A Guide to Writing a DBQ

The purpose of the Document Based Question (DBQ) is not to test your knowledge of the subject, but rather to evaluate your ability to practice the historian's craft. You will be required to work with the document and use them to answer a question.

Writing the DBQ is an acquired skill, one that takes practice. You should not get discouraged if you do not "get it" right away. The goal is to acquire the skill by May.

Remember that there is actually no right or wrong answer. Your answer is YOUR interpretation of the content of the documents. As long as your answer is logical and your interpretation is supported by the content of the document you are correct.

How to read the DBQ

Step 1: Breathe.

Read the question prompt carefully. Underline the tasks demanded and the terms which are unique to the question.

Read the documents carefully.

What is the origin of the document? (When was it written? Who wrote it? Where was it written?)

What type of document is it? (diary, newspaper, speech, personal letter, etc)

Make sure you understand the content of the document.

How to write your response

You are given 45 minutes to write your response, however you may use some of that time for further planning.

I. Opening Paragraph
   A. Contextualization – 1 point

   You must provide background to the prompt and your answer.

   The early background should be disconnected from your topic.

   Example: Contextualization for the Reformation should start with Middle Ages.

   This should be several sentences.

   The information should be as specific (names, events) as possible.
   B. Thesis – 1 point

   Thesis can be one or several sentences.

   Thesis must directly answer the prompt.

   Thesis must be arguable!

   If there is no way to disagree with the thesis, it's a fact, not a thesis.

Thesis must be specific, avoid general terms (political, economic, social).

II. Body Paragraphs

One body paragraph per idea. If your essay has only one idea, you have a problem. If your essay has 15 ideas, you have a problem. This should be 2 – 4 paragraphs in most instances.

Each body paragraph must have a topic sentence as the first sentence.
The topic sentence must be arguable and make a claim.
This claim should be supporting your thesis.

A. Documents

Using at least three documents – 1 point

Documents must be cited parenthetically (like this!).
Documents should never be quoted, only paraphrased.
Documents should be introduced by author.
Example: When we examine William Shedfield's and Sons letter to Her Royal Majesty we find that they claim that the introduction of steel helmets increased casualties in WWI. (Doc. 1)

Using at least six documents to support your argument – 1 point

Use all of the rules for documents above.
You must explain not merely what is in the document, but how it supports your argument.

Do not simply cite the documents in "laundry list" fashion.

You should strive to IMPOSE order on the documents.
Find groupings for the documents.
Can they be organized into a format?
What is the OVERALL picture presented by the documents?

B. Point of View – 1 point

You must analyze point of view, bias, or agenda in at least three documents. If time, gender or age were changed, would the person be saying the same thing?

Discuss why the author is saying what they are saying.
OR
Discuss why you trust or don't trust the document.
OR
Discuss who the document is intended for and why.

You must both make a claim and explain that claim.
Attribution (Dr. McClay is a principal) is not analysis of point of view.

C. Outside Information – 1 point

You must provide information that is relevant to the prompt but is not contained in the documents provided.

This outside information must be different than any information used for contextualization or point of view. You can't get points for the same information twice!

A good suggestion is to think of a person, event, primary or secondary source that you can use to further your argument, that is not provided in the DBQ.

Base your argument on the evidence in the documents, not outside information. Outside information should be used to enhance understanding but it must not be the basis of your argument.

D. Counter-Claim – 1 point

One of your paragraphs must address an argument(s) that would disagree with the position that you've taken in your thesis.

You need to explain what that counterargument is and why you think it is not persuasive.

This is a good opportunity to use documents which on the surface, disagree with your claim. Explain (PoV, Bias, Agenda!) why the document(s) may not be reliable.

III. Conclusion

You must have a conclusion…this could save your essay.

You will rephrase your thesis. This gives you another opportunity for the reader to recognize the brilliance of your claim.

You will summarize your argument. This gives the reader another opportunity to recognize why the counter-claim is not superior to your claim.

You can't lose points. You can only gain them by doing this.

Literary Concerns

The thesis answers all parts of the question and is arguable.

Proper essay style is used.

Grammar and spelling are adequate (do not misspell words that are supplied in the documents)

Avoid 1st person singular.
Don't quote the documents.
Cite only one document at a time.