

lege), Dr. George Frakes (emeritus of Santa Barbara City College), Professor Katherine Sibley (of St. Joseph's University), Drs. Todd Pfannestiel and Janet Knepper (of the History and English Departments, respectively, of Clarion University), Anthony Maccarella (my high school teaching consultant at Parsippany Hills High School), and Mary Dougherty of Houghton Mifflin Company for their comments and suggestions. I also thank Susan and Catherine Frakes for once again reading several drafts and Hannah and Lilith for their patience. I encourage students to work through this handbook carefully, reflect on their own writing, and also reflect on other writing that they encounter throughout their lives.

Frakes, Robert. *Writing for College History*.  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

---

## CHAPTER 1

### Short Writing Assignments

---

This chapter will lead the student through various kinds of short writing assignments starting with the sentence and progressing to the paragraph, the journal, and the letter. Some of these are typically given as in-class writing assignments and others may be required as homework. As you read through the sections, please pay particular attention to the examples and try to learn the ropes of what makes an effective written response.

#### 1.1 The Sentence

All students should be familiar with the sentence as the smallest building block of writing. Typically defined as "a complete thought," the sentence should be composed of, minimally, a subject, a verb, and usually an object. Sentences that don't contain the minimum ingredients are classified as "sentence fragments," and those that are so overly-long that they contain more than one complete thought are "run-on" sentences.

#### Examples of Good and Bad Sentences

I use the terms "good" and "bad" throughout this handbook. While "effective" and "ineffective" might be more sensitive equivalents to "good" and "bad," it is important to remember that you are trying to write clearly and to earn a good grade in your history course.

*Alexander the Great conquered Egypt around 334 B.C.*  
(Subject: Alexander; Verb: conquered; Direct Object: Egypt.  
The approximate date gives additional information.)

*One city state many gods around important.* (This sentence is garbled because of its lack of a verb. I presume the student meant to insert the verb "had," although I'm still a little unclear on the word "important" tacked at the end. Perhaps the sentence

was supposed to convey: *One city state had many gods and believed they were very important. On the other hand, maybe the sentence should have read: It is very important that one city state had many gods.*)

*Theodore Roosevelt* were president of the United States in 1900. (This sentence suffers from a lack of subject-verb agreement. A singular subject must have a verb form in the singular; a plural subject should use a plural verb form.)

You can see why clear sentence structure is critical. While an instructor may be generous and try to decipher the intended meaning of your words, many instructors will not and, in fact, will feel it is part of their job to teach you to write clearly. Instructors often hold to the adage: "Fuzzy writing indicates fuzzy thinking."

## 1.2 The Sentence as a Building Block

While instructors may require you to write a sentence in response to a question on an examination, you will more likely be required to use sentences in larger units of writing such as an identification paragraph, an essay, a book review, or a paper. In any of these units, you should effectively use various kinds of sentences such as a topic sentence (to introduce the paragraph or argument), sentences developing examples and evidence (to show your knowledge of a subject or to build an argument), transition sentences (to shift from one topic to another), and a concluding sentence (to state the significance of what you are writing).

### Examples of Various Kinds of Sentences

In the following examples, determine if the sentences are playing the role of a topic sentence, a developing sentence, a transition sentence, or a concluding sentence.

*There are several key reasons why the Romans were able to conquer the Mediterranean World.* (This topic sentence is set-up a paragraph, essay, or paper.)

*Another critical reason for the expansion of Christianity is the organization of a hierarchy in the early Church.* (This topic sentence introduces a paragraph within an essay.)

*While the Romans lost 50,000 troops at the Battle of Cannae in 216 B.C., they were able to go on to win the war because of their enormous manpower reserves.* (This sentence develops an example as part of a greater argument.)

*In his novel Babbitt, Sinclair Lewis satirizes the middle class values of mid-twentieth century America.* (This sentence develops primary source evidence as part of a greater argument.)

*In addition to taxation issues, the ideology of Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke provided further drive for revolutionary change.* (This sentence marks a transition from the treatment of one example to another.)

*Although there were many reasons for Rome's expansion, the Roman concept of abstract citizenship would go on to influence many important future states, including the United States.* (This sentence concludes a paragraph or essay.)

## 1.3 The Paragraph

A paragraph is a group of sentences (at least two), developing a central idea. Usually you start with a topic (or introductory) sentence, write several sentences developing different examples, and end with a concluding sentence. You will probably be assigned to write paragraphs either as "identification paragraphs" or as building blocks of essays (or both).

### 1.4 The History Identification Paragraph

A standard part of examinations in many college history courses throughout the United States is the "identification paragraph." Rather than simply requiring students to memorize events and respond to a list, the identification paragraph (sometimes called by its abbreviation "I. D.") requires the student to give not only some critical historical information, but also to interpret that information.

Although instructors are sometimes loath to explain what should be the “proper” length, try to aim for around four to five sentences. Keep in mind that the identification paragraph should be able to stand alone, with an introductory sentence, supporting sentences in a logical order, and a concluding sentence. A handy guide to remembering what should be addressed in a history I. D. paragraph are the 5 Ws:

Who?

What?

Where?

When?

and So What? (or What is the historical significance of the person, place, or event?)

Let’s walk through an example. Usually the instructor will pick critical names of people, events, or developments that have been topics of the instructor’s lectures. For our example, we’ll write a history identification paragraph on ziggurats (a classic exam subject for an Early Western or World Civilization class).

Now, if you were constructing an I. D. paragraph on ziggurats you would want to address the 5 W’s as previously mentioned.

You could accomplish this task in a minimum of about four sentences. After a quick review of your notes, you might easily come up with:

What = a temple

Where = Mesopotamia

This information could be the core of your introductory first sentence: *A ziggurat was a temple in ancient Mesopotamia.* So far, so good.

How about When? You might know that ziggurats existed in Mesopotamia for centuries. So, a safe dating would be to give a range: *A ziggurat was a temple in ancient Mesopotamia. Mesopotamians worshipped at ziggurats for centuries from c. 3000 B.C.E.–1000 B.C.E.*

The Who aspect of this particular identification paragraph is a little more complicated. Since we cannot easily come up with an individual associated with a ziggurat, we can instead use an official, such as the priest-kings who performed sacrifices there. So, now we have a paragraph in progress that reads:

*A ziggurat was a temple in ancient Mesopotamia. Mesopotamians worshipped at ziggurats for centuries from c. 3000 B.C.E.–1000 B.C.E. The priest-kings of Mesopotamian cities ruled from the ziggurats and performed sacrifices there.*

Thus far, we have covered Who, What, Where, and When and so have four of the five essential points. Since this covers 80%, our I. D. paragraph to this point might realistically be given the grade of “B.” To complete it, we need to answer So What—the historical significance part. It is useful to think of this as the concluding sentence of your paragraph. A quick and simple way to set up the sentence is to write: *Ziggurats are historically significant because....*

This is where you have to do some interpretation. Ultimately, you will want to tie the specific example of ziggurats to the larger general historical view of the period (in this case, the ancient Near East). If you are taking an early Western or World Civilization course, you probably will have noticed that your textbook and instructor have stressed the religious nature of society in the ancient Near East. This would fit very well with your identification paragraph on ziggurats. So, in the end, your I. D. paragraph might read:

*A ziggurat was a temple in ancient Mesopotamia. Mesopotamians worshipped at ziggurats for centuries from c. 3000 B.C.E.–1000 B.C.E. The priest-kings of Mesopotamian cities ruled from the ziggurats and performed sacrifices there. Ziggurats are historically significant because they show the central role religion had in ancient Mesopotamia and in the ancient Near East.*

### Time Budgeting for Identification Paragraphs

A critical point to keep in mind when you are taking in-class written examinations is how much time you have available. If

You are taking a standard Monday/Wednesday/Friday class, you might have 50 minutes available for the examination. (Likewise, you might have 75 minutes if it is a Tuesday/Thursday class.) Hypothetically, you might be asked to compose three identification paragraphs and one essay in 50 minutes. If that is the case, you should plan out beforehand how much time you should devote to each section of the exam. Be sure to ask your instructor ahead of time about how the exam will be structured.

Although the amount of time for an adequate response varies from instructor to instructor, five minutes should provide enough time to develop the core of an identification paragraph. This would give you one minute to organize your thoughts and then a minute on each sentence if you were to write four sentences. If you did indeed have 50 minutes for the exam and had to write three I. D.'s and an essay, you would then spend 15 minutes on the I. D.'s and have 35 minutes left for the essay. Train yourself to immediately budget the time needed for the different parts of the exam. Practice cracking out an I. D. in five minutes.

Since that is just one scenario, ask your instructor how long you should aim to spend on each part of the test. Ideally, you would ask this question a week before the test so that you could use the information when studying. Most importantly, wear a watch and bring extra pens and pencils!

### Examples of Good and Bad Identification Paragraphs

The following are some examples of identification paragraphs for lower-division introductory history courses (Western, World, and U.S.). Regardless of the course you are taking, it will be useful for you to examine these samples from a technical point of view. As you read through the examples, try to evaluate them in terms of the guidelines you have read. Do they have at least three sentences? Do they address "Who, What, Where, When, and Historical Significance"? Do they have complete sentences?

**Identification Paragraph #1: Ziggurat.** *A ziggurat was a temple in ancient society. Ziggurats were very important in ancient nations.*

**Comments:** This I. D. paragraph defines "what" the ziggurat was, but that is about it. It needs the "where" (Mesopotamia), "when" (c. 3000 B.C.E.), "who" (the priest-kings who conducted sacrifices, issued laws, and collected taxes here), and "historical significance" (showing the central role of religion in ancient Mesopotamian society or something to that effect).

**Identification Paragraph # 2: Pharaoh** *This was a king of a town or municipality or borough in olden times. He was a priest. There was one in each town in Asia. He was in charge of sacrifices and taking care of widows and orphans.*

**Comments:** This paragraph is not only lacking information, it contains misinformation. While a pharaoh was a monarch and so a type of "king," he was in charge of the Kingdom of Egypt, not a city-state "in Asia." There was not a pharaoh in every "town, municipality, or borough," but one for the entire kingdom. Also, the student does not give even an approximate date, just "olden times." Again, the student needs to go through the check list of who, what, where, when, and historical significance.

**Identification Paragraph #3: Neolithic Revolution** *The Neolithic Revolution, or "New Stone Age," took place c. 10,000 B.C.E. During this development early humans shifted from hunting and gathering to agriculture as their economic basis. This happened at various places, probably simultaneously, including the Fertile Crescent, West Africa, and India. Agriculture is important because it created a surplus of food and allowed populations to rise. It also freed 10% of the population from food production and this allowed for specialization of labor. This led to the creation of towns and to government.*

**Comments:** This I. D. paragraph is quite good. The author deals with "who, what, where, when," and even historical significance. In comparison to the preceding two examples, an instructor would probably quickly give it an "A." The one flaw (and again this would be minor) is that the author jumps to the crea-

tion of government at the end of the paragraph without directly spelling out the connection to agriculture (surplus, taxes, war).

**Identification Paragraph #4: Articles of Confederation** *When the American Colonies were emerging as the winner of their revolution against Great Britain at the end of the 1770s, their leaders (such as John Hancock and Robert Morris) realized they needed to form some kind of unified government. They came up with the first Constitution of the United States of America called the "Articles of Confederation" (ratified in 1781). The articles provided for a common defense and foreign policy, but had a weak centralized executive and had trouble raising taxes to deal with debts incurred during the war of independence. This ultimately led to the writing of our current constitution in 1787 with a strong executive branch. George Washington was the first president under this second (and still existing) constitution.*

**Comments:** This is a solid identification paragraph. It deals with the five Ws in a clear manner. The author could give a little more clarification on the problems of the Articles of Confederation to provide a clearer analysis of how such problems led to our current constitution.

**Identification Paragraph #5: Charles Darwin** *Charles Darwin was a rich Englishman of the 19th century who is famous for his books Origin of Species (1859) and the Descent of Man (1871). After studying theology, Darwin went on a voyage around the world on the H.M.S. Beagle and was impressed by the diversity of plant and animal life which led him to develop the "Theory of Evolution" in which he argued that plants and animals evolved over a long period of time and were affected by natural selection and the survival of the fittest. In the Descent of Man he argued that human beings also evolved over thousands of years from earlier forms. His theories are important because they conflicted with the traditional Biblical view presented at the beginning of the Book of Genesis that states that God created the world,*

*plants, animals, and humans in the course of a week (in 4004 BC according to Bishop Ussher).*

**Comments:** This is clearly a very strong I. D. paragraph. The student not only effectively covers the five Ws, but also develops the examples and historical significance well. The second sentence is overly long and could have been split after "diversity of plant and animal life." One possible weakness in this paragraph is that the student may have spent more than the allotted time in composing it, potentially forfeiting time on other sections of the exam. Again, make sure you have enough total time to develop your identification paragraphs and the essay (or other parts of your exam) adequately.

### How to Review for Identification Paragraphs

Now you have an idea as to what you should be aiming for when you compose an identification paragraph. This knowledge alone should help you better prepare for an examination because it will allow you to sift through your notes and estimate what is likely to come up on the exam. Identification paragraph terms have to be somewhat specific, yet still able to be tied into a larger historical context. So, people, subjects, and dates such as "zigurat, pharaoh, Constantine, Martin Luther, 1789, and Lenin" would all be potential I. D. paragraph terms for a Western Civilization or World Civilization class while "rivers, stone, and towns" would not. Likewise, "Stamp Act, Great Awakening, Dred Scott Decision, Brown vs. Board of Education, and New Deal" might be likely terms for a U.S. history survey course while "economy, religion, and America" would not. A useful exercise in preparing for an exam would be to review your lecture notes and try to come up with three potential I. D. terms for each lecture. Then look at the "master list" you have compiled and see if you are able to address the five Ws for each of your potential terms. If you cannot, it is time to review your notes and check your textbook.