DBQ Writing Hints: Tackling the DBQ step I
The Importance of the Reading Period

General rules of writing in history
• It doesn’t matter how beautifully you say nothing; it is still nothing. Having evidence matters.
• Sophistication is good; clarity is critical. The purpose of communication is to be understood.
• Write in the past tense. Avoid personal pronouns (particularly “we”). Argue from evidence: do not preach at your reader about your moral beliefs.
• You are in high school, but your audience is not. This is the 16-30 rule. Do not summarize or fact dump. Your reader knows more than you; your job is to prove your argument to a skeptical expert.

Approaching the DBQ: Before Looking at the Documents
• Read the question carefully. Fundamentally, what is the question asking you to analyze (what is the crux of the question)? Annotate the question.
• Approach the question as if it is an essay for which you don’t have documents. The strongest essays demonstrate an understanding of broad historical trends, rather than summarizing documents. So...
  o Attempt to identify (either written or in your mind) the dominant trend in the period related to the question (e.g. development of American identity prior to the American Revolution).
    ▪ Were there countertrends (e.g. prevalence of British loyalists) that should complicate your interpretation of the period?
  o Write down several pieces of SFI that are directly relevant to the question to help read the documents in context.
  o Begin thinking about if there are categories of analysis or groupings that would be helpful in organizing your documents.
  o Quickly think about basic ideas you might have for a thesis before you read the documents.

Annotations!: How to give yourself more time to write and analyze
• Students who struggle with the DBQ oftentimes do so because they do not use the reading period wisely.
• Annotating the documents themselves:
  o Source documents before reading the text of the document. Who is the author? Do you know anything about him/her? How might it affect the meaning of the source that follows? If you notice anything useful, write it down so that you remember this insight when writing.
  o Approach most documents as arguments that establish the mindset of historical actors in the time period. Very few documents establish facts (e.g. the House of Burgesses was created); instead, they establish the views of an author on those historical facts (e.g. the House of Burgesses was tyrannous in excluding the poor from voting roles).
  o Underline or circle key ideas in the documents that help you answer the question. Analysis requires you to break down specific ideas, rather than describe what a document “is about” in general. By underlining these ideas, you will not need to reread entire documents when writing.
• Marginal notes (annotations) should provide a reminder/shorthand of how you will analyze each document once you begin to write. There are four major ways to extend your analysis of a primary source in the DBQ. If you notice any of these while reading, you should not your observation in the margins of the primary source. This will become the basis of your analysis when writing. Marginal notes:
Now you are ready to write. Relax! A DBQ is nothing more than writing an essay with a cheat sheet.

Essay Planning: Writing is thinking on a page. It is helpful to figure out what you think before putting pen to paper.

- Now that you have read the sources, try to write a thesis statement (or at least identify the ideas you will place in a thesis). A thesis should:
  - Have a central claim that directly answers the crux of the question.
  - Identify categories of analysis (specific conceptual categories that allow you to group and analyze multiple documents and pieces of SFI).
  - Have a justification (can be your categories of analysis), which takes your basic claim further by answering HOW or WHY you believe your central claim to be true.

- Create a chart where you group your documents into categories. Note: if the question gives you categories (e.g. development of nationalism), you must use those categories (though you should attempt to make them more specific) in order to answer the question.
- If you really have a lot of time, plan your topic sentences also.

By the end of the year, you will do everything I mention above in 15 minutes. Don't waste the opportunity to practice these skills in our opening activities: everything in this class has a broader purpose.

First DBQ rules for writers: Avoid like the plague when writing:

- Avoid "Document A says..." (source your document, Winthrop argued...—or—embed quotations in your own prose); avoid lengthy quotations (you annotated so you could focus on a specific idea); avoid spending four or more sentence analyzing a single document (analyze, don’t summarize: it’s time to move on to new SFI or a new document).

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