

ESSAY TEST TIPS

When You're Studying:

- **PLAN AHEAD:** When you get essay questions in advance, decide how to explain each major term or theme as you study. Challenge yourself to condense answers into concise, 2-3 sentence summaries of each term or concept that explain both **what** it is and **why** it's important. Know what examples (events, statistics, etc.) illustrate each theme.
- **MAKE NOTES FOR EACH READING:** This will help you be very clear about each document, chapter, or novel, keeping them distinct so that you when you get to the test you will be able to refer to them more specifically and quickly in your essay.

When You're Writing:

- **READ/ANSWER ALL OF THE QUESTION:** History tests often ask about continuity and change, for instance, but they don't always ask you to talk about both. Questions also tend to ask about several themes—economic, political, etc.—so make sure you address all of them. Be sure that you understand what the question asks you to do and don't let a long question introduction throw you off. Answer exactly what the question is asking. This is the # 1 reason students lose points on essay tests.
- **EXPLAIN WHY:** Try not to describe important themes. Cite specific examples from your reading and analyze them—i.e. explain what's significant. Try to answer the question, "What does X tell us about early America?"
- **EXPLAIN YOUR TERMS/EXPLAIN HOW:** Very similar to the above point, but in reference to specific terms (investment bank, mining frontier, etc.). Contextualize these terms to make it clear that you understand them—not just that you can match a term with a topic. You cannot analyze what you only cite. For example, don't stop at saying, "Religion motivated to colonization." Do say, "X religion did Y activity that motivated to colonization in Z ways."
- **WRITE CLEAR TOPIC SENTENCES:** that refer back to your intro and thesis for every paragraph: Make each paragraph get you one step closer to convincing me of whatever you said in your introduction. This will help you stay on task with the essay topic and avoid those thoughtful rabbit trails that make you run out of time!
- **CITE SPECIFIC EXAMPLES:** It takes longer to explain themes in vague terms than it does to cite a relevant case and analyze it—use reading to your advantage to make clear points quickly.
- **CONTRAST PRE- AND POST-CHANGE CONDITIONS:** It's not enough to say, "American labor patterns changed." Answer these questions: Labor patterns changed from what to what? Where do we see this change? What is the difference before and after?

If you tend to run out of time: Be adamant about making everything in your essay count toward answering or supporting your answer for the test question.

If you tend to finish quickly: Make sure each paragraph answers the questions "what," "why," and "how." What are you talking about? Why is it important in American history? How do we see this in late nineteenth-century American history?