

Long Essay Question

1. From c. 1200 to 1450, complex civilizations developed in the Americas in difficult geographic terrain.

Develop an argument that evaluates the extent to which pre-Columbian American civilizations used or adapted their natural environment to bring about political or social order.

Your response should do the following:

- Develop a “historically defensible thesis” that responds to the prompt and establishes a line of reasoning.
- Describe the historical context of the events described in the prompt.
- Support your argument using “specific and relevant examples of evidence.”
- Demonstrate historical reasoning.
- Use evidence to agree with, modify, or refute an argument that addresses the prompt.

Introduction

Sample thesis statement:

Throughout the Incan Empire, the Aztec Empire, and the Mayan Empire, the act of living within one’s complicated natural environments provided a means of consolidating political order because the leaders in each community had to orchestrate programs for building, defense, and communication across the terrain.

How would you improve this thesis statement? Rewrite it here.

Write or type your response in this area.

①

②

③

Commentary

- ① This worksheet can be used in different ways based on the needs of your class. We recommend that you work through it as a class, using the commentary to guide the conversation. However, it could also be assigned as small group or individual work.
- ② This question aligns with Theme 1: Humans and their Environment. Even if you are not using a thematic approach in your class, consider spending a few moments discussing how developments across world history are united by similar concepts.
- ③ This question provides an opportunity to extend the exercise based on class time. As a supplemental activity, you may want to consider having students do “thesis drills” where they need to write X number of thesis statements within a set time period.

Body Paragraph 1

Sample topic sentence:

The natural geography of the Andean mountains provided an opportunity for Incan leaders to consolidate their political authority through infrastructure projects that connected the communities across the peaks, led to more effective defense, and increased communication among isolated parts of the empire.

What is the main argument of this topic sentence? Rewrite it in your own words. ④

Write or type your response in this area.

Choose one the following examples of evidence to support your argument. ⑤

A) Incan architecture at political centers, such as Machu Picchu, shows such a high level of engineering skill because the stonework was completed without any mortar. Many of these structures still stand today, despite the earthquake and volcanic activity in the region.

B) The various communities of the Incan Empire were connected by a series of rope bridges suspended between mountain peaks, which were vital thoroughfares for people and livestock. The Incan government ensured that these bridges remained safe by requiring villagers to replace them annually as part of their required public service obligations. ⑥

C) The Incan people adapted to life at a higher altitude through several physical and biological adaptations. For example, research has shown that the Incan people tended to have more red blood cells and higher lung capacity than people who lived in the same areas at a lower elevation.

④ Students should note that this paragraph is about how the state directed the projects to promote political stability.

⑤ This exercise poses a challenge to students because all of the choices listed as example pieces of evidence on this worksheet are factually accurate. In order to answer correctly, students be able to identify the example that fits with the main idea of the topic sentence (“relevant”) and supports it (“specific”).

⑥ One of these rope bridges is still in use today. The ropes continue to be replaced annually.

Describe how your choice is “specific” to the argument made in the thesis statement and topic sentence.

Write or type your response in this area.

Describe how your choice is “relevant” to the argument made in the thesis statement and topic sentence.

⑦

Write or type your response in this area.

Body Paragraph 2

Sample topic sentence:

The Aztec Empire had a complicated relationship with the natural environment, as seen in their choice to build their political center at Tenochtitlan in the center of Lake Texcoco. The construction and maintenance of the city with its floating islands required a large investment in infrastructure but benefited the empire by creating impressive natural defenses.

What is the main argument of this topic sentence? Rewrite it in your own words.

⑧

Write or type your response in this area.

- ⑦ Depending on class time, you can expand this exercise by having students find and incorporate their own evidence examples. Working in small groups, have each group evaluate whether the examples would be considered “specific” and “relevant.”
- ⑧ Students should identify that this topic sentence addresses how the state utilized its authority to harness the defense capability of the environment.

Choose one the following examples of evidence to support your argument.

- A) The availability of spring water through the springs of Chapultepec ensured that the city had a regular supply of fresh water. Aztec sources record that most Aztecs bathed at least twice a day, with emperor Moctezuma reportedly taking four baths a day.
- B) Lake Texcoco was chosen as the site for the capital of the Aztec Empire because of a religious vision which consisted of an eagle eating a snake, perched on top of a cactus. This symbolic representation is still used on the Mexican flag today.
- C) The city of Tenochtitlan, where the political center of the Aztec Empire was located, could only be reached on foot through four causeways with bridges. As part of the planning for the city, the emperor had decreed that the bridges in each causeway were required to be movable so that they could be retracted in case of invasion.

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- 9 As a point of contrast, consider highlighting how different the hygiene practices in the Americas in the period c. 1200 to 1450 were from those in Europe, where bathing was much rarer. King Louis XIV and Queen Isabel I of Spain claimed to have only bathed twice in their lifetimes.
- 10 The natural defenses of Tenochtitlan were so formidable that Cortez wondered whether it was even possible to invade the city at all. When he did so, his troops suffered very high casualties.

Describe how your choice is “specific” to the argument made in the thesis statement and topic sentence.

Write or type your response in this area.

Describe how your choice is “relevant” to the argument made in the thesis statement and topic sentence.

Write or type your response in this area.

Body Paragraph 3

Sample topic sentence:

In contrast to the Inca and the Aztecs, the Mayan Empire was a much more loosely defined confederation of communities that ranged over a wide geographic area. These communities were united on a political level through state-developed infrastructure projects like road systems that allowed people from different areas to communicate easily.

What is the main argument of this topic sentence? Rewrite it in your own words. ⑪

Write or type your response in this area.

Choose one the following examples of evidence to support your argument.

- A) The road system used by the Mayan Empire was primarily used by foot travelers, since the Maya did not use any large beasts of burden that could carry trade goods for a great distance.
- B) The Mayan government orchestrated the creation of paved roads, called "sacbeob," throughout the Mayan Empire to ensure that all people could easily reach a temple to perform the religious rituals that were thought necessary to the continuation of the state. ⑫
- C) The Mayan Empire was connected by a series of white paved roads that were marked with small huts along the way. Historians are uncertain whether those small huts or way stations were private businesses that catered to travelers (like roadside food stands) or part of a more official process (like mail delivery).

- ⑪ Students should be able to identify that this topic sentence is about how creating things that uniting all different types of terrain was an expression of political power.
- ⑫ Many of these still exist today. Some have been preserved in their original form, while others form the basis of modern roads.

Describe how your choice is “specific” to the argument made in the thesis statement and topic sentence.

Write or type your response in this area.

Describe how your choice is “relevant” to the argument made in the thesis statement and topic sentence.

Write or type your response in this area.