

## Hints on Writing Technique

In writing both the DBQ and standard essays, it's imperative that you follow the basic organization principles your English teachers have insisted on for years. Your first paragraph is an introduction and includes your thesis statement; the body of the essay presents evidence to support the thesis; the conclusion restates the thesis and provides a closing comment.

Beyond structuring your essay properly, there are other helpful techniques that you can use. One approach is the "give a little, take a lot" method of stating a thesis. In answering a question that asks you to "assess the validity" of a statement, you might concede that other points of view carry some weight. The answer to a question that asks about the causes of an event — the Civil War or the decision to drop the A-bomb on Japan in 1945, for example — should point out that historians disagree on the causes. Acknowledging these opposing interpretations and going on to state why the thesis you've chosen best fits the question enhances your essay. If you're familiar with the names of historians who have written on the subject, so much the better. Readers are impressed if you can show accurate and appropriate bibliographical knowledge.

One style of writing to avoid at all costs is "overwriting," making impossibly general statements that incorporate flowery verbs and adjectives. "The Jacksonians surged onto the scene"; "In the Progressive Era protest ran rampant"; "The Socialist movement roared into the twentieth century." Similarly, avoid sentences that are self-evident and add nothing to your essay. "Many things happened during 1952." Anders Henrikson collected all the bad writing and factual errors from his students' term papers in "When Life Reeked with Joy" (Wilson Library Bulletin, Spring 1983). It's a good article for AP classes to review.

Be wary of using the language of your sources instead of your own vocabulary and writing to impress rather than to inform — a style called the "false voice." One solution is to practice writing essays with an audience in mind, perhaps a friend. You want to inform your friend about what you've found out in your research; you don't need to impress this person with long

words you really don't understand because he or she is your friend, but you do want to clearly explain your thesis. Such writing need not be informal. It does avoid, however, the stiffness that occurs when you depend too much on DBQ documents or how you recall information presented by historians in the articles and books you've studied. Perhaps the best person to write for is yourself. Look inside your own thought processes and say to yourself, "I'm writing down what I understand is the story of my topic." Using this approach prevents you from "overwriting," and you won't be writing to impress anyone.