

Developing Your Thematic Essay

The Thematic Essay in the History 12 Exam asks you to discuss a major historical concept (e.g. nationalism) using as many relevant examples as possible. The essay question is usually very open-ended, like “What was the impact of nationalism on the 20th century?” The simplest strategy is to mimic the question (the so-called “soft” option) and place a series of examples in a list of paragraphs. The much *better* option is to use your examples to develop a perspective on the topic. This perspective evaluates and categorizes the examples; it is the so-called “hard” option. How do we develop this perspective?

First, we start with the Writing Process:

- We begin by brainstorming as many relevant examples as possible; we write them down quickly and without evaluating their usefulness. If our topic is nationalism, we might use examples from Europe, the Third World, the two superpowers during the Cold War, and so on. Representative examples from **across the globe** and **across the century** are the best. [i]
- Then we must sort and group. The key question is, “Are there any *patterns* that I can detect?” In other words, are there aspects (historical, political, economic, etc.) that separate some examples from others? This mental process of categorization is similar to that Sesame Street song, “One of These Things Doesn’t Belong Here”! [ii]
- If we can detect such differences, we can begin to gain perspective on our examples. We realize, in the case of nationalism, that not all examples are the same. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to have just one big list of examples in an essay about 20th century nationalism.
- With these groups, we can then create a thesis and an outline that reflects these differences. Now we have essay with an “edge”. Do be aware that historians can't prove things like scientists, but we can detect trends and generalizations. That's as much as free human beings would tolerate!
- Sometimes the command words make the job of grouping your examples easy, such as "compare and contrast" and "assess." However, other phrases are more open-ended, like "discuss the significance," "explain" and "describe." Grouping examples in these cases is not so obvious.

i.
Cuba
Stalinist Russia
Fascist Italy
Self-Determination after WW1
Cold War ideologies
Vietnam
Nazi Germany
India
Africa

ii.
Fascist Italy
Nazi Germany
Stalinist Russia
Cold War ideologies

India
Vietnam
Africa
Cuba

This essay will discuss two types of nationalisms; now we have that edge!