What is a History Essay?

Instructors assign essays to give you the opportunity to study a specific subject and to develop conclusions of your own about it. The main object of the exercise are to get you to think about the subject and to reach conclusions based on relevant evidence and the creation of a logical argument.

Essay topics are generally framed as questions to be answered or problems to be analyzed. For example, the essay topic “Assess the

relative importance of political and economic factors in the origins of the French Revolution” asks you to decide which were more important in explaining the outbreak of the Revolution: political factors or economic factors. Some instructors may ask you to devise your own essay topic to give you an opportunity to study a problem you find particularly interesting. It is important to frame your topic as a question or problem so that you do not write an essay that is simply descriptive or a narrative of events. There is no single "right answer" to any question posed in an essay assignment in History.

The conclusions you come to might be judged more or less "right." What is important is not only the conclusion you reach but also the evidence and arguments you use to support it. In the example of the essay on the French Revolution, you could make a case that (a) political factors were more important than economic, (b) economic factors were more important than political, (c) other factors (such as social) were more important than either political or economic. The evidence you collect will lead you to one of these conclusions.

Although there is no single "right answer" to a question in History, there are "wrong answers." You could not successfully argue, for example, that political or economic factors were totally irrelevant to the origins of the French Revolution and that the Revolution was caused by a particular conjunction of the stars and planets. The important thing to remember is that you are asked to assess evidence and to present an informed point of view, not merely to give an opinion. Reaching conclusions in History is not the same as having an opinion about a movie or whether apples taste better than oranges. Historians use agreed upon rules of evidence and argument. They select information relevant to the problem they are analyzing, they apply the evidence fairly, and they argue logically. When you write an essay you are required to practice the same rules as professional historians: to collect all relevant evidence, assess it fairly, and use it to construct a logical argument with a conclusion that expresses the weight of the evidence. If you were writing the essay on the origins of the French Revolution you would find some historians arguing that political factors were most important while others argued for economic factors. As you read their respective works, weigh up their arguments. Even though you might find each side has valid points you will probably find that, overall, one side has a stronger case. Do not try to guess which argument or conclusion your instructor favors and then write an essay that supports his or her position. Nor should you simply repeat the views expressed in the books and articles you have read while preparing the essay.

You must be very careful to set out the argument (or "thesis") of your essay, usually in your introduction. History often seems to be a story, a sequence of events or "narrative," and it is all too easy to fall into the trap of writing an essay that is no more than a recounting of a series of events with a brief opinion tacked on at the end. It is important to remember that a History essay is an exercise in developing a strong argument and an interpretive position based

on the fair use of solid and relevant evidence. In the French Revolution for example, it would be useless to give a narrative account of the origins of the Revolution that did not weigh political and economic factors