

ANSWERING HISTORICAL IDENTIFICATION QUESTIONS

Writing effective historical identifications is a skill which history students must master quickly. History teachers recognize that good answers to this type of question reveal more than just factual retention; they are indicators of a student's *understanding* of historical themes and significance.

Complete definitions or identifications generally contain the following elements:

<i>Who or what</i> in question?	Name
<i>What</i> happened and <i>how</i> ?	Action
<i>When</i> did it happen?	Time
<i>Where</i> did it happen?	Location
<i>Why</i> did it happen?	Motivation

You can construct an acronym such as **NATLoM** or some other mnemonic device to help you remember the elements of a good answer. A useful and pertinent historical identification is thorough in answering the above questions and also explains the *historical significance* of the name, term, or concept at hand. Identifying *historical significance* is a way of answering the question, *SO WHAT?* A complete identification, then, always includes the *important impact or effect* of the person, event, or idea in history. A helpful formula for structuring your answers to these "ID" questions is:

In [date], [person] did [what action] to [whomever], in [what place]. The event was *caused by*... The event *resulted in*... The event was *important* because...

The following is an example of a frighteningly thorough definition:

The Board of Trade, created by the King in 1696, was a London-based group of senior royal appointees. It was the supervisory body responsible for recommending all colonial political policy to the King and for implementing routine orders from the Crown regarding the colonies' governance. It nominated governors and other high officials and reviewed all laws passed by colonial assemblies. It served as an intermediary for colonial governments seeking to influence the King and Parliament.

The Board was not effective in creating a centralized government or policy for the colonies. It did generate suspicion and resentment among the colonists, however, because of its powers to review laws.

WRITING ESSAYS ON HISTORY TESTS

Writing an essay as part of an exam is basically the same as writing one as a take-home assignment; one should adhere to the tried-and-true empirical essay format and use “APEC” paragraph construction to build a persuasive argument. The pressures of time in a test situation, however, sometimes can turn even the most gifted student writers into blithering idiots. Consideration of the following reminders should keep you from panicking and enable you to produce your best work.

- *Think about the question.* Don’t just dive in. The minute or two you spend considering the topic and planning your approach will result in a much better finished product.
- *Write an outline.* Sacrifice a few minutes of actual writing. No matter how pressed for time you are, you should map out what you want to say in an orderly fashion on scrap paper. The outlining process will help you forge a more coherent and effective essay.
- *Get right to the heart of the matter.* Make sure you answer the question directly. Avoid long-winded introductions, tangential issues, and irrelevant nonsense. Reliance on charming anecdotes and glittering generalities will make your ignorance of the topic at hand painfully obvious.
- *Begin with a clear introductory paragraph.* Share the with the reader at the outset the direction you intend to follow in your essay, highlighting your thesis and how you intend to defend it.
- *Use separate paragraphs for major points.* Remember to begin each one with a clear topic sentence.
- *Support your assertions with detail.* Data is always important to the historian. The “APEC” paragraph model is a structure that requires evidence to support your points. Because your time is limited, assume the reader’s knowledge of your subject, but be sure to explain the connections between the evidence and your assertion and emphasize clearly the significance of your point.
- *Don’t forget a brief concluding paragraph.* One or two sentences will do.
- *Neatness counts.* If it can’t be read, it won’t help you. Double spacing always makes messy handwriting more legible.

PREPARING FOR YOUR FINAL EXAMINATION

- *Take care of your body.* It's important that you establish a regular routine in this stressful time. Be sure to get a good night's rest each evening during the exam period. As a general rule of thumb, be sure to get to bed well before midnight and plan to get up between 7:00 and 7:30 A.M. Do not miss a meal during the exam period; regular meals will keep you alert and energetic. (On the other hand, don't procrastinate in the dining hall; spend no more than thirty minutes at the table at mealtime.)
- *Study in a clean, quiet place with good lighting.* The ideal study environment is a desk or table free of clutter with a comfortable but solid wooden chair and good overhead lighting. Try to maintain good posture at your desk. Avoid the bad habit of studying in bed. Don't turn on music. Isolate yourself from distractions as much as possible. If your dormitory is too noisy, find a quiet location in the library or elsewhere on campus. Be sure to take reasonable breaks (say, ten minutes every hour) to stay relatively fresh.
- *Re-read the entire course syllabus.* Do this slowly and with great concentration, making a list of names, terms, and concepts you have forgotten or do not entirely understand.
- *Re-read the entire contents of your history notebook.* Again, do this slowly and with great concentration, making a list of names, terms, and concepts you have forgotten or do not entirely understand. If you've been investing time in note-taking faithfully throughout the term, here's where you'll realize your reward.
- *Re-read all tests and quizzes taken and all papers written during the term.* Again, make a list of those names, terms, and concepts you have forgotten or do not entirely understand.
- *In reviewing course materials, think about looking for both data and analyses.* Things you don't understand fully should be added to your list. Don't spend a lot of time on those things on your list; record them and move on; you'll come back to them later.
- *Look up in your textbook the things that are on your list of imprecise data and unclear analyses.*
- *Repeat the previous five steps.*
- *Practice writing identifications.* Review the appropriate section in the Skills Handbook, if necessary. A good generic formula for writing answers to these "ID" questions is:

In [date], [person] did [what action] to [whomever], in [what place]. The event was *caused* by... The event *resulted* in... The event was *important* because...

- *Think comparatively over the long term.* Make a list of things that happened in different eras but were similar in data or analysis. For all such events, be sure you have very precise data and can tell the different events in the different eras apart. *Memorize* here. You are preparing to answer essay questions. (See "How to Prepare for an Examination Essay" in the Skills Handbook.)
- *Write at least one practice empirical essay.* Review "The Green Sheet," if necessary. Be sure to employ "APEC" paragraph construction.
- *After you have done all of the above, come to a review session, if offered.* Ask questions about what still confuses you. Be warned, however: if you haven't made the effort to answer those questions yourself before coming, you will be thrown out for wasting my time and the time of your colleagues.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR AN EXAMINATION ESSAY

The first part of the U.S. history survey course centers on the federal arrangement of political power in the United States from 1763 through the Civil War. The manner in which the national and local—meaning colonial or state—governments shared power, fought over its definition, and sought to compromise or battle over deep differences of opinion are all issues of *federalism*. Into this thematic overview you must fit the facts, events, and personalities portrayed in the reading. If you keep track of the broad topic of federalism and regularly focus your study on the *connections* between *facts* and *themes*, you will succeed in this course.

Review is the regular search for connection. In the first few meetings of the course, review is relatively straightforward, since there are few facts to recall and the major themes have not yet emerged clearly in the material. Review at this point is primarily the recollection of unconnected facts.

As information accumulates and becomes more complex, however, one must approach review more systematically. History is essentially a study of comparisons—that is, (1) measurements of one institution through the changing circumstances of time, such as the effectiveness of the Federalist Party; or (2) two or more topics compared with each other at one or more points in time, such as the national government’s policies toward commerce and agriculture in the 1790s and 1830s; or (3) the changing definition of an institution or theme across time, for example, a study in the variation of federalism between 1780 and 1800.

How can review help in grappling with such broad measurements? Consider the following questions, typical of a fall term final exam, for which essay answers would be required:

- 1) Discuss the political effectiveness of the Federalist Party from 1791 to 1814.
- 2) “The national government, from 1791 until the end of the Marshall Court in 1833, favored commercial interests over agricultural interests.” Using specific historical data, defend or refute this statement.
- 3) “Federalism, characterized by a strong and active national government, was an undeveloped ideal in 1781, but became a forceful reality by the end of John Adams’ presidency.” Discuss the validity of this statement.

No single assignment contains sufficient information to answer any of these questions. Thus you need to integrate information you have learned over time to synthesize a new analysis, and this is the task you should perform in review. Let us proceed to describe the manner in which all the necessary elements of a correct answer would be created, and do so by answering question #1 above.

First, an accurate *identification* of the Federalist Party would describe it as the leading party of the 1790s, supporting a strong national government which fostered centralized commercial power and national strength in international relations; it sought to achieve its goals without emphasizing political participation by the electorate. Thus you have not taken basic identification for granted, but have prepared the way for your analysis by clarifying major terms contained in the question.

You are asked to “measure” political effectiveness from 1791 to 1814, and to do that you need to determine the major political controversies and tests of power during the time in question. They might include:

- a) Hamilton’s economic program
- b) the Alien and Sedition Acts
- c) the election of 1800
- d) the debate over the Louisiana Purchase
- e) the response to the embargo of 1807
- f) the Hartford Convention

To make a historical statement about political effectiveness, you have to make judgments about the Federalist Party at those times and then see to what generalizations those judgments lead. Such judgments are described with the commonplace language of human endeavor—terms such as *strong*, *weak*, *not representative*, *ineffectual*, or *carping*. Note that these are *adjectives*. Modifiers of your own choosing are the descriptive terms you want to create in the course of your review.

Thus the Federalist Party's fortunes might be described in this manner. In controversies (a) and (b) the party was strong, taking the initiative and leading the country. In (c) and (f) it was weakened as the voters lost confidence in the Party's policies. In (d) and (e) it was an ineffectual protest group unable to alter policy, capable of only following along (d) or carping to no avail (e).

Now that you have judged the effectiveness of the party, the third major step is to *connect your statements in a narrative*—a story—which describes the institution—the Federalist Party—through time. An outline of that narrative might look something like this:

- I. the Federalist Party began as the strong, unchallenged leader of the political scene in the 1790s
- II. the Party's power declined in response to its repressive efforts in the Alien and Sedition Acts
- III. the Party enjoyed a brief resurgence, drawing on dissatisfaction generated by the Republicans' efforts to avoid war with Great Britain from 1805 to 1812
- IV. the Federalists' nearly treasonable efforts at the Hartford Convention sealed their fate and they disappeared from the American political scene

A concluding generalization or summary would look something like this:

The history of the Federalist Party was not one steady decline from its early power, but neither was the party effective for more than a few years in the early era of the Republic.

The circle is complete. You have:

- defined the terms
- made your own descriptions of relevant evidence
- pulled all this together in a narrative and concluded or summarized

As the course proceeds, you must engage regularly in this type of activity, this *review*. Well before you walk into an examination you have to have established connections between the emerging components of the material. In reality, you have to anticipate the examination questions by testing various ways the historical topics and personalities fit together.

If you are demanding of yourself in review, you will have an easier time demonstrating your grasp of history for others.