

Answering the Question

Any AP World History Reader can tell you that the #1 problem at the Reading, every year, every question, is that “students don’t answer the question.”¹ Trying to get students to focus squarely on the question is surprising difficult. I found that too often I was assuming students knew exactly what the question asked, and were perfectly capable of answering it. Lo, how wrong I was!

One of the obstacles is that students often don’t realize that questions have three “axes” of specificity: Time, Place, and Topic. “Time” is the “when” of the question. “Place” is the “where,” and “Topic” is the “what” that each question asks. If students don’t have all three of these “coordinate” characteristics, their essay will be irrelevant to the question.

For example, if the question asks students

“Analyze the religious and economic effects of the Bubonic Plague along the Silk Routes in the 14th century.

Then the “Time” = “14th century”

“Place” = “along the Silk Routes”

“Topic” = “religious and economic effects of the Bubonic Plague”

But how do students know *which* words in the essay prompt are the “important” ones to which they have to pay attention? (Answer: Practice!) Students honestly don’t already know how to parse the words in essay questions! This resource is designed to help them develop the skills necessary to parse the question and specifically focus their writing.

I’ve included a blank “template” of the graphic organizer that you can photocopy or place on an overhead transparency. (It’s deceptively simple, students can easily draw their own on their own paper.)

For any question, ask students to write the “Time, Place, and Topic” inside the circle. Emphasize that every sentence in their essay must relate to all three of these characteristics. Equally important, while students are parsing the relevant “Time, Place, and Topic,” encourage them to nominate related times, places, and topics that are NOT directly relevant to the question. Place those “near misses” outside the circle. The only time a “near miss” is admissible is for the Continuity and Change Over Time Essay, Rubric Category #4, Global Context (Uses relevant world historical context effectively to explain continuity and change over time.)

Hopefully this will help them focus their thinking. When they get their essay back and some of it is crossed out as being irrelevant, they’ll quickly see that the reason a sentence was crossed out was because it dealt with something “outside the circle.”

The final step is to get students to focus on the *verb* in the prompt. (“Analyze” ≠ “Describe”) They should write the verb in the center of the “bull’s eye.”

Hope this helps,

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¹ They answer something *related* to the question, or what they *wish* the question had asked, or a question for which they actually *know* some factual information, but not the question *as it is printed on the paper in front of them*.