One of the biggest pitfalls that prevent students from earning the contextualization point is that they are too brief or vague.  In general, it would be difficult for students to earn the point if they are writing only a sentence or two.  Early in the year, I assigned students a DBQ based on the following prompt:

*Evaluate the extent in which the Civil War was a turning point in the lives of African Americans in the United States.  Use the documents and your knowledge of the years 1860-1877 to construct your response.*

This was the third DBQ we had written, and students were now getting brave enough to move beyond a thesis and document analysis and started attempting to tackle the contextualization point. However, the attempts were all over the map.

One student wrote: **“*The Civil War was a bloody event that led to the death of thousands of Americans”.***

Of course this is a true statement, but is extremely vague.  What led to the Civil War?  Why was it so deadly?  Without any specific detail, this student could not earn the contextualization point.

Another student wrote: **“*Slavery had existed for hundreds of years in the United States.  It was a terrible thing that had to be abolished.”***

Again, this is a drive-by attempt at earning contextualization.  It mentions things that are true, but lacks any meaningful details or explanation that would demonstrate understanding of the time period in discussion.  What led to the beginning of slavery in the colonies?  How did it develop?  What made it so horrible?  How did individuals resist and protest slavery?  These are the types of details that would add meaning to contextualization.

One student nailed it.  She wrote: ***“The peculiar institution of slavery had been a part of America’s identity since the founding of the original English colony at Jamestown.  In the early years, compromise was key to avoiding the moral question, but as America entered the mid 19th century sectional tensions and crises with popular sovereignty, Kansas, and fugitive slaves made the issue increasingly unavoidable.  When the Civil War began, the war was transformed from one to simply save the Union to a battle for the future of slavery and freedom in the United States.”***

**Now THAT is contextualization!** It gives specific details about the beginning of slavery and its development.  It discusses attempts at compromise, but increasing sectional tensions that led to the Civil War.  The writer paints a vivid and clear picture of the situation, events, and people that set the stage for the Civil War.  Students don’t want to write a 6-8 sentence paragraph (they will want to save time for their argument in the body), but they need to do more than write a vague sentence that superficially addresses the era