A Guide to the Skill of Essay Construction in History

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MANY TEACHERS OF HISTORY, at both secondary and college levels, invariably devote insufficient attention to the essay examinations they prepare for their classes. Typically, on the eve of an examination date, they dash off questions that are believed to deal appropriately with the subject matter they wish tested. Knowing the kinds of responses they expect, the questions seem clear enough; after all, teachers are cognizant of what their questions demand, and therefore they have no difficulty interpreting or seeing the implications of the words they have chosen. Unfortunately, not all students are blessed with such insight, and whether or not they respond as the teacher hopes — assuming they have studied properly — is often a matter of chance. Equally unfortunate is the failure to acknowledge that a student's misinterpretation of an essay question may be the teacher's fault, and thus teachers continue to repeat errors and handicap some among each new wave of students entrusted to their care.

From 1976 to 1980 I was Chief Reader for Advanced Placement European History. In that capacity I served on the committee that wrote the examinations, a process that involved, for each separate test, the deliberations of at least six secondary and college teachers over a period of about a year. I also supervised the annual grading of the thousands of student responses, after which I provided the Educational Testing Service with a report evaluating the performance of the questions. Further, I had access to 25 years of such reports from both European and United States History. What follows, then, represents the collective assessment and reaction of literally hundreds of teachers, all of whom benefited from experience and hindsight. In spite of the fact that a great deal of thought and deliberation have gone into AP essay construction, all too often the best or poorest questions are not discovered until after an examination has been administered and graded. Only then can the least obvious subtleties which determine the success or failure of a question be known. Nevertheless, approaching essay construction with a sense of what has or has not "worked" may help avoid past mistakes; in this fashion we can practice what we teach. (The sample questions included below are from past AP examinations.)

Essay Construction

Goals: All good essay questions, from a grading perspective, should be able to elicit responses of a varied caliber, roughly analogous to students' abilities and preparedness. Questions that can be answered by simple recall of facts should be avoided; they reveal nothing more than a student's skill at memorization. Machines can store and retrieve facts better than we can, so it is pointless to train students to compete with them. Instead, good questions test the student's ability to use historical facts in order to explain and interpret important developments and, by extension, to come to a better understanding of life. For example, the following question offers students an opportunity to exercise historical skills by integrating late medieval developments with those of the Renaissance and Reformation periods, while it also requires them to integrate political and religious forces, as well as to observe national differences as they confront a significant theme: "How did the disintegration of the medieval church and the coming of the Reformation contribute to the development of nation-states in Western Europe between 1450 and 1648?"

Language/Wording: Appropriate language is a vital ingredient in any essay question. Vaguely worded and loose and unstructured items should be avoided. For example, the following question may be provocative, but it deals with concepts that are beyond the capacity of even superior students; moreover, it is poorly constructed and too open-ended: "It has been said that, from 1450 to the present, European life and institutions have been shaped by the existence of a worldwide frontier. Describe the main influence of this 'frontier' on the Europe of two of the following periods: the Elizabethan Era, the Age of Louis XIV, the Age of Reason, the Victorian Age, the period between the two World Wars." Also, by way of example, is the following question, which provided so much scope that it was relatively easy to go off in one direction and write, for instance, only on the revolution with the first clause ignored completely: "'Although the thirteen American colonies were founded at different times by people with different motives and with different forms of colonial charters and political organization, by the Revolution the thirteen colonies had become remarkably similar.' Assess the validity of this statement." It is a useful practice to relate the purpose of a question to the goals of the course in such a way that it can be appreciated by the student and, if necessary, discussed afterwards. Considerable effort should be expended so that questions are well written, uncomplicated, and straightforward. Concepts, terms, and code-words should be used with care, making certain they have been noted in texts or class and, therefore, are familiar to students.

Directions: Statements or quotations followed by the words "discuss" or "assess" (e.g., "The attempt of the Emperor Charles V to achieve the medieval ideal of a

Christian European empire was doomed to failure from the start. Discuss.") usually unintentionally send students off in all directions; words like "discuss" or "assess" by themselves ask for nothing in particular. Make it clear what it is you wish to be discussed or assessed (e.g., "Discuss the origins and evolution of European liberalism as a political movement during the nineteenth century."). Similarly, students need to be led when asked to analyze or evaluate; state clearly what it is you want them to analyze or evaluate.

Questions that ask for the causes of something, or those that request students to explain why something happened, have worked well. Yet, those asking "How do you account for" or "To what extent" frequently elicit vague and weak responses unless the rest of the wording is especially clear and direct. The phrase "In what ways" can be interpreted either as "To what extent" or "How," if, in fact, the former and either of the latter are actually desired, then join them together (e.g., "To what extent and in what ways may the Renaissance be regarded as a turning point in the Western intellectual and cultural tradition?").

Instead of merely asking for the "effects" of something, ask for either the immediate or long-range effects, or both, whichever is desired. In a similar vein, when directing students to "explain and discuss the reasons" for something, and when several kinds of reasons are anticipated, your purposes will be better served if you request them to "explain and discuss the *several* reasons" or "the *variety* of reasons."

Essay questions should be structured so as to encourage or require that students go beyond mere accumulation of facts and textbook knowledge, and that they exercise critical judgment and show thoughtful interpretation.

Students tend to be weak on terminology; if some working definitions are desired, consideration should be given to asking for them as part of the question.

Avoid calling an event successful or unsuccessful (in a question that asks students why an event was or was not successful; e.g., "Why was revolution successful in France in 1789 but unsuccessful in the German states in 1848?") since it tends to stifle creative reflection and original judgment; students might prefer to challenge the assumptions within the question, but hesitate to do so given such wording. It is better to allow students to pass judgment and explain their reasoning. Similarly, when asking for an explanation of the success or failure (or other evaluative terms) of people or events, qualify it by stating the explicit criteria for success or failure, instead of leaving it open.

Finally, it is often wise for some questions to demand "evidence" to support a position or interpretation, even if such an implication is clear to you.

Sequence of Questions: Some attention should be devoted to the sequence of questions on any examination in which a variety of selections is offered. Given the pressure from time limitations, some students might not read all questions carefully and unload on the first one familiar to them. Although little can be done to prevent this, teachers might want to allot more time, offer fewer choices, encourage

students to read each question carefully, and/or be certain that all questions are of equal difficulty. Where there is great disparity among questions, students choosing the more difficult ones are at a disadvantage. More specifically, the 1977 AP European History Examination offered two questions, among others, on the decline of the aristocracy in Western Europe and the industrialization of Eastern Europe. They were answered by more students than a traditional one on the origins and evolution of nineteenth-century liberalism. This unexpected result may have been due to the question on liberalism appearing as the last of six choices. Similarly, it has been suggested that had the first and sixth questions on the 1978 examination been reversed, the overall quality of the responses might have been improved. That is, question 1 concerned the Industrial Revolution, a topic which tends to lure less able students and/or result in inferior answers. Question 7 treated the political side of major revolutions, a mainstream subject, with responses being of a high quality. Thus, while both questions were heavily answered, more chose question 1; had their order been reversed, more students might have elected the less troublesome topic. While this is speculation, to be sure, it is worth consideration in order to minimize the number of potential pitfalls.

Breadth versus Specificity: Questions should be constructed so as to be answerable in terms of time allotted and from the standpoint of a reasonable expectation of training for your students.

Questions with compound subjects (i.e., those that treat several variables, such as political, social, and economic factors, or several concepts) may be asking for more than can be reasonably expected; they also encourage students to wander and not focus on the question (e.g., "Estimate the roles of British sea power, French governmental weakness, and Prussian military strength in the relations among states in Europe, 1715-1789."). Similarly, some teachers feel that a broad, generalized question gives students freedom. In practice, however, such questions often force students to use time and energy trying to guess what the teacher really wants.

Avoid questions that are either too general or too specific (or too specialized); a balance between the two should be the aim. Some structure is needed, but room for student initiative should also exist. Questions must be manageable.

Questions within Questions: Multi-part questions (e.g., "Discuss the extent to which early modern European society encouraged education for women. What criteria were used to evaluate women's education or its role, and women's potential for learning? What evolution, if any, can be seen in attitudes toward education for women from the Renaissance through the early eighteenth century?") become unnecessarily complex and should be avoided or kept to a minimum. If used, they should be well thought-out so they elicit only what is desired. Questions asking for too many separate areas to be covered run the risk of some areas being ignored.

Compare and Contrast Questions: Unless phrased very carefully, questions calling upon students to compare and contrast (either explicitly or implicitly) usually, at best, evoke no more than separate listings. Teachers ought to consider offering examples of what they are looking for in such questions, or train their students beforehand in how they should be handled. For example, although the following question may have problems, it instructs students on what it is they should compare, and then on how they should apply that comparison to a broader issue: "Compare the economic, political, and social conditions in Great Britain and in France during the eighteenth century, showing why they favored the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain more so than in France." Comparative analyses are instructive, but even scholars employing such an approach often fail to achieve satisfactory results.

Quotations in Questions: The use of quotations can create unintended and unnecessary pitfalls. Quotations are often interesting, snappy, and clever, but they can deprive students of clear directions: besides, quotations are also frequently subtle, imprecise, and sophisticated, and not necessarily understood or used as hoped. For example, "According to Lord Acton, 'The authentic interpreter of Machiavelli is the whole of later history.' Discuss this statement with reference to the history of modern Europe, concentrating on those periods with which you are most familiar." The Acton quote is indeed provocative, but it is also too cryptic for most students. "Revolt is easier than reform" was the quotation that preceded another question, but such a quote could mean anything and nothing.

Quotations, when used, should not be ambiguous, and the quotation and question must be paired properly: that is, the question should be clearly and directly linked to the quotation. Quotations from historical figures should have the language modernized enough to be understood easily by contemporary students. Metaphors in quotations, like ghosts in old homes, will return to haunt teachers, or else they will be taken at face value.

Dates: Dates should not be chosen arbitrarily since students read significance into them; care should be taken so that dates are used accurately and for specific purposes. When using a set of dates and a question that calls for reference to more than one country, the dates should be equally applicable to each country. The mention of centuries is often not enough to restrict the boundaries of a question, since even the best students occasionally become confused; specific dates should be included (perhaps parenthetically) as well, even though this may be obviously redundant. The use of date-phrases such as "by 1700" or "by the twentieth century" is misleading and should be avoided. "By 1700" can be taken to mean the sixteenth century, only 1700, the beginning of the eighteenth century, or all three. Clear chronological limits are important because they confine responses within reasonable bounds: when it comes to dates, leave no room for doubt or variation.

Words, Concepts, Phrases: Words should be used to express precisely what is meant. Do not introduce unfamiliar words or esoteric concepts on an examination. As a test is being constructed, all words should be scrutinized in an effort to foresee their implications and to determine if they coincide with the intention of the question. The list below does not comprise a collection of prohibitive words; instead, it includes examples that have caused problems for students. As such, it is intended to sensitize teachers and alert them to potential problems.

- *state* (could mean existing government, society, something else, or some combination of things)
- *administration/administrative* (could mean ruler, the government, or more)
- *Central Europe, the West* (these and similar expressions of geography are imprecise unless clearly defined beforehand; list or specify which countries/ states are to be included or excluded)
- *art/literature* (unless it does not matter what type students use, including music and film, specify the type desired)
- *science and philosophy* (questions on intellectual history calling for a discussion of science and philosophy will often result in little or no differentiation between the two)
- *society* (could mean the governed, the government, both or something else)
- *Rationalism, Romanticism* (when these and similar words are used to refer to the societal movements which bear their names, they should be capitalized; otherwise, rationalism emerges as logical, pragmatic, wise, while romanticism is presented as dreaminess, emotion, unclear thinking)
- *social structure* (could be taken to mean any number of different things, including social conditions)
- *liberal, conservative, radical* (these words mean something different to United States and European history, and to different times during those histories)
- *aristocracy/nobility* (students generally see no difference between these words)
- *peasant, working class, middle class* (the first two are often used interchangeably; the latter is broad enough to include a wide range of social classes)
- *culture* (can be used to refer to literary and artistic factors, but also to sociological factors as well)
- *minorities* (can be ethnic, racial, or other)

Right or Wrong Questions: These questions are phrased in such a way that a position is taken or a moral judgment appears to be rendered (e.g., "The European saw himself as a benefactor, carrying the blessings of Western civilization to Asia and Africa. The peoples of these regions viewed the Europeans as disruptive of their own valued traditions. Discuss the conflicting outlooks for the colonized regions of the world from the mid-nineteenth century to 1960."). Such questions encourage ideological rhetoric and, worse, often stifle open inquiry and historical analysis of historical processes. It would be more instructive to focus questions on, say, causation.

Current Events Questions: Questions that deal with or are related to present-day concerns frequently are long on polemics, rhetoric, and emotion, and short on historical analysis. For example, questions on war and military organization, such as the following, attract either military buffs who tend to ignore the question as they expound on their beliefs, or anti-militarists who use the question as a forum from which to make pronouncements about the evils of war: "Write an essay that relates the development of the large conscripted citizen army from its origins in the *levée en masse* to the emergence of the modern nation-state." Questions that deal with minorities and/or toleration tend to generate hot rhetoric about "human beings' inhumanity to other human beings," instead of historical analysis (e.g., "Unpopular minority groups have been a persistent historical dilemma. Explain and discuss the reasons why the Huguenots in seventeenth-century France, the Irish in nineteenth-century Great Britain, and the Jews in twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe were unpopular with the majority and treated harshly." Or "'The leadership, organization, and programs of ethnic and racial minority movements after 1945 represented a fundamental departure from those which had existed from 1900 to 1945.' Discuss with reference to black Americans or Mexican Americans, giving about equal attention to the periods before and after 1945."). Teachers should be aware of the pitfalls involved, and advise students beforehand of what is expected from them and/or word such questions with care.

Successful Questions for Study

There is no easy road to writing fool-proof essay questions. Each new question has the potential to present a new array of problems. Nevertheless, by employing these guidelines, adapted and modified to suit specific needs, teachers should be able to avoid what have proven to be problems, and use what has worked with a greater degree of success. As a result, students should learn more efficiently and be treated more fairly, and teachers themselves will deserve and earn additional praise. In addition, teachers should consider establishing preliminary expectations or standards for their questions: this can serve the function of a pre-test, and should be pursued, as much as is humanly possible, from the perspective of students so as to anticipate problems. That is, after being written, questions should be screened with regard to intent and the extent that they actually ask what is intended. If there is a colleague with whom you can work to achieve this result, so much the better.

Finally, if studying questions that have been successful (for both students and graders) will aid the reader further, the following are offered from recent AP European and United States History. (It should be noted that United States History AP questions all begin with quotations, whereas only some European History questions are constructed this way.)

1. Discuss the various factors which enabled Europeans to achieve economic and political dominance over many non-European peoples between 1450 and 1750.
2. Explain how economic, technological, political, and religious factors promoted European exploration, from about 1450 to about 1525.
3. In the seventeenth century, England and the Netherlands developed effective capitalist economies, while Spain did not.

   Why did the economies develop so differently in England and the Netherlands, on the one hand, and in Spain, on the other?
4. What political and social changes in Western and Central Europe account for the virtual disappearance of revolutionary outbreaks in the half-century following 1848?
5. Discuss the extent to which nineteenth-century romanticism was or was NOT a conservative cultural and intellectual movement.
6. Assess the nature and importance of economic factors that helped determine the race for empire among the major European powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
7. "Every age projects its own image of man into its art." Assess the validity of this statement with reference to two representative twentieth-century European works in either the visual or literary arts.
8. "The Treaty of Vienna (1815) was a more realistic accommodation to the post-Napoleonic period than was the Versailles settlement (1919) to the post-First World War period."

   Decide the merits of the statement above and in a well-developed argument support your decision with a carefully reasoned analysis of the events mentioned.
9. A favorite device of social critics has been to construct model societies to illuminate the problems and the shortcomings of their times and to project a possible blueprint for the future. Describe and compare the utopias of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx. What were the chief faults they found with their own societies and how were their utopias designed to correct them?
10. "Every successful revolution puts on in time the robes of the tyrant it has deposed." Evaluate this statement with regard to the English Revolution (1640-1660), the French Revolution (1789-1815), and the Russian Revolution (1917-1930).
11. "Both the Jacksonian Democrats during 1824-1840 and the Populists during 1890-1896 attacked and sought to root out special privilege in American life. The Jacksonian Democrats attained power and succeeded; the Populists failed."

    Assess the validity of this view. Give roughly equal attention to the Jacksonian Democrats and the Populists.

12. "Although the United States is widely regarded as the home of free enterprise, business values, and materialism, American fiction since 1865 has generally been critical of business behavior and values."

    Assess the validity of this generalization with reference to the work of at least TWO writers who have treated the behavior and values of businessmen in their fiction since 1865.
13. "Paradoxically, Darwinism provided a justification for both social conservatism and social reform in the period from 1870 to 1915."

    Discuss this statement.
14. "Ironically, popular belief in the 'self-sufficient farmer' and the 'self-made man' increased during the nineteenth century as the reality behind these beliefs faded."

    Assess the validity of this statement.
15. "From 1914 to the present, the main trend in the relationship between the central government and the states has been toward concentration of power in the federal government."

    Discuss with reference to such areas of governmental power as regulation of business, social welfare, and civil rights.
16. "War has frequently had unexpected consequences for United States foreign policy but has seldom resulted in major reorientations of policy."

    Discuss with reference to the First and Second World Wars, giving about equal attention to each.
17. "Between 1776 and 1823 a young and weak United States achieved considerable success in foreign policy when confronted with the two principle European powers, Great Britain and France. Between 1914 and 1950, however, a far more powerful United States was far less successful in achieving its foreign policy objectives in Europe."

    Discuss by comparing United States foreign policy in Europe during the period 1776-1823 with United States policy in Europe during ONE of the following periods: 1914-1932 or 1933-1950.
18. "From 1790 to the 1870s, state and national governments intervened in the American economy mainly to aid private economic interests and promote economic growth. Between 1890 and 1929, however, government intervention was designed primarily to curb and regulate private economic activity in the public interest."

    Assess the validity of this statement, discussing for *each* of these periods at least TWO major areas of public economic policy.
19. "The term 'isolationism' does not adequately describe the reality of either United States foreign policy or America' s relationships with other nations during the period from Washington's farewell address (1796) to 1940."

    Assess the validity of this generalization.

20. "Presidents who have been notably successful in either foreign affairs or domestic affairs have seldom been notably successful in both."

Assess this statement with reference to TWO presidents, one in the nineteenth century and the other in the twentieth century, giving reasons for success or failure in each case.