

Dr. Price's Handy Study Tips For Success in History Courses



So, here you are taking a history course. I thought that it might be worthwhile to offer you some tips on how to succeed in history classes. Perhaps the first thing that I should do is explain in a vague sort of way what history is, maybe what it isn't and how you should approach it in college course work. Here we go:

Wordnet.princeton.edu offers several definitions of the word. History is, according to those Princeton fellows:

- ❖ The aggregate of past events.
- ❖ The continuum of events occurring in succession leading from the past to the present and even into the future.
- ❖ A record or narrative description of past events.
- ❖ The discipline that records and interprets past events involving human beings.
- ❖ All that is remembered of the past as preserved in writing; a body of knowledge.

I'm not sure that any of this stuff helped all that much. We can glean from it that history is about past events, it is about people, and it attempts to record, preserve and interpret human events. So, history is about people, and it is about change. How about, "History is a narrative about human affairs and the changes that take place in human affairs over time."

You probably took history classes in high school and your teacher, Coach Whazisname (over 80% of Louisiana high school history teachers are Physical Ed. Majors), assigned you long lists of terms to look up, then he tested you on those terms. This isn't really history, its kinda like Trivial Pursuit without the fun parts (the board and dice and whatnot). First off, what you did had no narrative. There was no story, just a bunch of terms to be defined without any real context or any real reference to the series of causes and effects that actually create a narrative – *create history*. Now, Coach Whozits might have said, "History is all about 'who, what, when and where.'" Alas, he was wrong. History is about "who, what, when, where and **WHY**."

The "why" is really important. The "why" represents the interpretation of history, and that is the most interesting part, and it is, unfortunately, the part that Coach forgot. You might have memorized the fact that Thomas Jefferson, a Virginia planter, wrote a document in 1776 called the *Declaration of Independence*. But, you didn't learn what the various sources of thought were that informed Jefferson's writing. When Jefferson wrote the

Declaration, why did he pick the thought of one political thinker instead of some other political thinker? He had lots of choices, but he mostly chose the writings and ideas of John Locke, an English philosopher who lived in the late seventeenth century, to model his main ideas after. Why? You might have learned that the *Declaration* was the literary culmination of a series of events that stretched back to the colonial conflicts with Great Britain that began in the 1760s. You probably weren't informed that these conflicts over the meaning of government, human liberty and the sanctity of private property went back even further to arguments about what government was supposed to be in England in the early 1600s, and even farther back in European History. And that's where interpretation comes in. That is also what makes history a narrative, and, for my money, it also makes history way more interesting than working on a laundry list of terms for Coach Whoever. Jefferson's *Declaration* didn't just happen, it is part of a chain of causes and effects that make up the history of the West – a long narrative, a story that is, in part, about human liberty.

History is about human affairs that change over time based on causes and effects. Causes and effects are events that are each part of a narrative of all the stuff that happened. Historians study the story, the players, the events, all that stuff (Coach Boudreaux's "who, what when and where"), then they add interpretations to explain *why* those events happened the way that they did, *why* the story played out one way and not another. And that is basically history.

That said, now we can share an interesting little secret. Most of history isn't really all that hard; if you can tell a joke and keep the various characters and plot elements straight, you should be able to understand the narrative part of history. And that is 80% of what you need to do to succeed in a college history survey course.

Interpretation is a bit tougher. We might define historical interpretation as "an attempt to explain why events happened the way that they did in a way that fits all of the evidence." Historians look at underlying causes – political movements, social movements, economic factors and human interests – that have an effect on the stream of history and help to effect changes in the narrative. You should get a feel for interpretation as you study the course before you. You will need to employ some degree of historical interpretation when you write essay examinations, or, even to answer some multiple-choice questions.

So, how does one study all this stuff? What should you do to prepare for history examinations? I have put together a guide below with some study tips that I hope will prepare you successfully to navigate the troubled waters of history and write good exams. Before we start, though, a couple of points:

1. History is not rocket science. You don't have to be a genius to learn history, but you DO need to study, memorize, and think. College history is harder than Coach's high school history, but, one hopes, also more interesting.
2. Success in a history course, as in all college course work, requires dedication and study. A good rule of thumb for any college course is that you should *spend three hours of out-of-class study and preparation for every hour you spend in the lecture*. For every week of lectures (about three hours) a good minimum of study, then, is nine hours. I'm not saying that if you do this, you will get an A. But, it's a good start.
3. This guide contains a lot of tips and strategies to help you study and prepare for examinations. Some may work better for you than others. The idea is to give you a lot of possibilities so that you can pick and choose strategies that work best for you.

Let the Tips Begin

Listening Skills

The average college student spends about 14 hours per week in class listening (or perhaps I should say "hearing" – there is a difference!) to lectures. Below are some strategies that can help you improve your listening skills:

- ◆ **Focus on content, not delivery.** Have you ever counted the number of times a teacher clears his/her throat in a fifteen-minute period? If so, you weren't focusing on content.
- ◆ **Avoid emotional involvement.** When you are too emotionally involved in listening, you tend to hear what you want to hear—not what is actually being said. Try to remain objective and open-minded.
- ◆ **Avoid distractions.** Don't let your mind wander or be distracted by the person shuffling papers near you. If the classroom is too hot or too cold try to remedy that situation if you can. The solution may require that you dress more appropriately to the room temperature. Sometimes you can't control your environment to eliminate all distractions. Then you need to tighten your focus on the lecture so that the distractions simply fade into the background.
- ◆ **Treat listening as a challenging mental task.** Listening to an academic lecture is not a passive act—at least it shouldn't be. You need to concentrate on what is being said so that you can process the information into your notes.
- ◆ **Stay active by asking mental questions.** Active listening keeps you on your toes. Here are some questions you can ask yourself as you listen. What key point is the professor making? How does this fit with what I know from previous lectures? How is this lecture organized?
- ◆ **Use the gap between the rate of speech and your rate of thought.** You can think faster than the lecturer can talk. That's one reason your mind may tend to wander. All the above suggestions will help you keep your mind occupied and focused on what is being said. You can actually begin to anticipate what the professor is going to say as a way to keep your mind from straying. Your mind has the capacity to listen, think, write and ponder at the same time, but it takes some practice.

Taking Lecture Notes

In college classes, lectures are still the primary means by which the professor delivers information to students. Note taking is still the primary means by which students acquire, process and store this material.

An essential skill for good note taking is good listening. Most people believe that they are good listeners, but research has shown that most students do not listen well. [See **Listening Skills** above] So first of all, you should try to sharpen your listening skills.

Taking notes during a lecture can be a frustrating, almost overwhelming, job. Getting **organized** is the best way to deal with the rush of incoming information. Here are some tips:

- ◆ Use a standard size notebook. A loose-leaf three-ring binder is the best because it allows you to insert handouts and rearrange your own notes. An alternative method is to use a legal pad as the first step in the note-taking process. Take your notes on the legal pad, then transcribe them onto loose-leaf paper and store your transcriptions in a three-ring binder. And, of course, if you are a good typist, you can use a laptop to take notes. But, if you do so, you should review your notes on the computer, then print the lectures to review and study notes.
- ◆ Sit near the front and center of the class. You will have the most direct communication with your professor, and you have fewer distractions.
- ◆ Put a heading and a date on your notes for each day. If your professor provides an outline at the beginning of class, copy it into your notes.
- ◆ Attend all lectures, even if attendance is not mandatory. Using someone else's notes is no substitute for attending the lecture. Trying to depend on someone else's notes is not a substitute for using your own. Even using the professor's notes can be problematic; good professors often only use their notes as an occasional reference, adding information as the lecture progresses. Some professors' lecture notes are so skimpy that they are useless to anyone but him/her. Some professors (including your humble servant) put their lecture notes online. Use, them, print them, study them, but don't trust them completely! VERY FEW professors actually READ their notes directly from a page, and most tend to add material that isn't in their prepared notes. Watch your experienced professors as they lecture and you might be surprised that they spend very little time actually looking at their notes. If they aren't looking at their notes, that means that what they are saying MAY or MAY NOT actually be in their notes. Think about it!
- ◆ As you hear the information, mentally process it, and write your notes, you are already beginning to learn the information. Reinforcement of the information through frequent review of your notes completes the learning process.
- ◆ Prepare for each lecture by pre-reading the assigned material in your text. You will find that you will understand the lecture better if you have some basic background. If your professor puts notes online, print them and re-read them before the class. This preparation is one that very few students take seriously.

- ◆ Learn to identify main points and not get bogged down in detail. Professors often give cues to what's important by repeating information, changing their voices or rate of delivery, listing items in order of importance, and, of course, by writing on the chalkboard. It is both difficult and unnecessary to write down **everything** that the lecturer says. As you get used to the lecturer's style of delivery, it becomes easier to figure out what is important and what is less so, but this requires attention to detail and concentration.
- ◆ These tips will help you prepare to take good notes, but what about the actual notes themselves? What should your notebook look like after a lecture? Well, let's hope that it isn't full of doodles in the margins which would indicate that your mind had wandered. In general, it should look a little like an outline with clear main ideas (not labeled with Roman Numerals, of course) and some sub-points with a moderate amount of details and examples. There should probably be some white space so that you add notes from your text or from the next day's lecture.
- ◆ Of course, what you do with your notes after they have been taken is even more important. It does you no good to take them if you do not review them. A great strategy for note review is to read *and transcribe* each day's lecture the evening after the lecture is given. Then, at the end of each week, review the week's material, thus reviewing all of the lectures at least twice per week. That is a pretty good start.

Taking Notes From a Text Book

Most professors assign a required history textbook to go along with the lectures. Only rarely does the professor actually use the text in class. He might say, "then there is the Aardvark Revolt on the 23rd of Grune, 647... you can read about it in your text." That doesn't mean that the Aardvark Revolt is not important or that you don't need to learn it. It means that the lecturer has other topics that he prefers to use valuable class time to cover and he expects that you can get the information about the Aardvark Revolt from the book by yourself. The textbook frees the lecturer to talk about the stuff that he considers most important or interesting while giving the student more information about other events, people, trends, etc. The text is meant to supplement the lectures. For instance, your history text usually has a great deal of material on the arts and literature of the specific period that is being covered, so your lecturer may pay little or no attention to those topics in the lectures. Your text may also contain a great deal of information about campaigns, battles and military leaders in a war, say the American Civil War, that your professor does not have time to cover in class. Nonetheless, that material in the text is important because it gives the student a wider understanding of the period and insights into how people ticked during that time, or it gives a vast amount of detail that would be costly in terms of class time for the lecturer, but is still important. A rule of survey classes is simply that there are only so many available hours of lecture, and there is never enough time to give detailed coverage to every aspect of the course. The textbook covers areas that the professor may not have time to cover, or it offers expanded coverage of topics only covered lightly in the lectures. The text can also provide the professor with lots of terms and ideas to plump up your exam! So, you need to learn it, and that means you need to read the text.

First: read a section of your textbook assignment

- ◆ Read just enough to keep an understanding of the material. Do not take notes, but rather focus on understanding the material.

- ◆ It is tempting to take notes as you are reading the first time, but this is not an efficient technique. You are likely to take down too much information and simply copy without understanding.

Second: Review the material

1. Locate the main ideas, as well as important sub-points.
2. Set the book aside.
3. Paraphrase this information: Putting the textbook information in your own words forces you to become actively involved with the material.
4. Take notes at this point on the important themes and information in the reading.
5. Do not copy information directly from the textbook.
6. Add only enough detail to understand.

Review, and compare your notes with the text, and ask yourself if you truly understand. If not, do it again. Then repeat all of the above for the next section until you have finished the assignment.

“M.U.R.D.E.R.”

A study system for both lecture notes and text

Mood:

Set a *positive study mood* for yourself.

Select the appropriate time, environment, and attitude.

Understand:

Mark any information **you don't understand** in a particular unit.

Keep a focus on one unit or a manageable amount of material.

Recall:

After studying the unit, stop and put what you have learned **into your own words**.

Digest:

Go back to what you did not understand and **reconsider the information**;

Contact external expert sources (e.g., other books or an instructor) if you still cannot understand it. (One really excellent source to go to for more information or clarification on specific topics is Wikipedia on the Internet. www.wikipedia.org)

Expand:

In this step, ask **three kinds of questions** concerning the studied material:

- ★ If I could speak to the author, what questions would I ask or what criticism would I offer?
- ★ How could I apply this material to what I am interested in?
- ★ How could I make this information interesting and understandable to other students?

Review:

Go over the material you've covered.

Review the strategies that helped you understand and/or retain information in the past and apply these to your current studies.

Exam Preparation

To do well on exams you must first learn the material, and then review it before the test.

The exam is the means by which you are judged on what you have learned from the course. In most college courses, exams are an end in themselves, a means to determine whether you have learned anything from the course and to grade you according to your mastery of the material. Your high school teachers might have considered exams as “another part of the learning process.” In college, however, by the time you take the exam, the professor assumes that the learning process is over and that you are prepared to show what you know. It is a good idea, therefore, to go into the examination actually knowing something! Below is a comprehensive strategy to help you prepare for an exam and perhaps positively amaze and surprise your professor.

Another American high school tradition that does not prepare you well for college examination taking is the obsession among “professional educators” (that means people who teach Education for a living or tell K-12 teachers what to do) that exams should only cover some infinitesimally small period of time or amount of material. The Louisiana Dept. of Education believes that the amount of material learned from Monday through Thursday is just the right amount of knowledge for students to be tested upon on Friday. This practice assumes that American high school students are incapable of remembering relatively complex information for more than four days! Of course, it also trains students to retain information for about four days. Then students go off to college where their professors assume that they are capable of remembering material for at least a third, or so, of a semester, and in most cases longer. In order to succeed in college you will have to prove your high school teachers wrong, and your professors are right! So let’s look at some strategies that will improve your chances of success on college examinations.

Long Term Preparation for Examinations

- ◆ **Begin reviewing early.** This will give your brain time to get comfortable with the information. Ideally, the first time you review your material should be the day of the first lecture. If you take four pages of notes in each of your professor’s daily lectures and there are three lectures a week, that makes twelve pages a week. If the exam covers five weeks of lectures, that’s sixty pages of lecture notes for the exam. That’s an awful lot of material to try to learn the night before the exam, or even a week before the exam. But if you have been studying and reviewing the material every day, by exam time, you will probably know it!
- ◆ **Conduct short daily review sessions.** You can ease into more intense review sessions prior to major exams. Every day that you take notes, you should review those notes for the first time.

◆ **Read text assignments before lectures**

This will help you identify concepts that the professor considers important and that are already somewhat familiar. Text assignments might be online materials as well as the text book or books.

◆ **Review notes immediately after lectures.** This will help you identify information that you do not understand while the lecture is still fresh in your memory. When you review immediately, you'll also have time to clarify information with other students.

◆ **Transcribe notes after lectures.** This gives you more opportunity to practice the material of the lecture, and gives you a better-organized and written record of the lectures when you review later in more depth for the exam.

◆ **Review with a group.** This will enable you to cover important material that you may overlook on your own. *But*, a study group is only as useful as the sum of its best and most contributive members. If you join a study group *but have nothing to contribute* and spend your time sitting around waiting for the answers to come from the other students, you really won't get much out of the experience except some pretty annoyed classmates. By the same token, if you are *the only member of a study group that is prepared*, and knows the material, then you are not a group member, but a tutor, and you should either leave that study group or send them a bill for your services!

◆ **Conduct a major review early enough** to allow for a visit to the instructor during his office hours if necessary.

◆ **Break up the study tasks into manageable chunks**, especially during major reviews prior to exams. Studying three hours in the morning and three in the evening will be more effective than studying at a six-hour stretch. *Studying while you are mentally fatigued is a complete waste of time.*

◆ **Get finished with your preparation** at least 24 hours before the examination; 48 hours is actually better. Cramming is a lousy way to study for retention. Psychologists, who make it their business to study such things, claim that, after intensive study, learned information sort of bounces around in the brain getting comfortable, trying out the furniture, checking to see what's in the fridge (metaphorically speaking), and integrating itself with whatever else happens to be around up there, so that information thus integrated is easier to recall, to analyze, and to synthesize if it is given a chance to mellow for a day or so before the exam.

◆ **Study the most difficult material when you are alert!**

Specific Preparation for an Examination

1. Learning

- ◆ Take good notes in your class lectures. Every day in my classes, I see at least a few people who are not taking notes in class, at least I see them until they are devastated by the first exam, then they usually drop the course, and probably move on to fail someone else's class.
- ◆ Review and/or transcribe your notes soon after the class lecture.
- ◆ Review notes briefly before the next class.
- ◆ Schedule some time at the end of the week for a longer review.
- ◆ The more often you review your notes, the more likely you are to learn stuff from them!

2. Reviewing

- ◆ Organize your notes, texts, and assignments according to what will be on the test and what kind of test you will be taking.
- ◆ Estimate the hours you'll need to review materials. A good rule of thumb for successful class preparation is that you spend ***at least three hours out of class for every hour in class***. This is not “cram time.” It should be spread throughout the course on a daily basis and should also include a couple of hours of weekly review and at least one large chunk of review time a couple of days before the exams.
- ◆ Draw up a schedule that blocks out units of time and material.
- ◆ Test yourself on the material.
- ◆ Finish your studying at least 24 hours before the exam. For some people it is actually better to finish exam preparation as much as 48 hours before the exam. This gives you time to process and digest the material (see psychologists & metaphorical furniture above). Those psychologists tell us that college students who have the most success on examinations often do not study at all the night before the exam, and go out and have a relaxing dinner, and an early bedtime because they are already prepared and confident in their preparation at least 24 hours before the exam.
- ◆ Pay particular attention to any study guides that the instructor makes available before the exam!
- ◆ Generate a list of possible questions you would ask if you were making the exam, then see if you can answer the questions.
- ◆ Pay particular attention to clues that indicate an instructor might test for a particular idea, such as when an instructor:
 - says something more than once,
 - writes material on the board,
 - or states that, **"This will be on the test."**

Examination Formats and Associated Strategies

History examinations will generally consist of some combination of three kinds of questions: multiple choice, identification of terms, and essays. Each requires some degree of memorization, analysis and synthesis.

Multiple-Choice Questions are actually the most dangerous questions for the unprepared student because the answer will either be right or wrong; there is no “wobble room” to allow you to get partial credit for the question. Some multiple-choice questions simply require that you associate some thing A with a thing B:

- In 1776, _____ wrote the *Declaration of Independence*.
- | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|---------------|
| a. Thomas Paine | b. Thomas Jefferson | c. John Adams |
| d. Thomas Gage | e. none of the above | |

These are the simplest of all possible questions, but they require that you actually **know the answer!** This is where memorization of the terms in the lectures, texts and other sources will pay off.

Other multiple-choice questions require some degree of analysis. For instance:

The “Price Revolution,” which took place in Western Europe between 1500 and 1650 consisted of all of the following EXCEPT...

- a. a fall in real wages.
- b. a dramatic increase in the cost of manufactured goods.
- c. a dramatic increase in the price of food.
- d. a catastrophic shortage of gold and silver.
- e. all are factors in the Price Revolution.

This question requires that you know, first, what the Price Revolution was (memorization). Next, you need to know the various factors that characterized the event (memorization again, AND some analysis). Finally you need to **analyze** the possible answer choices to find the one that doesn’t belong. If answers “a” through “d” are all true, then the correct answer would be “e.” In this case, the Price Revolution was marked by an *overabundance* of gold and silver from the New World in the European economy during the period, not a shortage, so the correct answer is “d.” These questions are more difficult since they require a more “in-depth” understanding of the thing examined in the question, but they still rest primarily on your memorization skills for success.

Answering Identification Questions

Identification questions test you on your knowledge of the terms in the lectures, texts, and other materials of the course. You are asked to, “Briefly identify and show the significance of” a series of terms that could be persons, places, events, things or ideas. In order to receive full credit for these you must define/describe the term, place it in a chronological framework, AND indicate why the term is historically important. If you only define the term:

Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin.

or you only explain its significance:

Marbury v. Madison created the precedent for judicial review of national legislation by the Supreme Court.

You will receive only partial credit. Below are a few examples of “Ids” which should receive full credit. **NOTE** that the answers do not have to be longer than a few sentences, and that you do not have to include everything that pertains to the term. You **do** have to show that you understand the term, and its historical implications.

Eli Whitney was an inventor in the early 1800s, who invented the cotton gin. The cotton gin made it possible to spread the cotton economy across the American South, which revived slavery.

A few more examples follow. The identification term is underlined:

Marbury v. Madison: Around 1800. Marbury was one of John Adams' Midnight Judges. Madison refused to serve his commission, so Marbury sued for it in the Supreme Court under the Judiciary Act. Chief Justice Marshall decided that the Judiciary Act was unconstitutional, and thus, null and void. This created the precedent that the Supreme Court could review the constitutionality of federal legislation.

Pharaoh was the title of the king of ancient Egypt. Egyptians believed that he was also a god (Horus or Ra), and that his duties as king included both mortal and supernatural activities. It was believed that he controlled the rising and setting of the sun, the annual flooding of the Nile River, and also more worldly stuff like building projects, tax collection, defense, etc.

Sometimes a person's significance is a part of their identification; they are significant because of the very things that you will mention to identify them:

Sir Francis Drake was a famous English Sea Dog in the 1500s who attacked Spanish ships in the New World, became the first English sea captain to circumnavigate the globe, and was rewarded for his activities by Queen Elizabeth I.

Roger Williams was a Puritan minister in New England in the 1600s who was kicked out of Massachusetts because of his religious views and later founded the colony of Rhode Island.

Note that none of the answers presented above go to more than a few sentences, and yet they each present the reader with the idea that the writer knows the material.

Answering Essay Questions

Essay questions are the most complex of the kinds of questions that you are likely to get on history exams. Essay questions test your ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate some complex question. These questions may ask you to write essays that are:

- ◆ **Descriptive**, asking you to identify key personalities, to define important concepts, or to describe how some significant event or decision unfolded in history. For instance:

Describe the role that religion has played in the period covered in this course. How have religions changed and developed from the beginnings of civilization through the Middle Ages?

- ◆ **Explanatory**, requiring you to explain why events occurred, why certain personalities were important in the unfolding of those events, or why certain particular decisions were made and what effect they had on history.

In an inscription known as the *Res Gestae*, Augustus described his position within the Roman constitution thus: “I stood before all in rank, but I had power no greater than those who were my colleagues in any magistracy.” What did Augustus mean by this? Was he being entirely honest?

- ◆ **Comparative**, asking you to compare or contrast ideas, policies, or personalities, and explain their differences or similarities. “Compare,” means, how are the things similar; “contrast” means, how are they different.

Compare and contrast Athenian society with Spartan society in about 500 B.C.

Your essay is, in effect, an argument. You will be expected to state the thesis of your argument and to present the evidence that led you to that thesis in a clear and distinct manner. An argument is based on evidence, not on emotions, feelings, faith or any other bits of therapeutic or religious claptrap that seems to be in vogue these days. Sentences that start out with “I believe,” belong in church. Sentences that contain phrases like, “it makes me feel...” or “he was a wonderful man...” certainly have no place in a history essay no matter what your beloved high school Civics teacher in the tie-dyed tee shirt and worn Birkenstocks might have said.

Remember that an essay is also a piece of prose. It is not a list or an outline. You should use complete sentences, acceptable grammar and correct spelling. A useful blueprint for writing an essay question is called the “five paragraph method.” Although you may not be able to complete your essay using only five paragraphs, nevertheless, this “five paragraph” approach to writing essays may provide you with a helpful guide.

The Five Paragraph Approach to Essay Writing

- ◆ **The Opening Paragraph:** It should contain a *thesis sentence* that states what you intend to prove. It may restate all or part of the question, but should not quote the question verbatim. The last sentence in this paragraph should lead the reader into the topics that you intend to cover.
- ◆ **The Topic Paragraphs:** Each paragraph should explore another piece of *evidence that supports your thesis*. Paragraphs should begin with an introduction that clearly states what you will talk about in that paragraph. Next you should explore the subject as fully as possible. It is very important that you state clearly how this *evidence* is linked to your *thesis*. Finally, you need some closing sentence that confirms your conclusion for the particular topic and, if possible, leads the reader into the next topic paragraph. You should present at least three pieces of evidence in this way, each with its own paragraph.

- ◆ **The Closing Paragraph:** This paragraph should restate your *argument* and *conclusions* in *concise* terms. The closing sentence should invite the reader to see how the event, problem, or whatever, that you have discussed is historically significant.

Now, I'm not sure if you were counting, but the above seems to indicate that you will actually have to write a page or two in order to present a complete and acceptable essay answer! An essay question is not a "short answer" question or an identify question. It asks you to present a fairly complex explanation of something, and *that is not possible in one or two paragraphs!* I have had students; usually when they are begging for a higher grade, argue that it is "possible" to give an "A" answer to essay questions on the exams in five or six sentences. I must admit that they are correct. It is "possible." It is also "possible" that I could run a three-minute mile without my heart exploding, or that I had a profound and spiritually uplifting relationship with Angelina Jolie before she met Billy Bob Thornton (her love interest before Brad Pitt) – lots of things are "possible," but likely, *I don't think so!*

So, how does one prepare to write essay exam questions? First, in my class, there will be no surprises because you should have already seen the questions, and therefore had ample opportunity to prepare them. That sounds really easy, but I should add that you will have seen at least **six** essay questions in advance, and only three will be available on the exam. That being the case, you should use the questions as a general study guide for the whole exam, and also, you should prepare each essay question so that you will know the answers well before you walk into the classroom to take the exam. Here are some pointers for preparation in writing essay exams.

Exam Essay Questions and Answers

Let's take a look at a couple of actual essay questions that occasionally show up on my examinations. The first is on one of those happy topics of the Middle Ages – the Black Death. First, let's examine the question:

Describe the European epidemic called the Black Death. What was it? When was it and where did it go? What were its immediate effects? In what ways did the epidemic bring about change in the social, economic and religious fabric of Late Medieval Europe?

You are asked to do several things in this question. a) Describe the epidemic called the Black Death in terms of what it was, when it was and where it was. b) Discuss the *immediate* effects of the plague in terms of Medieval society, economics and religion. Finally, c) you are asked to describe the longer-term effects in the areas mentioned. The question asks you to examine, not only the course of the epidemic in Europe, but also a series of causes and effects in the European economy, society, and religion that were all begun by the ravages of the plague. Below are three attempts at answering this question.

Essay I – This one got an F

The Black Death killed 50-60% of the population in the West. It was caused by a bacteria in fleas. These fleas were spread all over Europe by rats. At this time, rats were everywhere (it was not the cleanest time in history, it was the worst). Black Death caused fever, pain in the joints, and swollen throat.

The Black Death was easily used by religious figures to scare people into doing what they wanted. Everyone knew they must change their ways.

Essay I gives some vague coverage to the first part of the question, (describe the epidemic), but it contains no real analysis of the rest of the question aside from a vague reference to “religious figures” trying to use the epidemic to scare people (as if the threat of catching the bubonic plague weren’t scary enough). The essay has no depth, no analysis, and even some of the actual facts are erroneous (the plague did not kill half of the European population). It gives the grader the impression that the student did not prepare at any level for the exam.

Essay II – this one got a C (from a kindly Teaching Assistant; I would have given a D)

The Black Death was the first widespread epidemic to hit Western Europe. It was a plague that was brought about from a bacterial infection carried in fleas on rats. There were two types, bubonic and pneumonic plagues. The bubonic was the most common; it was characterized by fever, joint pain, swelling lymph nodes, and spots on the skin caused by heavy internal bleeding. The pneumonic plague was an airborne bacterial infection of the lungs. It was characterized by a cough, bloody sputum, fever and death. The disease came from Asia and went from Sicily and Italy, upward into Europe. People became more religious during the time of the Black Death because they believed that they were being punished by God for their sins. So, in turn, the people begged for forgiveness from God.

Essay II received a somewhat better score from the Teaching Assistant than I would have given it, but it is still quite a bit better than Essay I. The description of the epidemic, its symptoms and short-term effects is more detailed. Again, however, the second part of the essay, the analysis of long – term effects is pretty lousy. The essay contains an acceptable fraction of the religious effects, but ignores social and economic consequences. It is less vague in terms of what was written, but still missing important elements.

Essay III – this one received an A

Before the coming of the Black Death, Western Europe was prospering and its population was rising. In 1347, a grain boat from the Black Sea stopped in Italy. Aboard the boat were rats infested with fleas that carried the deadly Black Death bacteria. The bubonic plague first infected people in the cities of Northern Italy. Symptoms included high fever, black blotches under the skin, bleeding, and death.

From 1347 through the 1350s, the Black Death spread from Italy through France, Germany, Austria, and Spain, and eventually into Britain. As it spread, it killed from 25-40% of the population. People began to assume that their days were numbered. Some found retreat in the Church, others consumed themselves with debauchery.

Economically, times were hard because there were few workers to work the fields. Employers had to pay higher prices to workers than before because there were fewer workers and those that remained demanded more. The immediate economic result of the plague was an increase in prices and a shortage of goods.

After the plague ended, the economy of Western Europe underwent a great deal of change as a result of the many deaths caused by it. The population was lower, but those who survived were wealthier than they had been because they had inherited the wealth of those who did not survive. The survivors had more disposable income that they could use to buy stuff. This stimulated the revival of trade and the growth of manufacturing. More peasants began to work in the towns making consumer goods. Since there was a growing demand for workers, peasants began to demand higher wages. A series of peasant uprisings took place in many cities in Europe.

Increasingly, also, the expansion of trade and manufacturing required people in Europe to keep work schedules that depended on the hours of the day rather than the seasons of the year (agrarian calendar). In the past the hours of the day had been dominated by the Church. The day was divided up into times for worship and prayer. Now the hours of the day were secularized into work hours, free hours and sleep hours. This new secular way of seeing time was more modern and more human centered and less religious. It was marked by the appearance of clocks in the squares and church spires of Western Europe.

In general, the Black Death stimulated the European economy within a century after it had come and gone. It also led to modern concepts of work and time, and more secular attitudes about life that would become the standard in the next centuries.

Essay III is truly outstanding. The writer covered every aspect of the question in some detail. The analysis follows the question so that it is easy for the grader to make the transitions from one part to the next. Chiefly, the writer answered each aspect of the question with specifics, evidence and clarity. Work like this tells the grader that the writer knew the information necessary to write the essay and was able to take the analytical steps with that information in order to supply a reasonably complete and complex argument. Look over this essay again and observe how it covers the question before you move on to the next one.

The Next Question:

How did the evangelical fervor of the Second Great Awakening contribute to the various reform movements of the first half of the 19th century? What themes of the Great Awakening stimulated a reforming spirit?

This one is from first semester American History and it is about the reform movements that grew out of an American evangelical movement in the 1820s called the Second Great Awakening. This question also asks the writer to analyze the cause and effect relationship between a religious movement and the various social reform movements of the period. This is a pretty easy question that requires the writer to a) describe the Great Awakening in a general way; b) make the necessary connection between the themes of the Great Awakening and the reform movements, and c) identify a few of those particular reforms within the context of Great Awakening ideas.

Essay I – This one is really *ghastly*. It sends a clear message to the grader. That message is, “I know absolutely nothing.” That is never a good message to send!

The Second Great Awakening involved the idea that people could be part of protestant churches, and still be in the catholic church. This idea brought people together as opposed to divided by religion. Deism was a theme of the Second Great Awakening. It stated that God does exist, but after he created the universe, he no longer was involved with humans.

Essay I is easy to grade because there is not a single statement in it that has anything to do with the question, is factually correct, or even makes any sense. It receives an F only because we don't use any letters that actually go lower. It is, in a word, *dreadful*!

Essay II – This one is also a poor attempt, though not as irredeemably awful as Essay I. It is longer because the writer appears to have employed the “beating around the bush” system. The only problem is that the student had so little knowledge of the subject that she had VERY little bush to beat around.

The evangelical fervor of the Second Great Awakening contributed to reform movements because whether those people wanted it to or not, it had some kind of effect on their lives. The evangelical fervor was so strong and powerful that it influenced people to do something with their lives instead of just sitting still. Back in those times women were just working at home, and when them and their husbands split the woman didn't know whet to do. That's where the fervor came in, the revivals were like energy pills, they made the women stop sitting down worrying herself to death, and do something. Women started getting jobs in factories and all sorts of other jobs that they wouldn't ever get. It also was a place for young men who weren't entitled to a fortune who didn't know where their next meal was coming from. It inspired people, it gave people faith. At a black revival it even sparked a plan for a rebellion and for them to attack Richmond.

This one, while not as bad as the first one, still earns an F. It is factually flawed, in so far as there are any facts that can even be found within this collection of vague statements. Note that the first two sentences of the essay

appear to be two ways of saying the same absolute nothing. The Awakening had “some kind” of effect on people’s lives; what kind? What ideas stimulated Americans toward reform? There *was* actually a women’s movement associated with antebellum reform, but it was, in fact, the opposite of what the writer says. The “Cult of Domesticity” *encouraged* middle class women to *stay home* and take care of the domestic needs of the family and avoid the sordid male dominated world of business and commerce. There is a fair amount of emotional drivel in this essay as well. The fervor of the Awakening changed people “whether they liked it or not.” People were “inspired;” the movement acted like “energy pills”! None of that really means anything.

So, what does a good one look like?

Essay III – An A essay.

The evangelical fervor of the Second Great Awakening not only called for all men to strive for perfection but to assist others toward human perfection as well. It stirred the emotions of its followers to become better human beings, to be more worthy of salvation, to act to perfect American society.

Some evangelical leaders demanded abstinence from alcohol, which they believed caused a host of personal and social evils. They argued that intemperance caused ill health in drinkers, caused men to abuse their families, and represented a social ill that threatened the fabric of the republic.

A women’s movement grew out of the Awakening that led to an idea called the “Cult of Domesticity.” The movement advocated that women should stay at home and care for home and family. They should avoid factory work, which was too hazardous and unsuitable for the “delicate constitutions” of women. They should avoid the sordid and corrupting influences of business and commerce, where men smoked cigars, swore and lied to each other as necessary evils that were a daily part of business. This “women’s movement” advocated a domestic role for women, yet also came to promote the role of a woman as the center of the family and home as just as important as the masculine roles in commerce and factory. Women, they argued should, thus, have the same rights as men, including the right to vote.

The Awakening came at a time when the North and South were beginning to split over the question of slavery and its morality. Many northern activists began to support the abolition of slavery as a moral evil and a blot on the fabric of the Republic. Needless to say, the abolition movement didn’t catch on in the South, but the movement grew in the North, complicating an already volatile political and economic environment.

The reform movements that grew out of the Second Great Awakening changed America for the better. It made Americans believe that they could change and perfect the people of the Republic, that the chosen people of the “New Israel” could meet the challenge of their God by washing away the sins of the nation.

This is a very good essay! It follows the “five-paragraph” model. In the first paragraph, the writer creates the link between the evangelism of the Second Great Awakening and the reform movements – the idea of human perfection – that people can be saved through the perfection of their behavior. Paragraphs 2-4 introduce the reader to three reform movements of the period, temperance, domestic reform, and abolition, and in each case the writer shows, briefly, the perfectionist ideal that helped form each movement. Finally, the writer wraps the essay up with a brief conclusion that redraws the parallel between the religious and republican values and the spirit of antebellum reform. Nicely done!

I hope that these essays will give you some kind of idea about what is an acceptable essay and what isn't. I could have given lots more examples—some essays that received B, C and D grades as well as just As and Fs, but in the interest of brevity, I thought it best to present you with two questions and then allow you to see the worst and best – the Good, the Bad, and in one case, the Ugly. Now here are a few tips that should help you write essay exams.

Before writing out the exam:

Set up a time schedule to answer each question and to review/edit all questions

- ◆ If three questions are to be answered in sixty minutes, allow yourself only twenty minutes for each.
- ◆ If questions are “weighted,” prioritize that into your time allocation for each question. Do the one that is worth the most points first.
- ◆ When the time is up for one question, stop writing, leave space, and begin the next question. The incomplete answers can be completed during the review time.
- ◆ Three incomplete answers will usually receive more credit than only one complete one.

Read through the questions once and note if you have any choice in answering questions. Pay attention to how the question is phrased, or to the “directives”, or words such as “compare,” “contrast,” “criticize,” etc. If you are well prepared, then answers will come to mind immediately for some questions. It is more likely an answer will appear in your mind if you are very well versed in the material.

Write down key words, listings, etc, as they are fresh in mind. Otherwise these ideas may be blocked (or be unavailable) when the time comes to write the later questions. This will reduce “clutching” or panic (anxiety, actually fear which disrupts thoughts).

Before attempting to answer a question, put it in your own words.

Now compare your version with the original. Do they mean the same thing? If they don't, you've misread the question. You'll be surprised how often they don't agree.

Think before you write: Make a brief outline for each question. Number the items in the order you will discuss them.

Get right to the point. State your main point in the first sentence. Use your first paragraph to provide an overview of your essay. Use the rest of your essay to discuss these points in more detail. Back up your points with specific information, examples, or quotations from your readings and notes.

Teachers are influenced (and generally pleasantly surprised) by the compactness, completeness and clarity of a well-organized answer. Beating around the bush – writing huge amounts of stuff in the hope that the right answer will somehow splatter onto the page— is time-consuming and usually futile. The grader has neither the time nor the inclination to read vast ramblings that only show that the writer didn't know the answer! To know a little and to present that little well is, by and large, superior to knowing much and presenting it poorly (and, of course, both are preferable to knowing absolutely nothing).

Writing & Answering: The observations below are meant to supplement rather than replace the “five-paragraph format” that we have already looked at.

Begin with a strong first sentence that states the main idea of your essay. Continue this first paragraph by presenting key points.

Develop your argument

- ◆ **Begin each paragraph** with a key point from the introduction.
- ◆ **Develop each point** in a complete paragraph.
- ◆ **Use transitions**, or enumerate, to connect your points.
- ◆ **Hold to your time** allocation and organization.
- ◆ **Qualify answers when in doubt.** It is better to say "toward the end of the 19th century" than to say "in 1894" when you can't remember, whether it's 1884 or 1894. In many cases, the approximate time is all that is necessary; unfortunately 1894, though approximate, may be incorrect, and will usually be marked accordingly.

Summarize in your last paragraph Restate your central idea and indicate why it is important.

After you have finished or have a few minutes left in the exam, review your answers:

- ◆ **Complete questions left incomplete**, but allow time to review all questions.
- ◆ **Review, edit, correct** misspellings, incomplete words and sentences, miswritten dates and numbers.
- ◆ **Not enough time?** Outline your answers that are left. This way you will at least get partial credit.

Conclusion

This concludes my little guide to preparation and study for college history survey courses. I hope that it will do you some good. If you follow some of the tips herein, you will probably do better in the course than if you don't. Remember that, in at least one respect, your hippie civics teacher was right. Every one of us is somewhat different, so there is no single strategy for study success that fits every student. Some strategies however are essential. The "*three hour out per one hour in*" tip is extremely important, and you should make it a doctrine of faith for every undergraduate course that you take. Now, you might say, "I know me, and I know I only need one hour outside of class per hour in lecture." Perhaps you are correct. The proof will be in the pudding – let's see how your test scores bear out your theory. You might say, "I never had to study in high school and I made really good grades!" That may say more about the standards of your high school than it does about your academic abilities. It is not terribly unusual in some high school systems in the U.S. for students to receive good grades and a diploma if they continue to breath consistently for four years. You should not expect that your college experience will be like that. In the end, how successful you are in your college career is entirely up to you. Perhaps some of these tips will help. They certainly won't do you any good if you don't try them.

A quick note on sources for this guide. Most of the content comes from my own fevered imagination, and some of it has appeared in Benjamin Price, *History 2055: The United States to 1865, 12 Assignments and 2 Exams. A Correspondence Course Study Guide* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1999). Some of the text came from <http://studygs.net>, which offers a comprehensive collection of study strategies and is well worth a visit. Much of the content herein reflects the opinions of the Dr. Benjamin Price and not necessarily the views of Southeastern Louisiana University, the SELU Department of History and Political Science, Louisiana State University, the LSU History Department, the Louisiana Educators' Association, the American Federation of Teachers, ANY college of education, and so forth. Material shamelessly plagiarized from various web sources should be covered under the aegis of "fair use for educational purposes." Essay answers are the genuine articles taken from examinations that I have given in my courses at Louisiana State University and Southeastern Louisiana University.