

Improving Student Writing in History: A Focus on Thesis and Introduction

The spring 2004 vote by OUSD history/social studies teachers to implement a district-wide, document based, writing assessment expressed the understandings that: 1) students, through writing, would deepen their understanding of history, and 2) students, through the emphasis on historical writing, would develop literacy skills to support academic success beyond the history classroom.

One way to support these goals is to carefully analyze student writing from the assessments. As we scored and analyzed student papers from the last year's assessments one of the clearest issues to emerge was the difficulty students had in developing a thesis statement and writing a strong opening paragraph. For a great majority of students this meant they did not use their opening paragraph to help map out, for themselves and their readers, the paper's organization and the argument to be made. As a result, the quality of the papers suffered from the start.

There were, though, a number of students from across the district who did use the opening paragraph to help construct a strong piece of historical writing. Below are two examples. Neither is perfect, but this is an on-demand assessment with no chance for revision. We hope that by examining what some students do well, we can help other students emulate their success.

- Shelly Weintraub and Stan Pesick

Example One – 10th Grade

“Was Indian independence a success? In answering this question consider economic, social, and political factors”

When a country gains its independence from another it is usually to abolish an oppressive government and implement its own, better, system. This was the case when India gained its independence from Britain; however, India's independence was not a success because many of the problems they faced during the British “Raj” still existed. Such as religious disputes, limited resources for an enormous population, tensions between different castes, and illiteracy; problems India is still recovering from.

This paragraph has a number of strengths. First, it begins with a general statement that draws the reader in. It provides, by identifying the connection to India and Britain, some context and background. It has a clear thesis, “India's independence was not a success because many of the problems they faced during the British ‘Raj’ still exist”. Finally, and most importantly to the success of the essay, this student creates criteria for evaluating success—religious disputes, limited resources, caste tensions and illiteracy. These specific criteria can then be used by the student to help to develop a series of paragraphs that will help develop a coherent, with supporting evidence, argument. This sample paragraph offers what we hope to see - a roadmap of the argument that will be made.

Example Two – 11th Grade

“What were the most important reasons the nation, between 1963 and 1972, became increasingly divided over the war in Vietnam? Include differences over war aims and goals, the impact on the home front, and what was happening to the military in Vietnam.

War is hell. This well known phrase sums up millennia of human struggle, and will continue to do so as long as struggle occurs. There are few wars if any in which this statement can be found to be more true than in the Vietnam war. This was a war fought by boys, many of whom were forced into it. A war fought for ideals that many didn't know or agree with. This was a war that showed people sitting in suburban homes what hell really is.

This writer starts off with a sweeping statement that while it may be a cliché, indicates passion and an intention to engage the reader. There is no explicit thesis in this paragraph, but certainly an implied one. As in the 10th grade paper, the greatest strength of this paragraph is the clear categories the writer creates to support his argument. The war became increasingly controversial because people were forced to fight, the goals were unclear or unconvincing, and the effect of the media caused suburban households to become critical of the war effort. As in the 10th grade example these categories will help the writer develop coherent and well organized piece of historical writing. Additionally, the clear categories will help the writer thoughtfully analyze and use the source documents.

For more information please contact

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School by School Implementation

school	#10th and 11th grade teachers	# teachers administering assessment	% teachers administering assessment
Castlemont Community			
• <i>Busintess and Info Tech</i>	2		
• <i>School of the Arts</i>	2		
• <i>Leadership Prep</i>	2		
Fremont Federation			
• <i>Architecture</i>	1		
• <i>Mandela</i>	2		
• <i>Media</i>	2		
• <i>Robeson</i>	2		
Life Academemy	3	0	0
Metwest	4	0	0
McClymonds	3	3	100
Oakland High	8		88
Oakland Tech	7	7	100
Skyline	10	9	90
Independent Study	14	14	100
Youth Empowerment	1	1	100
District Totals	63		

District Scoring Committee
Spring Semester, 2004-05

10th Grade:

- Richard Charlesworth, McClymonds
- Gordon Danning, Oakland High
- Tsering Kheyap, YES
-

11th Grade

- Deborah Gordon, Independent Study
- Elizabeth Haugen, Oakland Tech
- Carl Keys, Skyline
-

Score Distribution of Submitted Papers - Spring Semester 2004-2005 (6 per class)

Grade / Score (%)	4	3	2	1
10th (114 papers scored)	4 (3.5%)	21 (18%)	58 (51%)	31 (28%)
11th (114 papers scored)	5 (4%)	21 (18%)	63 (55%)	25 (22%)

A New Plan for Selecting the 6 Student Papers to Submit

Last year each teacher was asked—for both the fall and spring assessments—to turn in two high, two middle, and two low papers. This process meant we received the same number of high, middle, and low papers. This process meant we received the same number of high, middle, and low student papers each time, but it did not allow us to see if our students improved over the course of the year. It did not allow us to determine if there were any changes in the numbers of students who scored at each level. The score distribution and percentages did not change. With this in mind the scoring committees recommended that we institute a process through which we collect a more random sample of student work from across the district. You will receive, with the fall semester assessment materials, a memo outlining the new criteria for collecting and submitting the six student papers.

A Revised Rubric – A Focus on the Thesis and Introduction

In response to the writing and organizational issues previously discussed (see page 1) the scoring committees suggested that the rubric be revised so that it might further increase the focus on writers and readers on the significance of the thesis and opening paragraph in guiding the development and organization of the essay. The box to the right contains, from this semester’s 10th grade question, that revised portion of the rubric.

Helping Students Organize Their Essays – The Skill of “Bucketing”

Last summer the assessment committee heard a presentation from the “DBQ Project” on ways to help students write better responses to document based questions. One of their ideas was to use a “student friendly” term to describe the need for developing analytical categories. They suggested the term “buckets,” as in, “what kind of buckets (categories) will you need to organize this essay and in which of these buckets will you put the information and evidence you gather?”

One way to help students organize their essays is by making sure that prompts contain potential “buckets” students can use to organize writing. For example, consider the prompt, “Was Indian independence a success? In answering this question consider economic, social, and political factors.” In this situation a student would have to decide into which bucket - economic, social, or political – they would place information and evidence as the organize the argument in support of the thesis. Students can also use “buckets” when being asked to provide reasons, or identify causes, or to compare and contrast different places, people, or time periods. An important understanding for students to develop is that often they will be able to determine the organizational “buckets” for their essay by analyzing the demands of the prompt before they begin to write.

Sometimes, though, a prompt will have few organizational clues, or you may ask students to develop their own essay or research topics. In this case students will, independently, have to create, identify and develop buckets (analytical categories) to help organize their piece of writing.

Support Activities

The next three pages contain an activity you can use to help students better understand the concept of “bucketing,” developing analytical categories, (page 4) and two versions of “document analysis sheets” provided by the DBQ project (paged 5-6). Please note that each version, both short and long, asks students to “bucket” the document(s) by asking them to identify the analytical category to which the information connects. Note also that the longer version asks students to discuss, along with identifying an analytical category, how the document will be used in the essay.)

Revised Thesis Category of 2005–2006 Rubric:

Sample from 10th Grade Assessment

4—Contains a thoughtful, well developed thesis that clearly identifies the major reasons used to evaluate whether the gains of the French Revolution were worth the pain. These specific reasons should guide the organization of the essay and be supported with evidence gathered in class and from the source documents.

3—Contains a thesis that clearly identifies the major reasons used to evaluate whether the gains of the French Revolution were worth the pain. These specific reasons should guide the organization of the essay and be supported with evidence gathered in class and from the source documents

2—A thesis that begins to identify the major reasons used to evaluate whether the gains of the French Revolution were worth the pain. Lacks clarity and may not distinguish between major reasons and specific pieces of evidence. This lack of clarity leads to poor organization throughout the rest of the paper

1—A thesis that only repeats or rephrases the prompt.

0—Contains no thesis.

Helping Students Organize Their Essays— A Simple Support Activity

Below are examples of prompts (except for A), taken from *Modern World History* and *The Americans*, that you can use to help students develop the habit of analyzing prompts before writing. There are, of course, many other examples you can use from both the text and your own resources.

A. Begin by giving students an example that is not historical, but will help them understand the idea of “buckets,” as analytical categories.

Prompt: Which cars are better – foreign or domestic? In responding make sure to consider cost, fuel economy, and the repair rate.

Analytical Categories/Buckets:

- A _____
 B _____
 C _____

B. For each of the prompts below identify what “buckets” might be used to help organize your essay.

1. **Prompt: Describe the effects of New Deal (1932-1936) public works projects on the economy, the environment, and people’s personal lives.**

Analytical Categories/Buckets:

- A _____
 B _____
 C _____

2. **Prompt: Compare President’s Truman’s attitude toward and efforts on behalf of civil rights with those of President Eisenhower’s.**

Analytical Categories/Buckets

- A _____
 B _____

(Note: You might point out to students that there are at least two ways to label each bucket. One way of organizing the essay would have a bucket for attitudes, and a bucket for efforts. A different organization would have a bucket for Truman, and a bucket for Eisenhower.)

3. **Prompt: What similarities existed between the political and social conditions in 19th century China and Latin America?**

Analytical Categories/Buckets

- A _____
 B _____

(Note: This is the same theory as the prompt above. Students could create buckets for political and social conditions, or they could create one for China and one for Latin America.)

“DBQ Project” Document Analysis Sheet – Short Version

Document Letter or Number: _____	Source: _____	Author: _____
Date: _____	Primary Source ____	Secondary Source ____
Main idea of document:		
Key quote, image, or data:		
Analytical category:		

Document Letter or Number: _____	Source: _____	Author: _____
Date: _____	Primary Source ____	Secondary Source ____
Main idea of document:		
Key quote, image, or data:		
Analytical category:		

In order to increase student success on the assessment it is important they get practice in analyzing source documents. This “short version” analysis sheet (note their two copies of the organizer on this sheet) asks students to identify the type of document, primary or secondary; to note the main ideas; and to identify a possible quote. It also focuses students on essay organization by asking students to decide to what “bucket,” or analytical category the information belongs.

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“DBQ” Binders at School Sites

To help support student success on the history assessment the district and the OUSD Teaching American History grant have purchased binders from the DBQ project. These binders, for both World and American history, include document based-questions, background essays, hook activities, and writing support materials. Below are questions around which the materials in each binder are organized.

10th grade questions

11th grade questions

(continued on page 6)

“DBQ Project” Document Analysis Sheet—Long Version

Document number or letter Title of Document (if present)	Source (Where did the document come from?)
Date of Document	Author of Document
Primary Source ____ Secondary Source ____	Possible Author Bias

After you read over the document, fill in the columns below.

What important facts can I learn from this document?	What inferences can I make from this document?	How can I use this document in my essay?
	Overall, what is the main idea of the document?	Analytical Category:

This “longer version” document analysis sheet requires students complete a more sophisticated analysis of a source document. In this version students are asked to go beyond identifying main ideas and analytical categories. The exercise also focuses student attention on identifying possible bias in the document and on making inferences— requiring them to go beyond just gathering information, to making judgments about the text. This demands more complex historical thinking skills. Once judgments have been made the students are asked to consider how this document might be used in their essays.

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Document Analysis Sheet created by Evanston Township High School History Department.

DBQ Binders at School Sites (continued from page 5)

For information on how access the World History binder contact Shelly Weintraub at 879-8477. For information on how to access the U.S. History binder contact Stan Pesick at 879-8497.

Update on Textbook Adoption

On **Saturday, February 25** representatives from your sites will vote on which new textbooks we will be adopted for OUSD history/social studies classrooms. Prior to the vote there will be several important committee meetings, and other dates to keep in mind.

Committees

Below are three committees that will review, with specific questions and topics in mind, the materials up for adoption. If you are interested in serving on any of these committees please contact Shelly Weintraub. (879-8477 or shelly.weintraub@ousd.k12.ca.us) prior to attending.

- **Economics** – If you are interested in helping to decide which economic textbook is selected please come to a meeting on **Wednesday, January 11, 4 PM, in the Harper Building.**
- **ELL** – If you want to evaluate the textbooks to see which best serve the needs of our ELL students please attend a meeting on **Wednesday, January 25, 4:00 in the Harper Building.**
- **Technology** – If you want to evaluate the technology components of the new materials please attend a meeting on **Thursday, January 26, 8:30 – 3:00 in the Harper Building.** Substitutes will be provided.

Other Important Dates

Tuesday, January 31—10th grade piloting teachers meet to make a recommendation for the new world history textbooks. Substitutes will be provided. (8:30 – 3:15)

Wednesday, February 1—12th grade piloting teachers meet to make a recommendation for economics and government textbooks. Substitutes will be provided. (8:30 – 3:15)

Thursday, February 2—11th grade piloting teachers meet to make a recommendation for U.S. history textbooks. Substitutes will be provided. (8:30 – 3:15)

Saturday, February 25—Site representatives vote on which textbooks will be adopted. (10:30—12:00)

Tuesday, February 28—Voting for AP textbooks. (4-6)

Instructional Resources to Support the Assessment

As the district assessment was piloted in classrooms and implemented district-wide during the 2004-2005 school year a body of support materials and practice tests was developed for use by teachers in OUSD classrooms. Below is a list of those materials, by subject, that you available for your use. Please contact Shelly Weintraub of Stan Pesick for copies.

10th grade materials

- Categorizing activity—"World War I: The Good, The Bad, The Ugly"
- Practice assessment on South Africa—"Was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission helpful in overcoming the problems created by apartheid?"

11th grade materials

- Document based inquiry activity on the Boston Massacre—"Were the British soldiers guilty of murder?"
- Document based inquiry activity—"Was Nat Turner a Hero?" "Was Nat Turner's Revolt a Success?"
- Categorizing Activity—The New Deal - The Good, The Great, The Bad, The Ugly
- Document and image based activity on developing a thesis and introductory paragraph- "Writing about the Student Sit-Ins and Freedom Rides – 1960 and 1961"

OUSD History Assessment Newsletter

Fall Semester 2005-2006 Assessment Questions

World History

Considering the goals of liberty and equality, were the gains of the French Revolution worth the pain that was caused between 1789-1804?

U.S. History

During the decades between the Civil War and World War I, America was torn by industrial conflict, as workers confronted employers and, at times, state and federal troops. Why did this conflict arise?

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