

How to write an A-Level History Essay

Writing Essays is the most important skill that A-level Historians need to acquire. Some Units are examined wholly in essay questions either 2-part structured questions, or longer essay questions. No matter how much you know if you can't write a good essay, you will not do well. Unfortunately, a good essay does not just consist of writing all you know on a given topic; at A-Level, examiners tend to insist on tricky things like answering the question, analysis rather than narrative and inclusion of information to support your points. Unless you are particularly gifted, these skills take time to learn and poor marks are common early on. Fortunately, these skills can be learnt, so don't despair if your early attempts in lower sixth are torn to shreds by your teacher. Listen to his advice, read his comments and work on improving for the next time.

Although every essay will demand a unique answer, there are certain techniques common to all essays which will ensure that you don't go too far wrong. First some general points.

Read the Question

This sounds too obvious to mention, but all too often, someone sees a word or a phrase in the title and proceeds to reel off a prepared answer without considering whether what they are writing actually addresses the question asked. Read the question several times and make sure you understand what it is asking.

Analyse the Question

When you have read the question you should then analyse it. This is vital – many people do not make the distinction between what the question is asking and what the question is about. By breaking down the title into key words (the issue to be considered) and topic words (the subject matter), you can ensure that you actually answer the question rather than provide a simple narrative of events. A look at a couple of examples will show you what I mean:

- What measures did Mussolini take to consolidate his control over Italy from 1922 to 1925?
 - Main Topic – Mussolini's attack on political opponents, the parliamentary system and the Fascist party.
 - Key Words – 1922, 1925, measures, consolidate, HIS control
- In what ways did radicalism impact the Army, Army leaders and MPs between 1646 and 1653?
 - Main Topic – the effect of radicalism on politics
 - Key Words – army, army leaders, MPs, 1646, 1653

Planning

This is without doubt, the most vital part of writing an essay. It is your plan that determines what approach you take to answering the question. If you have written your plan properly, you will know exactly what your answer is going to be. This stops you from falling into the trap of deciding on the path of your essay whilst you are writing it. More importantly, your plan will ensure that you actually answer the question. Everything you write must be related to the question, and without a plan it is all too easy to lose focus and write irrelevant nonsense. Not answering the question is the most common failing in A-level essays, and there is nothing a teacher likes doing more than crossing out huge chunks of an essay with the word 'irrelevant'! Write a good plan and this won't happen to you.

Beginnings

Once you have made your plan, you are ready to begin. How do you start an essay? Unfortunately, there is no hard and fast rule – it will depend very much on the individual title. However one thing is absolutely certain, your introduction must make a good impression. It is the first thing anyone will read; if it fails to grip, the rest of the essay will have to be doubly good to retrieve the situation. Ideally your introduction should sparkle, leaving the impression that you know what you are talking about and that the rest of the essay will be worth reading. Preferably it should also be short – if it takes more than a third of a page, then you have probably missed the point.

There are three main ways of writing an introduction (notice that these are the main ways, not the only ways):

The safe approach is to simply state what you are going to do, sum up in a few sentences what the question is asking and say how you are going to answer it. This approach will not excite an examiner in A2 exams, but is perfectly acceptable for AS level answers (units 2 and 3). Even in A2 level essays, as long as you have identified the key areas for investigation, you will have made a satisfactory start.

Another way to begin is to actually state your answer in the introduction and then go on to prove your case in the essay. This approach is far more interesting because it shows you have a definite point of view, and are prepared to argue it. It shows the examiner that you have planned your essay, know what you are going to say and hopefully will support it with good evidence.

The final type of introduction is far more individual. You might use an interesting quote, describe a significant event, take issue with the question or otherwise set the scene. It is hard to define this type of introduction, but the effect will be to show that you have

complete mastery of the subject, understand the issues at stake and will be dealing with them thoroughly. This kind of start will grip readers, impress them and make them want to read on. It is also very difficult to write!

Middles

The main body of the essay is where you prove your case. Once you have planned your essay, this section will almost write itself, it is just a question of filling in the gaps. You will know what paragraphs you are going to write and what information you are going to use. However, remember that you are answering a question, not narrating a story. You have already identified the key issues in the question, now it is time to use them. **Every paragraph must refer in some way to the key words and issues** or it is danger of being irrelevant. Be ruthless – you will have far more information than you need and must select carefully only that which you need to support your points.

However, it is also important to avoid writing an essay which consists purely of argument – you must not make unsubstantiated claims. For everything you say you must have supporting facts or examples – otherwise your essay will be full of assertions and no more than hot air. This balance between analysis and supporting detail is what makes up the skill of essay writing, and takes time and practice to learn. If you can learn from your mistakes early on and put the effort in over the two-year course, you will be able to write a good essay.

Make **S**tatements, then **EX**plain what you meant by the statement and be sure to **I**llustrate your argument with examples and information

Ends

The conclusion is where you sum up what you have said in the essay. It is absolutely vital that you write one. This is the last thing the examiner reads and counts for a great deal. A good conclusion can rescue an indifferent essay and set the seal on a good one. It is here that you draw together the threads of your argument and hammer home your points, leaving the reader in no doubt as to your answer. You should refer explicitly to the key words that you identified in the question and reinforce the points you made in the main body. Above all it should contain nothing new, it is simply a restatement of your argument. If there is anything you forgot to say earlier, leave it out, it is too late now!

Adapted from an article by Gareth Affleck published in *History Review* March 1997