

## **Writing Rubric for a History essay**

### **KEY TO THE “SAMPLE EXAMINATION QUESTIONS” (The U.S. to 1877)**

#### **Essay Question**

The question:

Quite obviously, the history of colonial America involves many social, economic, and political factors. It can, however, be meaningfully studied in the context of the colonists' relationship to their natural environment. Write an essay in which you discuss the role of climate and topography in the development of the English colonies.

**The following pages show a sample A, C, and F response to this question, along with comments highlighting some of the differences among these answers.**

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An “A” essay can take many forms since there is never just one “right” answer. However, all “A” papers do share some characteristics. (This particular sample happens to be exceptionally complete).

Note that the organization is absolutely clear and each point is fully developed.

Notice the opening paragraph that establishes the two main points that will be made.

A paragraph (or more) is devoted to each point that the author wants to make and that point is clearly stated in a topic sentence. The author then goes on to provide enough detail to explain the more general statement that was made in the topic sentence.

Notice also that the author drew out the implications of the point. For example, the author notes the impact of all the separate beginnings.

The climate and topography of the Atlantic coastline of North America influenced English colonial development in at least two significant ways. First, the geography of the coastline contributed to the separate and nearly independent development of the colonies and thus helped to create sectional differences.

The eastern coastline of North America is pocked with numerous bays and inlets at those points where rivers dump their waters into the Atlantic Ocean. The bays furnished “nesting places” for colonial settlement, and in addition, the rivers provided a natural direction for further growth, insuring that colonial expansion would move “up” the rivers. Because overland travel was so difficult, the colonies tended to remain isolated, finding it easier to maintain closer ties with the mother country than with each other. Hence, geography “encouraged” the multiple beginnings that so typified English settlements in North America, and in an age dominated by water transportation, exaggerated the uniqueness and provinciality of each colony. A century and a half after the beginning of colonial settlement, the American revolutionaries would find that the relative independence of each colony posed the greatest obstacle to the creation of a new united nation. The motto “e pluribus unum” thus represented a triumph over a political difficulty that was rooted in large part in the geography of North America.

Despite the unique history of each of the colonies, there did arise obvious regional differences in social structure and economic development. As each colony faces the immediate task of finding a basis for its economy, it was forced to capitalize upon the opportunities offered by the surroundings.

The topography of the region surrounding the Chesapeake Bay differed dramatically from that found in the New England region and hence, the colonies in those two areas followed divergent patterns in their development. The Chesapeake

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“A” Essay (continued)

An “A” Essay

immensely fertile soil called the tidewater that extends far inland to the Appalachian mountain barrier. The ocean floor was too deep to be commercially exploitable, but the tidewater offered excellent land for the growth of staple export crops, particularly tobacco, which became the basis of the 17<sup>th</sup> century economy. Because tobacco is a labor-intensive crop, the Southern planters eventually turned to the importation of black slaves to provide a reliable labor supply. In so doing, they set in motion a tragic sequence of events which eventually erupted into a Civil War. In contrast, the New England region is characterized by coastal land which is glaciated and hilly and therefore unsuitable for large-scale commercial farming. The ocean floor, however, is hallowed off the coast and provided the region with its first “cash crop”-fish. As the New England colonies turned to the sea for economic development, they exploited other commercial opportunities, including shipbuilding, and manufacturing. The seeds of a merchant, and eventually industrial, economy had been planted.

The author concludes with a summary paragraph, which briefly reminds the reader of the points that have been made.

It can therefore be said that two critical features of American history –the difficulty in creating a “united” states and the bitter sectionalism which created the Civil War –were directly related to the climate and the topography of North America.

Region is characterized by a deep ocean floor immediately off the coast and a large region of



### Comments for a “B” Essay

How is a “B” essay different? Generally, a “B” paper is also well-organized and clearly make the main points, but is not as strong in providing supporting detail or in noting the implications.

(Please remember that this sample would earn an extremely high “A”. Many “A” papers could be shorter, but they would follow the same pattern: well-organized, clear topic sentences, good supporting detail, implications drawn out, a concluding paragraph.)

### A “C” Essay

As difficult as it can be to accept, a “C” paper is merely an average college essay- and “average” means that the author makes the “main points.”

Making the main points is not, however, enough to earn a top score.

Notice that this paper lacks an opening paragraph that establishes the direction in which the author is going.

The eastern coast of America has many bays which were good places to start settlements. The English colonists started many settlements in these numerous bays, but because it was hard to travel overland, they didn’t communicate very well with each other. Because water transportation was the main thing. The thirteen colonies stayed pretty isolated from each other and so when the Revolution came, it was hard to get people together and get them united. So e pleribus onnum (sp?) (out of many one) was a big deal because the colonists had to overcome the isolation.

Some of the colonies though were pretty much alike each other and different from other ones so that there were sections- the New England section, the Middle section, and the Chesapeake section.

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“C” Essay (continued)

Notice also that the author is not careful about spelling or grammar and uses incomplete sentences or run-on sentences or very casual language (such as “it was a big deal”).

Most professors do not specifically “count off” for bad grammar or spelling, but they do count off for incomplete thoughts. Since a complete sentence expresses a complete thought, poor grammar does harm one’s grade.

The essay ends very abruptly. The author had not provided a concluding statement, nor are the implications of some of the comments fully explained.

This essay is merely adequate- it lacks a good organization, it omits too many details and it does not fully explain the implications of the points which are made.

They (the sections) were like each other because of the way the land was. The biggest difference was between the New England section and Chesapeake one. The land in New England was rocky so farming was no good, but the ocean was shallow so they started fishing which led to other things like shipbuilding. The Southern section had land that was much better for farming called the tidewater which they used to plant tobacco and they couldn’t use the ocean to make money because the water was too deep. So they mostly farmed, but they needed a lot of people for the crops so they ended up getting slaves. Which resulted in the Civil War. The middle colonies were sort of a mixture of the two.

“D” Essay Not Included



### An "F" Essay

Failing papers are all unique, but they do share this: the information is either wrong or so totally garbled that the reader can't make heads or tails of it.

This one indicates that the author may have been present for the lecture and has some vague notion of what the question is about. Clearly, however, the material is not organized. NO major points are made. It is merely a set of random pieces of information and many of these are simply wrong.

Almost invariably, the spelling, grammar, and punctuation in such a paper are dreadful and in many cases positively eccentric.

What would make it a zero paper (this one would probably get a few points)? If the answer indicated that the author had absolutely no idea what the question was about, the professor would probably score a zero.

What would make it a "D"? If the author could at least mention a point (such as "the many bays meant many different starts for the colonies"), many professors would kindly score it a bit higher into the passing range of points.

The ocean has lots of bays in N.A. the water Transportation and the fishing were quite important. But not in all places. Like for instance in the places with the tobacco where the slaves were brought to work and they had to have a civil war. But other places could not grow the crops for the slaves were needed so they made ships...which could be a problem because England didn't like that. So with the tobacco, some places were pretty isolated from the other places so when the war came with the revolution, they had a lot of trouble getting together because some of the people didn't like the idea of slaves but some did. So the geography cause the war.