

HOW TO WRITE GREAT ANSWERS

The “Right” Answer vs. a “Great” Answer

When you answer a multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, or other short-answer type question, there is a “right” answer.

When you write an answer to an essay question, it’s rarely useful to think in terms of a “right” or “wrong” answer. It’s more than possible to write an essay in which all the data is correct, but the essay doesn’t answer the question.

Perhaps the trickiest part of responding to an essay question is understanding the question. This is sort of a chicken-and-egg problem. You have to know the answer in order to understand the question. Writing essay answers is really a process of articulating your understanding of material you have at hand.

The following criteria are the basis for grading your short essays on *Weekly Assignments, Discussions and Tests*:

1. **The information presented in the answer is relevant to the question.** It’s clear that the student understood the question.
You can help both me and you understand your answer by repeating the question as part of your answer.
2. **There is a clear focus in the answer.**
At the beginning of your answer, make a simple statement to create your point of focus. Then, elaborate on it.
3. **The writing uses appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation.**
Grades will be discounted up to 50% for poor vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. Make friends with *AskOnline* if your writing skills are weak.
4. **The information in the answer is correct** – date, names, location, circumstances, etc.
5. **The answer explains special terms** (e.g., Cold War, imperialism, colonial charter, mercantilism, etc.).
6. **The information in the answer is COMPLETE.**
The answer should include all the elements described in the [box below, "How to Describe a Historical Event."](#)
7. **The answer makes connections that demonstrate an understanding of the significance of the question to the process of historical change being studied in this class.**
8. **The writing is the student's own.**
I will stop reading when it becomes apparent that the answer is copied from any source – or if it is the work of someone besides the student.

How To Describe a Historical Event

A complete and meaningful description of a historical event will answer the following five questions:

1) **What happened?**

Obviously, you need to explain the facts that you’re talking about.

2) **When did the event occur?**

History is about time. Similar events recur numerous times throughout human history (war, plague, founding of governments, destruction of people/families/tribes, human migrations, etc...). The *time* of the event is a significant distinguishing feature. We

might know the time of an event as a *specific date* (The American Declaration of Independence was published on July 4, 1776.); as a *decade* (The issue of slavery became critical in the U.S. during the 1850s.); as a *century* (The first successful English colonies were established in the 17th century.).

3) Who was involved in the event?

History is a process over time carried out by *people*. Sometimes we know specific *individuals* involved in an event (George Washington implemented the first Cabinet in the U.S. government.) Sometimes a *group* is the most significant actor (Native American tribes created continual conflict on the western boundaries of English settlements; England and France continually waged war with each other throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.)

4) Where did it happen?

Like the element of time, the *location* of the event is a significant distinguishing feature. The location might be a *specific place* (The Civil War ended when General Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox, Virginia in April, 1865.); or it could be a general geographic location (Native Americans were active in the northwest until the War of 1812.)

5) Why is the event significant?

Answering this is our greatest challenge. Historians call this question the “So-what? question.” Understanding the significance of an event is really what makes it historically interesting. To answer the “so-what?” question, think about questions such as: What led to this event? Did the event *resolve* some prior process – or *start* a new process? How did this event change the parties to the event (people, place, etc.)? Why are we spending time learning about this event?

Some Sample Answers

The following are examples of good answers based on student responses to different types of questions.

QUESTION1: Describe how John d. Rockefeller organized the Standard Oil Company. Be sure to explain how Rockefeller’s organization illustrates the following concepts; vertical integration, trust, monopoly and holding company.

ANSWER1: John D. Rockefeller used a variety of new techniques in organizing the Standard Oil Company. He first organized it in 1870. Over time, he grew the company through the technique of vertical integration, the use of trusts, making his company a monopoly, and creating a holding company. Rockefeller gained control in the petroleum industry by not only gaining control of refineries that transformed crude oil to finished products like kerosene and lubricant, but by also acquiring control of other facets of the petroleum industry like production, transportation, and sales to the consumer. The Standard Oil Company’s monopolistic growth was restricted by state laws in that they prohibited one company from owning stock in another. Through the creation of the Standard Oil Trust, Rockefeller exchanged with others individual company ownership in stock with trust certificates; allowing him to control the companies but not exactly owning them. After New Jersey legalized corporations to own stock in other companies, Rockefeller created the Standard Oil of New Jersey holding company for all the companies affiliated with Standard Oil in the trust. John D.

Rockefeller's monopolistic use of vertical integration, trusts, and creating a holding company gave him organized control of the petroleum industry.

QUESTION2: Compare the geography of the Chesapeake colonies with the geography of the New England colonies. Explain the effects of the differences.

ANSWER2: The geography of the Chesapeake was distinctively different from the geography of New England, and the differences affected the lifestyle choices of the first English colonists. The geography and climate of the Chesapeake colonies was conducive to agriculture and the major cash crop that developed was tobacco. Since there were rivers running through the Chesapeake area, ships could travel on the rivers and pick up the tobacco product and deliver much needed goods to the colonists. The tobacco plant only required the use of the hoe and no oxen or plows. After the Bacon Rebellion, the colonists became more dependent upon the importation of slave labor to work on large plantations of tobacco. This produced a different effect on their economy from the economy which developed in New England. The geography and climate of New England afforded colonists a healthier environment, free from malaria. The early settlers of New England worked hard at family farms, farming corn (maize), pasturing animals, gaming, fishing, and later manufacturing. The merchant class flourished as Boston served as an important port for trade with all the American colonies and with England. The New England colonies exported meats, fish, lumber, pig iron, and ships. The effect on New England colonists was that an elite class prospered, as well as a middle class, while slaves served only as hired out laborers, craftsmen, or as household help. The combination of geography, climate, and commerce produced the effect that the Chesapeake colonies became slave dependent with a wide disparity between the wealthy, poor whites, and slaves, while the New England colonies thrived with less disparity among the growing classes of colonists.

QUESTION3: Describe who were the following Indian leaders and what happened to them: Sitting Bull, Chief Joseph, Geronimo.

ANSWER3: During the wars between the Lakota and Crow tribes in the 1850's, a holy man named Sitting Bull emerged and became a war leader of the Lakota tribe. Around this time, many western and eastern tribes were at war over control of their territory. The western tribes were being forced to move to western lands by eastern tribes, who were being forced west by American westward expansion. The Lakotas, led by Sitting Bull, along with the Cheyennes, led by a man named Crazy Horse, populated an area called the Powder River Region. Gold was discovered near this region, within the Great Sioux Reservation, around 1874, and military plans were assembled to relocate the Indian population in order to setup mining operations. This would eventually lead to the Great Sioux War. In 1877, Sitting Bull took his people to Canada in retreat from the U.S. Army. They stayed there until 1881, when cold and starvation forced them to return to the U.S. Sitting Bull surrendered to the U.S. Army in 1881, and his tribe was settled in the Standing Rock reservation in the Dakotas. Sitting Bull was fatally shot in 1890 in a skirmish with police who suspected him of inciting a rebellion on the reservation.

In 1877, the Chief of the Nez Perce Indian tribe, Chief Joseph, tried to lead his people into Canada in order to escape from the converging American soldiers. During the journey, many of his people died. Chief Joseph eventually surrendered, but asked that his people be allowed to return to their homes in Idaho. This request was denied, and the remaining Nez Perce were sent to what was known as Indian Territory, where many more of them died of disease. Chief Joseph is noted for making a speech that indicated how hopeless it would have been at that point to resist the American armed forces.

One last group of Indians, known as the Chiricahua Apaches, refused to be forced to live on a reservation, at the time of Sitting Bull and Chief Joseph. This group was led by a man named Geronimo. With Geronimo's leadership, the Chiricahua Apaches were able to evade the American military through mountains in the Southwestern region of the United States. Geronimo's capture in 1886 ended the threat of guerilla-type warfare by the western Indians. Geronimo lived more than 20 more years and died in 1909 in Fort Sill, Oklahoma.