

*Chapter IV:*  
*Essay Test Taking Skills*

# Teaching the Value of Inquiry Through the Essay Question

John C. Bartul

STUDENTS, PARTICULARLY THOSE bright energetic types who take Advanced Placement history courses and, no doubt, their college counterparts, all too often become prisoners of essay questions. In their ambition to complete the tasks they are given, they do not take the time to ask questions about the question. The results of this omission can range from a total misunderstanding of the question posed to a failure to comprehend the many options the question provides to those who thoroughly examine its possibilities.

The problem and the promise can be illustrated with the following essay question taken from Dennis Sherman's, *Study Guide and Readings for the Western Experience, to 1715*. "Protestantism was not simply a single movement away from the Roman Catholic Church; it was a series of separate and often conflicting movements.' Do you agree? Explain."

The question above appears to be rather straightforward. Students are given a statement — "Protestantism was not simply a single movement away from the Roman Catholic Church" — which may or may not be true, but which, with its corollary — "it was a series of separate and often conflicting movements" — governs or sets limits to what they may write about. The next question — "Do you agree?" — and the charge — "Explain" — set additional limits.

On a most general level, students must deal with Protestantism, however defined, and its relationship to the Roman Catholic Church. On this same level, they must either agree or disagree with the statement and its corollary and then, in either case, explain their position. Or must they? Let us come back to that question later.

Before students can even begin to write they must have some comprehension of what the words and terms "Protestantism," "simply," "single movement," "away," "Roman Catholic Church," "series," "separate," "often," and "conflicting movements" mean, and how *each of them* sets limits to what they may write. One way to check this understanding, while exploring alternative possibilities, is to brainstorm by asking questions of the question without being judgmental or censoring the questions asked. The following might begin to clarify this point:

1. Can one include John Wycliffe or John Huss within the category of Protestant? How about Savonarola? Desiderius Erasmus? Can anyone, including Luther prior to the Diet of Speyer in 1529, be called Protestant? Were the original Protestants men of religion?

2. What does the adverb "simply" mean? Does it mean alone? merely? solely? singly? barely?

3. What does "single movement" mean? Doesn't Protestantism have something to do with religion? In what sense is Protestantism, as a religion, a movement? What does it mean to be a "single one"? And who says that Protestantism is "a" religion? What does "movement" mean? Is it a performance? an exercise? an operation? an action? an activity?

4. What does "Roman Catholic Church" mean? Does it refer to buildings? a group of men holding certain offices? the Pope? belief? practices? or some combination of all of these factors plus others?

5. What does "series" mean? Does it refer to a particular order, as in the phrase "chronological order"? It appears to be modified by the antecedent word, "Protestantism." Does that change its meaning? Does it mean some sort of organization, i.e., must what you write about be related in some way?

6. What does "separate" mean? Does it mean alone? singly? without reference to another? unaffected by another? not influenced by? Is the word "separate" modified by the word "series" so that in fact separate cannot be separate?

7. "Often" is an interesting word. Does its use here mean the movements did not always have to conflict? Or does it mean they did not have to conflict in all respects? Can one conflict in some respects but not conflict generally? or conflict generally but not in some respects?

8. "Conflicting movements" — for the word "movement" see number three above. But what does "conflicting" mean? and with whom, or between whom is the conflict taking place? Is it between Protestants (whatever they are) themselves? or between Protestants and Catholics? or could it be both of these possibilities?

Let us return to the question raised in the fourth paragraph: "Or must you?" Is it possible to agree with one part and not another? That is to say, for example, that "it" was a series of separate movements but that they did not all conflict? Or that they all conflicted with Roman Catholicism but not with each other? Or that they all conflicted with each other and Roman Catholicism, but did not occur as a series of anything?

The point of all this is that words and questions are not always what they seem. One must ask questions of them, perhaps not as many questions as have been asked here to illustrate the dimensions of the possibilities (and these just skim the surface), but enough to understand the limits, enough to enable one to understand how much leeway one has to control the situation.

Writing is a thought process which, in one sense, is organized and illustrates certain relationships. The organization and the relationships one chooses to illustrate will be governed by one's answers to the questions about the question. Using the same question here are some possibilities:

A. If Protestantism is not simply (only) a religious movement, or a "series" of religious movements, then might it also be possible to deal with political and social movements? To be more specific, was the decision of Henry VIII of England to assume the role of leader of the Church of England a Protestant movement? Was it a religious movement? Was it a political movement? Was it an economic movement? Was it purely a personal movement leading to his emancipation from Catherine of Aragon? Given Carl G. Gustavson's concept of "multiple causation" in history, could it have been many of these?

B. If Protestantism is strictly religious, what groups or individuals fall within the category "Protestant"? At what point does Protestantism come into being? Was Luther a Protestant in October 1517? in 1520? in 1521? What is the basis for one's decision? Can one make a case for religious Protestantism beginning around 1400 with the efforts of Wycliffe and Huss?

C. Can one speak about the Reformation and Protestantism synonymously or are they very different kinds of "things" or "movements"?

Having asked the necessary questions there comes a point where students must choose "a" possibility (meaning one out of many possibilities) and organize their essay in terms of it. Some individuals, perhaps for the sheer intellectual stimulation they get, choose the most remote (outlandish) possibility available. It is recommended that students choose the most obvious possibility or that which is easiest for them to demonstrate because they have the evidence at hand. They ought to prove they can do something relatively simple before delving into something more complex.

In an opening paragraph students should state what they intend to demonstrate. If they can do this they probably have asked some additional questions for which they have found adequate answers, for example:

1. What evidence exists to illustrate each point made in the opening statement? For example, can one demonstrate that Protestantism was not the name of a single group but one composed of Lutherans or Evangelicals, Calvinists or Reformed, Anglicans or Episcopalians, as well as others too numerous to mention here? On the other hand, can one, at a higher level of abstraction, demonstrate that this umbrella term was appropriate to describe a single movement united in its belief in the authority of the Bible, the central role of Christ as the redeemer, and the overwhelming importance of faith as a means of salvation? In the former case one would argue for separate and often conflicting movements; in the latter, while they might be separate, certain commonalities of belief and practice might be shown to have united them.

2. Is all the evidence, as outlined, related to the question being answered? Put another way, if one argues for "separate and often conflicting movements," does

the evidence support this position? If one argues for the position that "Protestantism was simply a single movement away from the Roman Catholic Church," does the evidence, the examples one might use, support this position?

If students have not found adequate answers to the questions above, or others similar to them, they should not be writing their opening paragraph. They should be thinking — a process which is a large part of the job of writing — and teachers should consider adding some five to ten minutes to the time allotted for this purpose during examinations.

Given the limited amount of time students have to respond to essay questions on an examination, one would not expect them to ask as many questions as have been asked here. The idea is to establish a mind set, a habit, to help students comprehend the concept that questions need not be prisons if one will but make inquiries of them. To accomplish this goal, teachers can assist students in the practice of asking questions about questions in situations where time constraints do not exist, or where they are very broad.

One might begin, for instance, with the titles of course textbooks. *The Western Experience*, by Mortimer Chambers et alia; *A History of the Modern World* by R. R. Palmer and Joel Colton; and *A History of Civilization: Prehistory to the Present* by Robin W. Winks all imply very different mind sets on the part of the authors. Imagine the possibilities for interpretation in such words as "Western," "experience," "modern," and "civilization." Students and teachers ought not to take these titles for granted. Their possible meanings and the implications of those meanings ought to be explored.

The same process should be followed with chapter headings and subheadings. Using the same texts as above, one finds the appropriate chapter headings on the topic of this essay question to be: "Reformations in Religion 1500-1570," "The Upheaval in Christendom, 1300-1560," and, "The Protestant Reformation." What questions might these titles engender and how different might be the evidence each author would present in support or demonstration of the title? Students who follow the practice of asking questions about such things as chapter headings are also more inclined to become more effective readers because their questions lead them to seek certain kinds of evidence. Note that two of the titles above establish time limits whereas one does not.

To take only the first example, does the time limit "1500-1570" preclude certain efforts toward reformations in religion that might otherwise have to be included, such as the efforts of Savonarola, Wycliffe, or Huss? Would one expect in this case references to the "Babylonian Captivity" of the Roman Catholic Church or the "Great Schism"? Can a case be made for including references to these as causes of "Reformations in Religion 1500-1570"? The possibilities for such questions and the critical reading they require can be enhanced by having students read conflicting

points of view. This would be the case, particularly, where the authors use essentially the same evidence while giving their formulations very different perspectives. Such a case would demonstrate the point that one's perspective shapes what one sees. From a macro point of view, Protestantism can be seen as a single movement away from the Roman Catholic Church. From the micro point of view, it is more likely seen as a "series of separate and often conflicting movements."

When students are given essays for homework the only time constraint is that which they place on themselves. One could require them to list the questions they have asked of the question they are responding to and to turn them in along with their outline. When it comes to actual exams, require students to list x number of questions, where x stands for something the teacher thinks is reasonable. Keep in mind that the issue is not the number of questions asked but their quality. In this teacher's experience, students initially resist the process. It takes more of their time. Constant use in the classroom, however, reinforced by frequent reference to items engendered by questions which would not have surfaced without them, demonstrates unequivocally the efficacy of the practice. Within five to ten weeks students should begin to appreciate the value of the process. When transferred to other courses such as literature or to other practices such as newspaper reading, students report increased comprehension. Continued modeling by the teacher will lead students to develop a lifelong habit of inquiry. This behavior pattern will reduce their efforts to seek closure and insure their capacity to view events or experiences from many different perspectives — each giving a possibly different understanding of the world. And that, after all, may be more important than all the factual material we ask them to remember.