

## COMPREHENSIVE ESSAYS FOR WORLD HISTORY FINALS

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When formulating final exam questions for world history classes, a dilemma arises: what to do about comprehensive questions. At final exam time there is usually a large block of material over which students have not yet been tested. There is a temptation to cover only that, especially since essay topics in a more limited period seem more manageable for most students. Comprehensive questions can become overwhelming: "Discuss all the wars since 1500." They can be of questionable relationship: "Compare and contrast modernization in England in the 18th century and China in the 20th century." They can be downright trivial: "Plan a dinner party and explain your guest list of the seven most interesting people we have studied this semester." Occasionally inspiration strikes and a wonderfully phrased question elicits thoughtful and thorough responses summing up and expanding on themes of the course from intelligent, motivated students. Perhaps you have had great success with comprehensive questions. I have usually not been very happy with mine, until recently that is, when I hit upon a comprehensive examination question based on current newspaper articles.

The World Civilizations Since 1500 course that I teach focuses on modernization and Westernization. We look at the development of competitive nationalism, the growth of scientific thinking and reason, the rise of political liberalism and capitalistic industrialism, and responses to and expansion of these phenomena. In the post-World War II world, we discuss the spread of nationalism and the desire for liberal goals of civil rights and democratic government throughout the non-Western world and, most recently, in post-Communist eastern Europe. To continue these themes in a comprehensive essay topic for the final exam, I look in newspapers for articles that pick up my themes of nationalism, liberalism, and economic development, and I frame a question that asks students to trace the history of these themes in relation to specific recent events.

About a month before the examination, I begin to look for articles of only a few paragraphs that specify events that are clearly related to a course theme. What's happening at that time limits my choices, but I try to find examples from Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. I use my local paper, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*.

Since educational institutions tend to be concerned about legal challenges involving photocopying and copyright infringement, it is best to forestall any difficulty by gaining permission in writing before beginning and keeping this document on file. I contacted the *Commercial Appeal's* managing editor, who asked for a letter explaining my project and quickly responded to the subsequent document with a letter approving my request. Even without specific permission, photocopying by a teacher for limited

classroom use is generally covered under the "fair use" doctrine; such photocopying is educational, non-profit, and has no effect on the market.<sup>1</sup>

If the combination of searching for articles, organizing the packet, making copies, and—above all—ensuring that your actions fall within acceptable copyright act guidelines appears too time-consuming or otherwise objectionable, there is an alternative. From your knowledge of current issues, crises, and events, construct a question that includes these topics—perhaps with brief quotations and citations from newspapers, magazines, and broadcasts. This might even seem preferable since it produces similar questions and puts a heavier burden on the students. The question packet, on the other hand, has the advantage of forcing interaction with not only the current results of the historical process but also with the format of one of the news media; in terms of encouraging students to think historically, this form is more like everyday activities. But there is a choice.

Two weeks before the final exam date, I make my decision on which ones of my collection make the "final cut." Then I paste the articles to sheets with a Roman numeral, source, and date typed at the top. At the foot of each sheet containing an article, I type "Copyright 199- *The Commercial Appeal*," as required by copyright guidelines.<sup>2</sup> A cover sheet gives the points allotted to this question, instructions, and the specific topic. Instructions state:

1. Prepare ahead, using any resources available to you.
2. Do not make notes on this question packet.
3. Bring this packet with you to use during the examination.
4. Do not write an essay to bring with you. During the examination period, you will compose your essay in an exam booklet.

A subsequent note reminds students that to receive a good grade, an essay should show evidence of outside preparation, whether from textbooks or other research materials, and should include historical background as far back as but no further than 1500.

For the spring 1993 exam, I combined articles on the Serbian attack on the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, black mob violence against whites and white retaliation in South Africa, and Pakistani concern over Hindu riots and bombings of Muslim holy

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<sup>1</sup>Guidelines for the Copyright Act allow teachers to make single copies of newspaper articles for their own use and multiple copies, not to exceed one per student, for classroom use. Further guidelines state that the copying be for only one course in the school where the copies have been made, that no more than nine instances of such copying be done in any one school term, that the article be copied one time only, and that the copies not substitute for a standardized test. The idea for making the copies must be the teacher's, not an administrator's, and the teacher may charge students no more than the cost of the copies. A copyright notice should appear on all copies. Stephen Fishman, *The Copyright Handbook: How to Protect and Use Written Works* (Berkeley: Nolo Press, 1992), 11/4-6, 11/15-16.

<sup>2</sup>Fishman, 11/16.

places in India. Students were asked to trace these developments historically and discuss them in terms of twentieth-century nationalism. In December 1993, the question focused on liberalism and its recent manifestations in the former Soviet Union, Jordan, and South Africa, each of which was attempting to move toward constitutionalism and broader political representation. With each of these exams, there was no one correct answer because the subjects were broad and the history long, but each allowed students to amass a fund of information, organize it reasonably, and draw some conclusions about the force of these eighteenth-century European principles and the hopes and challenges of disparate peoples in the late twentieth century.

Another approach is more general. Once I collected seven articles including the Pope's reversing the Church's seventeenth-century condemnation of Galileo in an attempt to improve relations between the Church and science, an aborted coup in Peru that had attempted to block elections for a constitutional convention, and GATT negotiations to promote free trade. Students could select three of the seven quite disparate articles and discuss each in terms of historical background. They were encouraged to try relate the events to each other and to tie them to the themes of the course. This "potpourri" approach worked well enough, but I prefer the more thematic essay topics.

Students receive individual "packets" of several stapled sheets—including instructions, topic, and articles—two weeks before the exam date. They bring the packets with them to use for reference but are allowed no notes or completed essays. Anyone may assist students outside class, but the information, beyond that in the packet, and essay form, no matter how achieved, must be in the students' heads at exam time. Students return the question packets along with their essays, and I place the copied materials in the building's recycling bin.

Responses vary. The occasional brilliant student performs brilliantly. Most good students have calculated their point totals by exam day and know what they have to do to make an "A." They tend to concentrate their efforts on the other sections of the exam, which can be mastered with less leg work. Poor students do poorly. The most gratifying results come from high "C" and high "B" students who want to achieve a higher grade with a big push at the end and know that this question allows them that opportunity. They are not required to list sources, but these students, in a great burst of motivation and achievement, will often include parenthetical citations to let the instructor know just the library time they have clocked and how much they have knocked themselves out. Knowing that they have the opportunity for notable improvement motivates them also to prepare for the non-comprehensive parts of the exam as well, and the performance of this group is the strongest argument for this type of exam question.

In general, a newspaper-based essay seems to me to have a number of other positive qualities. Since the exam is "take-home" in terms of preparation, students feel that they are being treated more fairly and that the instructor is interested in their success. A newspaper-based comprehensive question connects the present to the past

and encourages students to see this connection. (Sometimes they seem to think the past occurred on a different planet.) It reminds students that what they are doing with this particular question has more general applicability, and that long after they have completed the work for the course, they can make connections between events that they have studied and those that have not yet happened. Of course these expectations are rather grand and possibly unrealistic, but if they only have these effects to a modest degree, the effect on students will have been positive. All in all, the project fulfills the instructor's need to conclude with some sort of comprehensive work to provide "closure" to the course, and it provides the students with an opportunity to do well and develop a useful pattern for thinking about contemporary world affairs.