

AP US History[®]

DBQ Sample Essays

Created by: Chris Averill

AP[®] is a trademark registered by the College Board,
which is not affiliated with, and does not endorse,
this website.

Use these sample essays to better understand how graders evaluate the DBQ Rubric.

There are three essays:

Sample A – 7 Points

Sample B – 4 Points

Sample C – 1 Point

Sample A – 7 of 7 points

There is little doubt that the pushers of Revolution during the two decades before 1776 had numerous motives underlying their cause. The base foundation of the movement to revolution was a belief amongst many colonists that they enjoyed Englishmen's rights just like Englishmen in England. These ideas were spawned by the Enlightenment Era of the early 18th and were the philosophical underpinnings of the movement. However, the most significant cause of the movement towards independence were the economic benefits that such a revolution might bring - An end to British taxes and the ability to be economically self-sufficient. They would enjoy for themselves the wealth that they believed was being stolen by British manufacturers. These two underlying forces were brought into clear focus when a series of perceived tyrannical events by Britain occurred in the two decades before the revolution. Britain passed legislation that taxed them and violated their inalienable rights.

Fundamentally, the colonists had always thought of themselves as economically independent. Since the day the English landed at Jamestown and became economically viable with tobacco they were in many ways independent from England. England, like other European monarchies of the 18th century, had created the mercantile system of trade between the colonies and the mother country whereby they sold manufactured goods to the colonists in exchange for colonial agricultural goods and raw materials. Though both sides benefited to some degree, the colonists beginning in the early 18th century, began to skirt the very laws that England had emplaced to control this trade. They discovered that they could smuggle goods to the Spanish and French West Indies and make much larger profits than they could by only trading with the British West Indies. The mercantile system forced them to be paid less for their goods so that English middlemen could then sell their valuable goods (such as tobacco) to the Spanish and French. When the British caught on to colonial smuggling they began to crack down on smugglers with the Sugar Act of 1764. They took away trial by jury in the new Vice-Admiralty courts created. Unbeknownst to the King, they had now taken the first steps towards creating the Revolution.

Economics was always the motivator for the colonists. The first attempt to coordinate trade efforts of the colonies occurred during the French and Indian War. The Albany Plan proposed by Ben Franklin and others would have created an inter-colonial assembly that would have power over inter-colonial trade. Franklin attempted to get them to join with his famous veiled threat that if they didn't join in this effort they would all die a divided death. (1) Though the plan was never adopted, it did show even as early as 1754 a tendency of the colonists to attempt to unite to fight common issues without the assistance of England. This tendency was tempered by the fact that the 13 colonies were anything but similar in their economic outlook. The southern colonies traded almost exclusively with England, while the northern colonies had a diverse economy trading all manner of foodstuffs and raw materials. The north was itching to spread their economic wings probably moreso than the southern colonies at this point. However, all the colonies during the 1760's were increasingly aware of the importance of their trade to England and the possibility that if they were to become independent they might enjoy the fruits of their own labor. As seen in Washington's letter, he hints at the possibility that the colonies have within themselves the keys to their own economic destiny when he suggests that colonial frugality could be a "necessary stimulation to industry". (3)

British taxation policies on the colonists were one of the most visible and atrocious acts perceived by the colonists. For over a century, the colonists had accepted the parliamentary taxes on foreign goods entering the colony (external taxes) for purposes of payment for British naval protection. However, with the taxing of British West Indies sugar into the 13 mainland colonies under the 1764 Sugar Act Parliament had begun taxing goods traded between colonies and not just foreign goods. Never before had the Parliament taxed colonial goods traded within and between colonies (internal taxation). When Parliament passed the Stamp Act, which was a far reaching internal tax, taxing paper items, deeds, wills and many other items, the colonies exploded in opposition. In response to this tax, the Virginia Assembly stated that they were the only legitimately elected legislature that had the "exclusive right and power to levy taxes" (2) In addition to taxes, The economic right to private property was directly infringed upon when British troops would search anywhere and anytime with their writs of assistance. Sam Adams thought this extremely tyrannical for the British were violating "personal security, personal liberty, and private property." (4)

Underlying all of these issues with taxation was the commonly accepted belief that American colonists were the same in every respect to their English countrymen in England. They enjoyed the same rights that all Englishmen held. However, by 1776, it was very evident that the Crown and Parliament did not feel the same way. As seen in the Declaration of Independence, most Americans believed that they – the people – empowered the government when they gave their consent to their government to rule over them. (7) They also believed that they had inalienable rights. However, the British over nearly two decades had taken these rights away. Increasingly, the Crown had infringed on virtually every right they held dear. They had taken away trial by jury in the vice-admiralty courts where they were guilty until they proved their innocence. They were taxed without their consent and they had no privacy rights. The ultimate irony is that the loyalists believed the Crown was benevolent and was listening to the colonial petitions. They claimed that the colonial assemblies were seditious because they were denouncing those that opposed them. (5) This might have been true if the Crown and Royal governors were not in the business of closing down the colonial assemblies as they did in Massachusetts in the 1773 Intolerable Acts or in Virginia in 1775. It appears that direct opposition to the crown was not acceptable. The one piece of propaganda that was intended to convince all colonists of these very simple, yet clearly tyrannical actions so that they would support the revolution was Paine's Common Sense. One of his arguments was that hereditary rights were anathema to individual initiative and that thus the monarchical system itself was thus corrupt. (6)

In short, though the Enlightenment principles of Locke's social contract and the belief in inalienable rights were a strong foundation for the revolution, the fact was that the colonists would not tolerate a perceived stifling of their economic rights. Excessive taxation and denial of economic self-sufficiency for well over a century were the true causes of this revolution. Enjoying the fruits of their own labor and economic liberty were prizes too big not to revolt.

Rationale: Sample A

Thesis / Claim – (1 of 1 points)

- The student correctly identifies the underlying forces for the revolution as economic discrimination against the colonists and violations of enlightenment principles by the Crown.
- The student also maintains that the economic reasons for revolting were more significant thus pointing directly to the relative importance of the two factors.

Contextualization: (1 of 1 points)

- In paragraph 2, the student thoroughly explains the system of mercantilism that existed in the 18th century as the trade development that preceded and continued during the period of the question. This context directly establishes the fundamental economic trend and why its monopolistic tendencies were a cause of the revolution. This is an extremely healthy explanation and points would have been awarded even if it was half this length.

Evidence:

Document Content use: (2 of 2 points)

- The student correctly utilizes the content of all 7 documents. Docs 1 and 3 are used in par. 3. Docs 2 and 4 are used in paragraph 4. Docs 7, 5 and 6 are used in paragraph 5.
- Pay particular attention to how the student only uses “power quotes” to finish thoughts. The student takes the main idea/perspective/opinion of the document and ties it directly to its larger issue presented.

Evidence outside the documents: (1 of 1 points)

- In paragraph 4, the student received the point for its clear and extensive discussion of taxation issues. It correctly brings forth the colonial distinctions between internal and external taxes and gives specific laws that illustrated it.
- Note that the student brings in quite a bit of outside evidence throughout. However, to get the point a student needs to only bring forth a single issue/trend/development or piece of outside information and directly tie it to the argument made. A simple phrase or mention will not get the point

Analysis and Reasoning:

Document Sourcing: (1 of 1 points)

- In par. 3, the student established the historical context for Doc. 1 with the discussion of the Albany Plan for Union and proposed inter-colonial assembly that would control trade.
- In par. 4, the student established the historical context for Doc. 2 with the discussion of the Stamp Act thus causing the House of Burgesses’ reaction as seen in their Resolves.
- Also in par. 4, The historical context of the Doc. 4 is established with the discussion of the writs of assistance.
- In par. 5 the historical context for the accusations in the Declaration of Independence are seen after the document is introduced by establishing the violations of trial by jury as seen in the Vice-Admiralty courts.

- Also in par. 5, the student established the purpose of Doc. 6 with its reference to “convince the colonists of these.... Clearly tyrannical actions”. The significance of this purpose was to get them to join the revolutionary cause.

** It is important to note that the student would have gotten the point for only three of these, but it is always good practice to attempt to source 4 or 5 documents not just exactly three for there is a possibility that you might not state one accurately or completely

** Also, make sure that you include the significances of the sourcing. This significances of the historical context elements occurred when they were tied to the question. The purpose significance for Doc. 6 was established with the attempt to get them to join the revolution.

Argument development: (1 of 1 points)

- This is an extraordinary essay. This student demonstrates a complex understanding of the issue as seen in its taking complete control of the question.
- The student does an exceptional job of qualifying regional economic differences and similarities in paragraph 2. The student establishes the economic differences between the Northern and Southern economies, but also manages to explain how they were increasingly seeing a unity in purpose in questioning their subservient role in the system of mercantilism. This is very strong interpretive narrative.
- The student shows deep insight with the modifying of the Tories’ perspective in paragraph 5 when it establishes the irony of accusing the Congresses of being seditious when in fact the Royal Governors were shutting down assemblies.
- This essay is well organized, uses the documents adroitly and shows a much deeper and complex understanding of the issues than the typical document driven essay.

Sample B – 4 of 7 points

There were a number of factors that caused Americans to revolt during the twenty years prior to the Revolution. The British did not let the colonies have their own trade. They also violated a number of individual rights. Events that showed these violations were acts such as the Stamp Act and Intolerable Acts. Probably, the most important reason was the violation of natural rights for without these there is no freedom.

Enlightenment ideas were ideas about liberty and individual rights. They began in the 18th century. The colonists thought that their rights were being taken away. In Common Sense, Thomas Paine states that hereditary rights of kings could not be the basis of a good government. (6) Other rights taken away were stated in the Declaration of Independence in an attempt to convince the colonies to unify to revolt against the British monarchy. The Declaration included John Locke's idea of a social contract. (7) Even Tories brought up enlightenment principles. In 1775, a Tory wrote that colonists enjoyed the natural right of petitions and that the Crown and Parliament were listening to colonial concerns. (5) If not for enlightened ideas there wouldn't have been a revolution.

Economic issues were also a big topic that caused the Revolution. The British had taxed the colonists for two decades. The Sugar Act and Townshend Acts were two taxes that caused the colonists anger because the Crown was taxing them internally. The Stamp Act caused the largest outcry for it taxed many items and was a direct tax. The House of Burgesses opposed these with their Virginia Resolves. They stated that only colonial legislatures had the power to tax within the colonies (2) Sam Adams, the leader of the Sons of Liberty who tried to bring about revolution, stated that the colonists enjoined all the rights of Englishmen, including protection of their property rights. (4) These taxes violated those property rights.

Unity was another issue arising during this time. The 1754 "join or die" cartoon was an attempt to unite the colonies. The point of view of the cartoon is that of a Rebel. (1) George Washington also attempted to bring the colonies together to support British manufacturing in order to reduce taxes. (3) Though not all agreed with revolting, many did. By 1776, the reasons to revolt were too great and the Revolution began.

Rationale: Sample B – 4 of 7 points

Thesis/Claim: (1 of 1 points)

- The thesis is found in the introduction paragraph. It states that British violated economic and natural rights and states the relative importance by elevating natural rights by stating that there is no liberty without protections of natural rights. Though the thesis is simplistic, it gets over the bar by making a claim it will try to substantiate.

Contextualization: (0 of 1 points)

- The attempt at the beginning of paragraph 2 to establish a contextualization point with the discussion of Enlightenment ideas does not get over the bar for the point. The discussion needs more elaboration as to what the individual rights and Enlightened principles were and how they were a fundamental force causing the revolution.

Evidence:

Document Use: (1 of 2 points)

- The student accurately uses only 5 of 7 documents and thus only receives 1 of 2 points.
- Docs. 5,6,7 in paragraph 2 and Docs. 2 and 4 in par. 3 are all used accurately.
- However, the reference to the content of Doc. 1 is very unclear and thus doesn't get credit. Over what issue is the cartoon attempting to unite them? The student must clarify the reason. The cartoon itself was an attempt to unite the colonies to fight the Native-Americans during the French and Indian War and support the Albany Plan for Union and is unrelated to the American Revolution 22 years later as the student implies with its qualifying sentence.
- Doc. 3 is misinterpreted. Washington was not proposing that colonists support British manufacturing, but rather, to reject it.

Outside Evidence: (1 of 1 points)

- Though not very elaborate, the discussion at the beginning of paragraph 3 concerning taxation gets over the threshold to receive the point. There is enough elaboration of what the taxes were and why they were offensive to the colonists to warrant the point.

Analysis and Reasoning

Document Sourcing: (1 of 1 points)

- In par. 2, the student establishes the purpose of the Declaration of Independence when it states that it was attempting to join the colonies together to fight the British.
- In par. 3, the historical context for the Resolves was introduced with the Stamp Act discussion.
- In par.3, the point of view for document 4 is given with the discussion of the significance of the Sons of Liberty in connection with Sam Adams.
- In par. 4, the attempt at point of view for the cartoon (ie. a Rebel) is incorrect. In 1754, the issue for the cartoon was not independence from England, but rather uniting to fight the Indians in the North and West. Thus, Loyalists and Rebels did not exist at that point.

Argument development: (0 of 1 points)

- The student attempts to develop an argument but fails to tie the simplistic ideas together to show a more complex understanding of the issues. For example, though the student maintains that enlightened principles were the major cause of the Revolution, they do not prove it. There's a passing reference to how enlightened principles are key to liberty in the introduction paragraph and also a simplistic assertion in paragraph 2 that revolution would not have occurred if enlightened ideas did not exist. The student must explain how and why this is true and develop the discussion in much more nuanced terms to show a deeper understanding.
- Also, in paragraph 4, the student loses sight of the argument they were attempting to develop. The discussion of unity is not related to the larger issue that they were addressing – the underlying forces that caused the revolution. Their line of thinking was taxation violations and infringements on natural rights. In par. 4 they move into a tangent that has nothing to do with these forces

Sample C (1 of 7 points)

There were many reasons for the American Revolution. The colonists were angry at the British and wanted to revolt. There were also many events that led to the Revolution between 1754 and 1776.

In Document 1, the snake shows disunity in the colonies. The colonists were probably angry over how the king was trying to divide them. In the Virginia Resolves, Document 2, the colonists said that they had the right to tax themselves. Taxes seemed to make them very angry. This was in response to the Intolerable Acts and other taxes. George Washington also did not like these taxes and said that manufacturers would help American industry. (3)

The letter from the farmer seems to show anger also. He is angry at the king when he says that he was “condemning the conduct of the King”. (5) The King had mistreated them and ruled tyrannically over them. Many papers were written stating this anger. By 1776 and the shots at Lexington the country had to revolt. In the Declaration of Independence, the colonists declare their independence when they say that the king broke the social contract with the people (7)

Rationale: Sample C – 1 of 7 points

Thesis/Claim: (0 of 1 point)

- The student does not establish a line of reasoning for their essay. Stating the colonists were angry does not indicate the factors that caused this anger. The introduction sentences also do not introduce the relative importance of any factors.

Contextualization: (0 of 1 points)

- There is no attempt at contextualization.

Evidence:

Document Use: (1 of 2 points)

- The student uses 3 of the 7 documents (Docs. 1,2,7) to address topics associated with the question and thus receives one point.
- In paragraph 2, Doc. 1 is accurately stated as to what it presents – disunity. However, the sentence following it is in error in reference to the king trying to divide them. Document 2 is presented accurately and tied to the topic of taxes. Doc. 3 is misinterpreted.
- In paragraph 3, Doc. 4 is not related to a topic. Also, the student does not show how having the rights of Englishmen is connected to colonial anger. Document 5 is misinterpreted for the author is a Tory who supports the King. The Declaration of Independence is accurately used to support the claim of anger by colonists.
- Document 6 was not used in the essay.

Outside Evidence: (0 of 1 points)

- The attempt to discuss taxes in paragraph 2 does not receive the point. It is not elaborated on enough and the Intolerable Acts were not taxes. The Intolerable Acts also did not precede the Va. Resolves.
- The passing reference to Lexington in paragraph 3 is also not elaborated upon enough to receive the point for outside evidence

Analysis and Reasoning:

Document Sourcing: (0 of 1 points)

- There are no attempts to source the documents.

Argument Development: (0 of 1)

- This is essentially a document driven essay. The student presents the documents in a very simplistic way while often misrepresenting them. There is little understanding shown of the larger forces at work bringing about the Revolution. The lack of clearly defined factors other than a passing references to taxes and anger prevents this student from receiving the point.