



AMERICA: THE LAST BEST HOPE

How to Evaluate Student Essays

In each chapter of the Roadmap, teachers will find essay questions that can be incorporated into chapter examinations (see the “Assessment” link on the Teacher View). Teachers will want to develop their own grading systems and essay standards, so the ideas below are simply meant to be suggestions.

Consider giving the students essay questions well in advance of the test. It is very likely they will study harder and learn more if they aren’t “surprised” by an essay on exam day. Perhaps give the students four essays one week before the test and tell them that on test day you will randomly draw two of the four from a hat. They will then write an answer to one of those two. This can add some real *drama* to class.

One thing for teachers to remember when they assess history essays is that there is not one “correct” answer. Making this clear to students will free them up to do their best work. Essay questions are not designed to learn what student’s *don’t know*, but rather designed to give them the opportunity to display what they *do know*. Many essays ask students to make an argument or take a stance on a historical issue. Make it clear to students that two of them can come to dramatically different conclusions and yet both do very well on the exam question.

But having said there is not one correct answer students must produce in no way means that essays do not need to meet high standards of content and analysis. When assessing essays teachers should evaluate students with the following criteria in mind (weighted in a way that best reflects what teachers believe is appropriate for the class and their instructional goals):



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- **Content:** First of all, does the student understand the question and provide an answer that addresses all of the points addressed in the question? Second, is the content accurate and does it show a depth of knowledge?
- **Analysis:** Does the response go beyond a simple historical narrative and show historical understanding? Does the student show his or her own analysis, as opposed to simply restating the teacher's or the author's point of view?
- **Clarity:** Is the writing clear and free of errors? Is the response focused (avoids "rambling" and moving away from what the question asks)? Does the response have a clear introduction and a strong conclusion?