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Duration

One or two class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

Resources

1. Study guide



2. Worksheet: Unacceptable samples



3. Homework assignment



Objectives of Lesson

- To introduce students to the three required criteria of a thesis statement for DBQ and LEQ prompts
- To identify specific ways that test-takers fail to earn the thesis point
- To practice grading thesis statements using the official rubric criteria

College Board Objectives from the 2019–20 CED

- **AP Historical Thinking Skill 6—Argumentation:** “Develop an argument” (p. 16).
- **Thinking Skill 6.A:** “Make a historically defensible claim.”
- **Unit 2—Learning Objective F:** “Explain the causes and effects of slavery in the various British colonial regions” (p. 59).
- **Unit 3—Learning Objective H:** “Explain how different forms of government developed and changed as a result of the Revolutionary Period” (p. 78).

Student Activities

- Class discussion based on grading examples of thesis statements
- Homework assignment for writing thesis statements

How to Use This Lesson

This lesson has been designed to introduce students to the criteria for writing an acceptable thesis for the DBQ and LEQ. Even if you have already introduced this topic to your students, it's good to reinforce that a thesis statement must satisfy three criteria: respond to the prompt, make a historically defensible claim, and establish a line of reasoning. It's also very beneficial for them to grade sample thesis statements based on the criteria.

The best way to begin the lesson is to distribute the study guide and walk students through each of the three criteria of an acceptable thesis. As another option, you could begin without the handout and put the three criteria on the board. Ask students to explain what they mean in plain English. “Respond to the prompt” is easy enough, but what does “historically defensible” mean? What is “a line of reasoning”? Follow up by asking students to speculate about how test-takers could fail to satisfy the criteria. Then, you can distribute the study guide and walk them through the tips. The study guide will remain useful for your students throughout the school year.

Beyond the Test

Writing a successful thesis statement is about more than earning a point on a standardized test. Making a precise, coherent argument is central to the work of historians and historical reasoning both inside and outside the historical profession.

The thesis point is awarded frequently on the AP U.S. History Exam. In most years, approximately 60 percent of all students earn the thesis point on the DBQ, while the number fluctuates between 50 and 70 percent on the LEQ, depending on the prompt.

Next, distribute the worksheet with the sample thesis statements, and have the students read each of the samples out loud. You can also build out these categories on the board and discuss what they mean. Make sure that students are using the specific criteria to assess thesis statements. In these instances, spelling and diction don't matter nearly as much as satisfying the three criteria. Keep the students focused on the criteria.

Homework Assignment

At the end of class discussion, distribute the homework assignment and remind students that they need to grade these thesis statements and rewrite them to satisfy the criteria. It is easy enough to complain about inadequacies in sample essays; it is much harder to get into the text and fix it. During this homework assignment, students will be forced to apply what they have learned in class to specific examples. If you have time at the end of class discussion, go through the first two samples of the homework assignment together. We have provided a total of ten examples, but the students may only need to complete five of them (i.e., the first two pages) if you think that is enough. Only four of the sample thesis statements would earn the point: 1, 4, 6, and 9.

Small Group Activity

For larger classes, a general class discussion can be challenging to manage effectively. Both the worksheet and the homework assignment provide an opportunity to break students into groups to work together as graders and then reconvene as a class to discuss their findings. This kind of small group activity could allow for greater engagement and better reinforce the lesson plan.

You can earn up to one point for your thesis on both the document-based question (DBQ) and the long-essay question (LEQ) of the AP® U.S. History Exam. In order to earn this point, your thesis must do three things:

1. Respond to the prompt

Your thesis must be a specific answer to the actual prompt, not a variation of the prompt or something more generally on the topic of the prompt. This means that you have to read the question multiple times and identify everything you must do to address it. It's a good idea to mark up the prompt and underline key words. While you will want to borrow certain words and phrases from the prompt, you do not want to merely restate it.

2. Make a historically defensible claim

Your thesis must make a specific claim that could be defended with historical evidence. Avoid overly vague phrases (“throughout the ages” and “there were political, social and economic changes”) and get specific. Also, make sure that you can actually back up your claims with specific evidence, whether from the documents (in the DBQ) or from outside evidence (in the DBQ and LEQ).

3. Establish a line of reasoning

It's not enough to just answer the question. You must “establish a line of reasoning,” which means explaining *why* your answer to the prompt is correct. The best word in the English language for this is “because”: X happened “because” A, B, and C. You can also use phrases like “as a result of” or “due to” or “on account of.” The point is that you must show some rationale behind your argument that goes beyond merely stating your claim.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long should a thesis be?

The thesis is normally one or two sentences in length. It's very natural to split the thesis into two sentences with the “line of reasoning” in the second sentence. There is no perfect length or word count for the thesis. What matters is that you fulfill all the criteria of the rubric.

Where should the thesis be located?

Your thesis should be located in the introductory paragraphs or the conclusion. You can make the grader's job as easy as possible by putting your thesis clearly at the end of the first paragraph. It will help set the tone for your whole essay and for your grader's experience with your essay. You should also try to reinforce your thesis in the concluding paragraph in order to ensure that you earn the point. Don't worry about repeating yourself. Use different words to express your main idea again.

Can I earn a thesis point even if I don't earn other points?

Yes, the thesis point is completely independent of the other points of the rubric. Even if you do not properly contextualize the time period or use evidence, you can still earn the thesis point.

Notes:

This document contains sample thesis statements that would fail to earn the point on the exam. The LEQ prompt for all of these questions is:

Evaluate the relative importance of different causes for the growth of the Atlantic slave trade in the period from 1650 to 1750.

NOTES

1. Respond to the prompt

Problem 1: Does not respond to prompt

Throughout the ages, people have enslaved each other and stolen away people's liberty. Unfortunately, this was also true in America, where slavery lasted for centuries.

Slavery had many effects on society between 1650 and 1750, including economic growth in the South as well as new laws that limited the freedoms of African Americans. Ultimately, the legacy of slavery was to cause lasting damage to slaves and their descendants and set the stage for fundamental inequalities that persist to this day.

Problem 2: Merely restates prompt instead of responding to it

There were many causes for the growth of the Atlantic slave trade that can describe how and why this evil institution came to dominate America from 1650 to 1750.

The relative importance of different causes for the growth of the Atlantic slave trade can be described in a number of ways by historians in the period from 1650 to 1750. This is true because America was undergoing significant change during this time, especially in the South.

2. Make a historically defensible claim

Problem 1: The claim is not historically defensible

The most important cause of the slave trade was the decline of Spain and Portugal's colonial settlements in the New World from 1650 to 1750.

There were many causes of the rise of the Atlantic slave trade in the period from 1650 to 1750, but the most significant causes were the need for new labor for textile mills in America's growing industrial cities and the invention of a railroad system to transport slaves into the interior of the United States.

Problem 2: The claim is too vague

The main cause of slavery came from the people at the top of society back then.

Slavery's impact on American society from 1650 to 1750 was undeniable. When we begin an investigation of its causes, however, we find that the causes come from a variety of sources, some of which cannot be fully understood today, even by historians.

3. Establish a line of reasoning

Problem 1: There is no line of reasoning

There were numerous causes for the rise of slavery in this period, especially in the domain of American life.

The increasing growth of colonialism impacted slavery in the era between the years 1650 and 1750, which grew and grew over this time period.

Problem 2: The line of reasoning is too vague

Some causes were the main drivers of slavery during the 1650–1750 time period that became a problem because of economic changes in America at the time.

Throughout the entirety of early American history, slavery was prevalent, but by 1750, new policies were passed into law and new changes occurred during this time.

NOTES



Instructions: Using the checklist on the right-hand side, identify whether the following thesis statements satisfy the three essential criteria for a thesis statement. If you determine that the sample would not earn the point, then rewrite the thesis in the lined space so that it would earn the point.

All of the responses are based on the following prompt:

Evaluate the extent to which the American Revolution changed American society in the period from 1770 to 1800.

Sample 1:

Although the American Revolution changed the form of government and created a new nation, it did not fundamentally transform American society for most ordinary Americans because women and African Americans still did not have equal protection under the law.

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1

Sample 2:

The American Revolution was more than just a war that overthrew the British. It was also a major influence on American society that changed everything about the colonies.

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1

Sample 3:

There were many causes of the American Revolution, including the tyranny of King George III and economic reasons, but there were also many effects, including an impact on the economy and social structures, which were both drastically altered by the war.

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1

Sample 4:

The true foundations of American identity can be found in the era of the American Revolution. During this time period, American society was transformed as there was an increasing awareness of the injustices of slavery and women began to participate in "republican motherhood."

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1

Sample 5:

Society changed during the American Revolution in that people were never the same as they were before when they were just regular British people who lived in America.

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1

Sample 6:

The American Revolution changed U.S. society in a number of ways. In addition to creating a new awareness of the role of the individual in democracy, the Revolution also shaped women's roles because "republican motherhood" gained popularity and elevated the importance of women in American society.

Sample 7:

Throughout all of American history, our society has always been changing. You can see this in a number of time periods, but especially in the American Revolution, when people were very active in society.

Sample 8:

When evaluating the extent to which the American Revolution changed American society in the period from 1770 to 1800, one should consider the importance of social change and social movements, which were just beginning at this time.

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1

Sample 9:

Although many aspects of American society remained unchanged as a result of the Revolutionary War, there are at least two concrete ways that American society changed. First, revolutionary ideals created a new interest in protecting individual liberties from government intrusion and second, the abolitionist movement was born as colonists achieved new understandings of freedom and liberty.

Sample 10:

The American Revolution changed society during this time because of the Second Great Awakening, which created a new emphasis on religion in the lives of most Americans. This is when American religion becomes American religion and society is changed.

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1

CRITERIA FOR THE THESIS POINT

- Responds to the prompt
- Makes a historically defensible claim
- Establishes a line of reasoning

THESIS POINT EARNED: / 1