

3. Writing the AP World History Comparative Essay

Like every essay in this exam, there is no substitution for careful reading, thinking, discussion, and writing throughout the year to prepare you to write this essay. Nothing helps you score at the top more than continuous hard work and mastery of content. That said, here are some structural elements to apply each time you write an AP World History Comparative essay.

The Thesis: The thesis is the most important part of each essay, and the comparative one is no exception. Although your classroom teacher might have explained this piece differently, here are some elements to consider as you plan your response to the comparative essay exam question.

- A. Although this is called the comparative question, you are expected to compare as well as contrast, identifying similarities and differences. You must always cover both concepts; there are no exceptions.
- B. Always have a one-sentence thesis that contains an argument (position, premise, or idea) that you can support with a framework (essay map, topic delineation, or slugs). You might be okay with a two- to three-sentence thesis in your regular classroom, but on this exam, a two- to three-sentence thesis can signal that the student writer has no clear plan or argument and is just connecting a list of topics to talk about. One, accurate, clear, non-run-on sentence is the ideal—and it takes practice to perfect.
- C. If you have an introduction, make your thesis the last sentence of the introduction. It isn't a problem if you do not have time for an introduction. Just write your thesis and then begin a new paragraph with your first body paragraph.
- D. Your thesis must have some value-added concepts, which means that you must demonstrate some applicable knowledge here. You cannot just rearrange the words of the prompt or write a generic thesis; for example, *There are many similarities and differences between....* Nor can you earn this point by simply writing *There are more similarities than differences between....* You must provide the reader with information that shows original thinking.
- E. Your thesis must deal with all aspects of the question and address similarities and differences. Some of the most successful thesis statements use one of the following formulas: stating two similarities and a difference or stating two differences and a similarity. One AP teacher describes this idea as “keeping the powerful singleton for the end.” This structural technique makes it easier to write *A and B are similar, but C is different because...* or *although A and B are different, C is similar because....* That kind of thesis can easily become an

expanded core thesis if you have the content knowledge and the historical thinking skills to support it.

- F. This is the most important point to earn, because you will rely on a solid thesis to guide the rest of your essay—do not be afraid to spend some time crafting it.

Body Paragraphs: Unlike the DBQ or the CCOT questions, the Comparative essay demands a depth of specific historical knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge in comparative analysis. These points are generally earned in the body paragraphs of your essay. Here are some ideas to help you demonstrate your knowledge in the most successful ways:

- A. Follow your thesis order for your paragraph order. This will keep you on track and reduce the time required to write the essay because you will not be wondering what to write about next.
- B. Do not write a block-style essay where you tell everything you know about topic A in a block and then tell everything you know about topic B in another block. The block style might be a structure you know well, but it will probably hurt you on this exam because it lends itself to description rather than analysis. This exam is called the Comparative exam because you are expected to compare; the block style makes it difficult to earn the relevant direct comparison point and the reason for the similarity or difference point. You can know a lot about a topic, but if it only provides description without specific comparative analysis, you will not score well on this question.
- C. Begin each body paragraph with a topic sentence that is a direct comparison or contrast. This means that both subjects must be addressed and specific similarities or differences must be identified; for example, *Han China and Imperial Rome relied on massive public works projects to demonstrate imperial power* or *Although medieval Europe had a chivalric code based in religious teachings, the code of bushido in Japan was secular in focus*. If your thesis is strong, then you can use those words to develop the comparison and contrast in each topic sentence. Sometimes English teachers call these kinds of topic sentences thesis reference statements.
- D. Be sure to use historical evidence to support each part of your topic sentence. Although you might know more about one aspect of the essay than another, be sure to use ample historical evidence to support each element in your topic sentence.
- E. Close each body paragraph with an explanation of why the similarity or difference exists. Demonstrating this ability requires a lot of specific historical knowledge as well as the historical thinking skills of contextualization, interpretation, and synthesis. For most students, it is the most difficult point to earn in your Comparative essay.

Introduction and Conclusion: You can earn a top score on this essay without these elements, so do not waste time on them. However, if you have time, the introduction and conclusion can be very significant in earning expanded core points, so here are some ways you can make them really count for you.

- A. Some student writers need to write their introduction to get to their thesis. If this is your style, then be sure to reread your introduction after you have finished the essay to make sure it still makes sense in relation to the ideas in your essay.
- B. Do not waste time seeking inspiration for an introduction. Leave a few blank lines at the top of your paper and begin with your thesis. Later you can add an introduction with a great opening idea if you have time.
- C. A restatement of your thesis might be helpful as the opening sentence in your conclusion—sometimes your wording will improve as your paper progresses. Again, you can earn a top score without this element, so do not use valuable time in crafting a conclusion.
- D. Often great conclusions echo the essay's introduction. If you began with a great idea, perhaps you can use the conclusion to finalize that thought. Sometimes teachers talk about this idea as tying a bow around your essay.
- E. In many high-scoring essays, the student uses the introduction and conclusion to establish a global context that earns expanded core points for the essay. Global context means that within the time parameters of the prompt, you should discuss what else was going on in the world that impacted or was impacted by the topics of this essay. Addressing global context effectively demonstrates to the reader that you understand how these details fit into larger global patterns. It allows you to demonstrate your skills at historical interpretation, periodization, and historical causation, as well as your knowledge of historical developments and processes. However, beginning with *Since the dawn of time...* is not showing global historical context.

Lastly: This is the third and final essay most of you will write, and you will be tired by the time you start it. Applying these ideas about format and structure will free you to show the applicable content you know without worrying about omitting a key structural component.