTS.** You must explain how the specific historical evidence is linked to the thesis.

Step 7: Write the Conclusion

- **Restate the thesis.** Students should restate the thesis in a fresh and interesting manner.
- **Add contextualization.** This requires you to situate the relevant argument within the broader regional, national, or global context in which it occurred in order to draw conclusions about their relative significance. You are looking at broader historical events or developments relevant to the topic of the essay during the same time period.

Note: Contextualization refers to events that happened less than 20 years before or less than 20 years after the main topic of the essay.

Consider the following prompt: "Evaluate the major causes which led to the development of an American Revolution". Contextualization requires that you situate the topic of the essay within the broad historical context of the time, then 2nd: draw a conclusion about the topic, why was this event so significant?

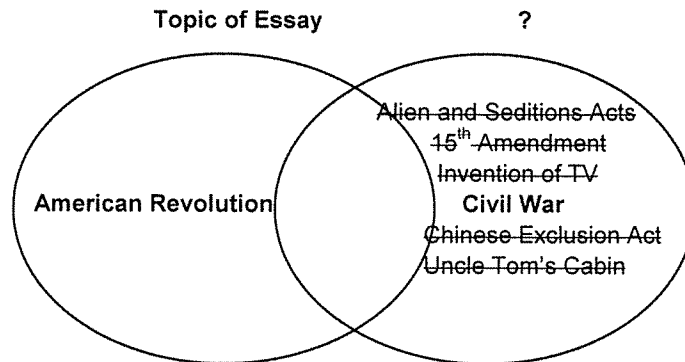


Contextualization might look like this: "The **broad context to which the** American Revolution was a small part of, revolved around the attempts of the British Empire to maintain control over its colonies; this power struggle would determine the fate of the British as a leading world power. Both their financial and political institutions required the existence of these satellite colonies, taxes and raw materials were necessary requirements to maintain their position in the world. The need to maintain control over its colonies was an essential element to maintaining that world status, thus the American Revolution was not simply a minor rebellion within a tiny colony, but a much larger revolution which would lead ultimately to the downfall of the greatest nation in the world and would give birth to the next great world power."

- **Add synthesis.** Each long essay will also evaluate the skill of synthesis, which involves combining the thesis, context, and relevant historical evidence into a new idea. The simplest way to earn the synthesis point is by adding several statements in the conclusion which connect the topic or issue of the question to related developments in another time period, including the present. A quick way to remember this would be “similar in kind, but at another time” (SKDT). It kind of rhymes. European colonization, for example, is similar in kind to the Great Migration of the Puritans of the 1630s, Manifest Destiny of the 1840s, and imperialism of the 1890s.

Note: Synthesis refers to events that occurred more than 20 years before or more than 20 years after the main idea of the essay.

Ask yourself, what other period (SKDT) makes sense to compare it to? Think of it in terms of what would make sense on a Venn diagram? Would you compare the American Revolution to the passage of the 15th Amendment? No. The Civil War? Yes. Once you find a good period, make two connections.



You begin the synthesis point of the essay with the following. “The [topic of essay] can be compared to the earlier/later period of [synthesis topic] in two ways...” Then establish two common connections to the two periods.

It could look like this: “The American Revolution can be compared to the later period of Southern Cession prior to the U.S. Civil War in two ways. First, both groups saw themselves fighting for what they perceived as injustices from a tyrannical government. Southerners viewed the injustices of the Northern government in the same light as the Americans viewed the British, so much so, they utilized many of the same points of the Declaration of Independence. Second, both groups invoked John Locke’s social contract theory, which allowed the throwing off any government when it failed to meet the needs of its citizens as a natural right.”

Phrases that are commonly used to show contextualization include: “This fits into...”, “In the same way”, “The theme of...is seen...”, “...is representative of...”, “... exemplifies the larger trend of...”

- **General Comments.** Don't confess that the essay probably is not worth reading. Don't end an essay with a smiley face, "The End", or a dramatic signature. These give the impression the student is trying to get by on personality instead of knowledge.

General Guidelines for Writing Historical Essays

Use the following guidelines to help you write a more direct, coherent, descriptive, and analytical essay:

1. **Stick to the question.** Make sure you answer what is being asked and stick to the time scope of the question.
2. **Don't use slang terms.** A good historical essay does not use slang. Avoid "things", "stuff", and "a lot".
3. **Avoid abstracts.** Be careful of abstract words such as democracy, progress, success, and individualism. Certain abstract words carry a wide range of definitions and connotations. Take the time to define an abstract word; it helps you focus on that aspect of the word the essay question intends.
4. **Write concisely.** Make conceptual arguments in your essay, provide factual support, and move on. Avoid the temptation to write everything you know or to tell a pleasant story. Remember, you are not writing a history of the period; you are answering a specific question about this period in US history. Some students pound a single point, incorrectly believing that constant restating adds to an essay. Avoid discussion or unnecessary detail. Ask about every sentence: Will this help me communicate my point to the reader? If the answer is no, leave the sentence out. A concise essay in which every word has a purpose is better than an essay bloated with fillers and flowery language in an attempt to impress the reader. Don't write about a subject; write to persuade.
5. **Use adjectives and adverbs.** Use effective adjectives and adverbs to enhance the descriptive power of your essay. These expand and enhance the essay's thesis. For example: "Smith's letter strongly portrayed Jackson's belligerent attitude toward the Bank of the US". Use adjectives to convey the amount of generality or specificity needed for a particular sentence. "The US has a democratic government." Is it a parliamentary democracy, representative democracy, or direct democracy? Do you mean political, economic, social, or religious democracy? Do you mean democratic in results or in opportunity? However, sometimes a single adjective sufficiently describes a noun, e.g., "fascist leaders", or "subsistence farmers".
6. **Make a mental and/or written outline.** Organization is the key to a good essay. Delay writing your essay until you have had time to organize your thoughts and outlined your answer. Jot down all the concepts and facts pertaining to the answer. Organize these facts into major sections or paragraphs. Then write your essay.
7. **Do not use absolutes.** Do not use absolute words - never, all, only, none, every, etc. Rarely in history is the evidence so absolutely conclusive that you can prove that there were no exceptions. At least one point will be deducted on your essays for the use of these words.
8. **Proofread.** When you are finished, briefly read your essay. Check for grammatical errors and misspellings. The omission of one word, particularly the word "not", may change the meaning of your essay. A student occasionally begins an essay with one argument, realizes he has better support for the opposite viewpoint, and changes the remainder of the essay without changing the introduction. For example, an essay states that slavery was the sole cause of the Civil War by agreeing with the statement in the introduction, but then contradicts that thesis in the body of the essay by discussing multiple causes. Go back and change the introduction.
9. **Assume your reader is uninformed.** Spell things out. Don't take it for granted that he or she knows what you mean or what you are talking about. You have never met the College Board person who is going to read and grade your essays next spring. Explain your key points clearly; don't assume that people know what you know. When you mention someone in the essay for the first time, include both the first and last name.
10. **Define or explain all key terms.** If the question deals with terms, such as "liberal", "conservative", "sectionalism", or "manifest destiny", an essential part of your analysis should be an explanation of these terms.
11. **Use transition words.** A judicious use of transitional words and phrases such as: "therefore", "however", "thus", "despite", "because", "instead", "although", "rather", "furthermore", "nevertheless", and "finally" carries the reader smoothly from one sentence or paragraph to the next.
12. **Write in the third person.** Do not use "I", "me", "we", or other personal pronouns in order to avoid personal feelings and impressions. You must use historical facts and logical reasoning to support the thesis. At least one point will be subtracted on your essay if you use personal pronouns.
13. **Avoid progress reports.** For example, "It is now time to conclude"; "Enough of this"; or "Let's get into it".
14. **Use key words and phrases that indicate judgment and analysis.** These might include: controversial, turning point, inevitable, more importantly, ironic, key, significant, primary, secondary, deliberate, dramatic, predominant, imperative, any indicator of degrees of causation, etc. A student who uses judgment and analysis indicates a higher degree of sophistication than a straight narrative composition that only recites facts. Prioritize your organizational points and indicate primary vs. secondary causation or some aspect of varying degrees of importance for your list. It is rare that anything ever happened or didn't happen due to factors that shared the exact degrees of relevance. Distinguish between the significant and the less important.

15. **Use "wonderful" verbs.** The verbs used are a critical element in presenting a more sophisticated and descriptive essay. Your choice of verb reveals your judgment and analysis of the facts. Use a variety of "wonderful verbs", such as revealed, illustrated, implied, demonstrated, portrayed, exemplified, indicated, symbolized, depicted, etc. Compare, for example: "The assassination caused the war..." vs. "The assassination provoked the outbreak of war..." or "The diary showed the prejudice..." vs. "The diary usually illustrated the deep prejudices".

Reduce your use of all forms of the verb "to be" (am, is are, was, were, have been, being, etc.) Change them to more active verbs. Avoid vague verbs such as "felt" and "says".
16. **Use the active voice.** Use the active voice rather than the passive voice because it states cause and effect more strongly. "Edison created" is in the active voice; "was created by Edison" is in the passive voice.
17. **Show your awareness of the complexity of history.** There are a multiplicity of events, emotions, ideas, etc. that impact human history. Avoid simplistic comments, e.g., something is "bad", "good", "great", "fantastic", etc. Stay away from the idea of single causation.
18. **Write using the PAST TENSE.** The events occurred.
19. **Do not use abbreviations.** George Washington was not "GW"; Andrew Jackson was not "AJ". However, actual nicknames such as JFK or LBJ are acceptable.
20. **Never write conversationally.** Don't talk to the reader. Never state what you are going to tell the reader. Do not use rhetorical questions.
21. **Spelling, grammar, and capitalization.** A strong, well-written essay integrates a fundamental understanding of spelling, grammar, and capitalization skills with content information. It is expected that students use correct spelling, grammar, and capitalization throughout their essays.
22. **Do not use metaphors that have no bearing on the issue.** Avoid comments like, "That's why we have the country we do today." Or "If the Pilgrims had never landed here, we could not have become the great, freedom-loving nation that we are today."
23. **Watch out for repetitions.** Avoid repetitive tendencies in word or phrase usage and sentence structure.
24. **Justify your arguments.** Express facts and demonstrate why the reader should believe your conclusions.
25. **Use personal pronouns sparingly.** Avoid vague references, such as "them" and "others". It's pretty easy to confuse the reader if he or she has to struggle to figure out who "them" is/are/or could be.
26. **Avoid "lumping".** Be cautious about placing too much unity into the thoughts and actions of the many, i.e. "The colonists felt...the Indians hated...the Europeans wanted". Could there be subsets within the groups? Which groups felt, hated or wanted? It's like saying "all teenagers are..."
27. **Don't inject yourself into history.** Don't use "we" when you really mean, "Americans who have been dead for a long time". "We" didn't evict the Cherokee from Georgia, win World War I, give women the right to vote, build railroads, land on the moon, etc. The US citizens of the past did.