

Common Essay Types

There are four common essay types that students may come across in most history classes. Provided below is a brief explanation of each type, sample essay prompts, and guidelines for crafting a thesis for each essay type.

Compare and Contrast

Compare and contrast essay prompts ask students, “What similarities and differences are there between the two things, are there more similarities or differences, and what are the reasons for these similarities and differences?”

Sample prompts include:

1. Compare and contrast the northern colonies and the southern colonies between 1607 and 1756.
2. Compare and contrast immigration during the 1840s and 1850s with immigration during the 1870s and 1880s.
3. Compare and contrast the tactics and methods of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X in the 1960s.

In crafting your thesis:

- X = your counter-argument to the Y statement
- Y = more similar OR more different

Cause and/or Effect

Causation essay prompts ask students, “What are the major causes or consequences of an event or movement and what were the most important causes or consequences of an event or movement?”

Sample prompts include:

1. Evaluate the causes of the Civil War (1861-1865).
2. Evaluate the effects of the Civil War (1861-1865).
3. Evaluate the extent to which westward expansion led to the development of sectionalism prior to 1860.
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the New Deal (1932-1938).

In crafting your thesis you have three options:

- Option 1 (causes): X = your counter-argument to the Y statement
Y = political, social, and/or economic
- Option 2 (effects): X = your counter-argument to the Y statement
Y = effective or ineffective
- Option 3 (effects): X = your counter-argument to the Y statement
Y = positive or negative

Devising a thesis statement for causation prompts will be the most difficult because of the number of approaches that can be taken. The option you choose will depend on the specific prompt and your understanding of the topic.

Continuity and Change Over Time

Continuity and change essay prompts ask students, “What are the major patterns of continuity or change over a time period, was there more continuity or change over that time period, and what were the reasons for the continuity and change?”

Sample prompts include:

1. Analyze the changing role of women within American society from the American Revolution (1776) to the Civil War (1865).
2. Evaluate the extent to which increasing globalization contributed to maintaining continuity as well as fostering change in US society from 1945 to the present.
3. Evaluate the extent of change and continuity in the lives of African Americans in the South during the period 1865 to 1905.

In crafting your thesis:

- X = your counter-argument to the Y statement
- Y = more continuity OR more change

Periodization

Periodization essay prompts ask students, “Was a specific event or time period a turning point and what were things like before and after the event or period?”

Sample prompts include:

1. Evaluate the extent to which the Spanish-American War (1898) was turning point in foreign policy in the United States.
2. Evaluate the extent to which the Declaration of Independence (1776) marked a turning point in American history.
3. Evaluate the extent to which the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) marked a turning point in the debate over slavery.

In crafting your thesis:

- X = your counter-argument to the Y statement
- Y = was a turning point (more change) OR was not a turning point (more continuity)