

APPENDIX C

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Short Writing Assignments

In many history courses you may be asked to write short essays, often on very specific topics. For example, we frequently ask our students to write short essays—usually no more than about 500 words (or two printed pages)—about a portion of reading we have assigned for a course. These essays, and many similar assignments, are intended to encourage thoughtful reading of some document, historical essay, or even a journal article and to stimulate careful consideration of it in a written essay. Often these assignments are made well in advance so you may plan your reading and studying accordingly. Sometimes they may be announced just prior to your reading or studying the material about which you are expected to write. On other occasions, very similar questions may be the basis for essay examinations, requiring you to reflect seriously on what you have been studying.

One such advanced notice assignments we have used is based on students reading an excerpt from the royal chronicle of the Christian monarch, Amda Seyon, who ruled Ethiopia from 1314 to 1344. We ask students to write a 500 word essay comparing Amda Seyon's efforts in resisting Islamic invasions to similar situations in Europe and elsewhere at about the same time. In another assignment, sometimes introduced in class as an immediate prelude to discussion, we invite students to study the famous Jan van Eyck painting of 1434, *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*. Then we ask them to write a short essay about the objects van Eyck

depicts and how they offer evidence concerning the social standing of merchants in medieval Europe.¹

These brief essays are somewhat different from other kinds of (usually longer) essays we have discussed in this book; they are actually more like essay examinations, to be written within a given time in circumstances where you must rely on your memory, usually without the aid of notes, books, or the reference room of a library. Essay exams test what you know and how you think about what you know. They are to some degree artificial creations; historians usually do not write under the strictures of the standard essay exam format. They write and revise, go back to their sources, and revise some more. So essay exams frequently are the most comprehensive test of how much you have learned in a history course. They are so much a part of the Western academic scene that you doubtless already have much experience with them. The best examinations allow you to show your knowledge about the facts, demonstrate some recall of sources for these facts, and prove that you can make judgments about them.

Perhaps the best way to prepare to write any of these short essays, including exams, is to study the readings you have been assigned, attend class diligently, and take good notes. The best way to take notes—from classes or readings—is to jot down important concepts, using keywords and phrases but not trying to take down every word. As soon as you can after class or a period of reading, sit down at your computer or your notepad and, using these original notes as your foundation, write out an account of what the professor said or what you read. When something is unclear, ask what the point was; use reference books, and especially your textbooks, to make sure you understand the information. All this takes time, of course, and college students are busy, many of them working at jobs to support themselves in school. It is hard to take the time to go over notes shortly after taking them. Yet if you force yourself to do so, you will discover that

you may save time in the long run. You will impress the information on your brain as you write out your notes about it. You will become acquainted with your own notes, and when time for writing a short essay assignment or taking an essay exam draws near, you can face it without cramming just ahead of time because you will already know most of the material. You might get together with classmates and come up with a collection of class notes—from lectures and your reading—that you have all cooperated in putting together. In our experience, students who study together and talk about the class are more likely to make the highest grades on their essays. In our opinion, this is not deceitful but rather a reflection of the cooperative spirit of much historical work.

If you receive the question for a short essay ahead of time, study it. If you only receive the question shortly before you begin to write, you can still be prepared for what questions you do receive. Pay particular attention to what your professor emphasizes in class. Try to think what questions you would ask if you were that professor. Remember, professors usually feel that if they have spent a good long time discussing a subject in class, it is only fair to expect students to know something about it! If you write out questions of your own, you will be surprised at how well you sometimes can read your professor's mind. Once you have the question for your essay, follow the directions carefully. *Read the questions.* We have always been surprised at how often students will read questions carelessly and write an essay having almost nothing to do with the topic.

In looking at the questions, determine what mode of historical writing each of them calls for. Your primary task may be to tell a story: “Trace the career of Martin Luther from the Indulgence Controversy of 1517 to his appearance before the Diet of Worms in 1521.” You will need to narrate a sequence of events from 1517 to 1521, being careful to choose the most

important steps in this part of Luther's career. Or you may be asked to explain the historical significance of an event, a document, or a person: "Discuss the significance of the heroic image of Sunyatsen in the developing ideologies of Chinese Communism and its 'Nationalist' opponents." To answer this question you must prepare an exposition that will first explain the "heroic image" of Sunyatsen as he became the leader in the effort to free the Chinese from European imperialist control. Then you will need to tell what his program for China included and how it changed as first the Communists under Mao Zedong and then the rival Kuomintang Party under Chiang Kai-shek took over his message for their own ends. You can complete your exposition by indicating why and how these changes were significant in China's history.

Related to questions about significance are comparison questions which many history professors are fond of asking. In effect, the professor gets two answers from you for the price of one question! And you are required to demonstrate the flexibility of your mind and the quantity of your knowledge about two portions of the course material. For example: "Compare Thomas More's *Utopia* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*, both written in 1516." Again, you will need to write an exposition, in this case one that explains the key ideas in both books, recognizing that both More and Machiavelli were preoccupied with reform. You will also want to emphasize that there were differences in the kind of reform each wanted. And you can conclude by evaluating how each reform program affected the world of medieval Europe. In making this comparison you can, in addition, explain how radically different two people, living at the same time in similar cultures, can be so different.

Other short essay questions may ask that you argue a point. These essays are difficult and challenging. You might given a question much like this: "Which African national leader of the 1960s provided the best program of government for his nation in the two decades following its

independence from colonial control? What arguments would you make to support your choice?” Whether you select Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, or another African leader, you would need to construct your essay making a plausible case for whomever you decide to write about. But remember, historians seldom prove anything beyond any doubt. You cannot resolve every uncertainty and eliminate all contrary opinions in the limited space you have for a short essay, and certainly not in the few minutes you have to write an examination. You can, however, show that you know the material, have thought about it intelligently, and can offer a cogent rationale for what it means. As always in an argument, you should show some familiarity with viewpoints contrary to your own and provide a few words about why you reject them.

Among our favorite short essay questions are those asking students to analyze an important text. Your professor may give you a paragraph from a noteworthy historical document and ask you to write about what it means. Such questions could also be more focused than that. One question that we recently posed for students was this:

The European philosopher, Francis Bacon, observed in the early seventeenth century that “the force and virtue and consequences of discoveries...are to be seen nowhere more conspicuously than these three which were unknown to the ancients...namely, printing, gunpowder, and the compass. For these have changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world.” Would you agree with Bacon that the development and spread of these technological innovations had such a profound impact on world history?

This question not only requires a student to think carefully about some very specific things, but also demands consideration of their significance. One of our students, Bill Hembrook, wrote a short essay answering this question in a recent examination for a course on “World History to 1500”:

All three of these discoveries were brought to the West from China where they had been invented during the Tang and Song dynasties. Once known there, they played a significant role in advancing Europe’s

power around the globe after 1500, just as Bacon suggested.

The gunpowder chemistry originally developed in China was not a very effective military weapon. It was brought to the West with the Mongol conquerors, as Bentley and Ziegler describe in *Traditions and Encounters* [the course textbook], where the technology was refined and the first crude cannons were used in battle. Later sailors and explorers from Europe were able to advance the technology to assist in conquering people in their explorations and empire building, such as the Portuguese in Africa, the Spanish in Central, South, and North America, and the British in India.

The magnetic compass was also invented in China but, as the text also points out, was spread first throughout the Indian Ocean by Indian and African sailors who used the compass and the trade winds to facilitate a great deal of trade throughout the Indian Ocean, from northern Africa, eastern Africa, and India on to southeast Asia and China. Eventually the knowledge got to the European navigators, who used it to explore the rest of the oceans of the world and finally tie the whole world together. From then on trade and exchange of ideas, diseases, customs, and religions could be exchanged from anywhere in the world to any other part of the globe.

Printing, the text again notes, was invented in China, but taken from its Asian roots and advanced by Europeans. Printing helped agriculture improve in Europe in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries by spreading information about new techniques on raising different crops. The printing of the Bible also helped spread the faith and unify the Christian world. Europe was united by Christianity, with the church exerting great authority over the people through scriptural authority, common beliefs, and church practices.

Europe had been a fractured area politically, and backward compared to other great empires of the world especially after the collapse of the Roman Empire. By taking these three inventions and adapting them for their needs and advancement, European countries became the discoverers and creators of great empires of the post-1500 world.

Notice how the author begins with a short paragraph offering a thesis statement that refers specifically to the text quoted within the question. He follows this with separate paragraphs on each of the three discoveries Bacon mentions, analyzing the significance of each. And he concludes his argument by referring again to his thesis. He also mentions the textbook assigned

for the course, where he found much of his information; this is much the same as the citations to sources you would provide in a longer essay.

Achieving this balance in any short essay requires study and preparation in advance, and then careful planning when you first receive the question. We encourage students to jot down quickly words and phrases they remember concerning the question, and then to reorganize that collage of ideas into a basic outline. For an examination especially, you must do this quickly and also carefully judge how much time you can spend on each part of an examination. Take care not to spend too much of your time organizing—or on writing one part of an essay or answering only one of several questions asked on an exam. After completing your college education you will discover that allocating time is one of the most essential tasks of a human being; efficient use of time in writing examination essays is good training for what will come later on.

Managing your time and the space available is, of course, an important part of writing any history essay. Yet even in a very short essay, whether during an exam or not, you need to be as specific as possible. You must name people, dates, documents, places—answering the basic historian’s questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? These questions should haunt your mind, and you should always be trying to answer them as you read and write. Plan your work carefully to be certain you can complete those tasks. Doing so will help you prepare to answer any history question. You likely will discover that time spent considering them—even before you know what questions you may need to write about—offers you an opportunity to shape your knowledge, integrate various parts of it, and produce an essay (even on an examination!) that may be not only a source of pleasure but also of pride.

As you complete any short history essay, including those you may write for an essay examination, read over what you have written before you submit it. Take enough time to

consider the key questions below.

Writer's Checklist

- 4 Have I sharply focused my topic?
- 4 Have I made a clearly stated argument?
- 4 Have I carefully acknowledged the sources of ideas and evidence?
- 4 Have I included my own original thoughts?
- 4 Have I expressed myself clearly?

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1 Copies of both these documents and introductory discussions of each can be found in Dennis Sherman et al., *World Civilizations: Sources, Images, and Interpretations*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 230–231, 243–244.

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