

First Midterm: Essay Questions

Writing an effective short essay

For the essay question on the first midterm, you will choose **one** of two questions. These are questions that allow you to talk about a lot of information from various periods of the course; you should use them as spurs **not** to do any additional research outside the textbook, but just to pull together a number of strands from lecture and readings. (Don't overestimate how much time half an hour is to write an essay, either: You'll only be writing about three times as much as on a typical response.

You'll notice that each of the questions asks you to deal with counterarguments. The reason for this is twofold. First, you can't make a good argument without understanding what the likely objections will be. Second, you should not omit basic information just because it's contrary to the point you are trying to make.

In addition to dealing with counterarguments, good answers to these essays will

1. Address the major points in the prompt
2. Take a clear and well-reasoned stance on the questions asked
3. Integrate evidence *with specifics* from various units of the course that are relevant to the topic. Some of the sentences you write will probably be almost identical to ones you might in a short ID on a person.
4. Have some sense of chronology. You needn't give precise years for every detail, but there should be general signposts when you move across big periods of time. This means phrases like "In the seventeenth century" or "shortly before the Civil War" or "the period between Jefferson and Jackson" may be useful.

The two questions on the exam will be selected from the following three:

1. Imagine you are a rural, white, nonslaveholding man from western Virginia who sides with Nathaniel Bacon in his rebellion in 1676. You get hit in the head and start Rip-Van-Winkling your way through American political history; falling asleep for thirty years at a time and then waking up to vote. Who do you support in the presidential elections in 1800, in 1828, and in 1860? Why? Which is the hardest one to decide? The easiest? [Note that there is no single *right* answer to these questions; rather, you must be convincing in your justification, which includes dealing with any obvious counterarguments.]
2. In the Civil War, many of the existing avenues for political resolution of disputes collapsed in favor of tremendous violence. How foreign was this violence to the character of the nation up to that point in time? How had Americans previously tried to avoid such violence among themselves going back to the 17th century? (When you talk about "Americans" here, be sure to include at least three populations on the continent, not just English settlers). Were there strategies that had worked well or less well?
3. At the outbreak of the Civil War, over half of all Americans still worked on farms. So: how strong an influence did the things that they were able to farm have on the character of the nation from 1600 to 1860? What might have changed if they were able to grow different things in the ground? Were sectional differences fundamentally about agriculture, or did they have other roots? Be sure to mention at least three different crops and two different centuries in your answer, along with some of the effects those crops had.