

## More Tips on Writing APUSH Essays

**Sample Question:** To what extent was Social Darwinism a conservative doctrine?

### The Introductory Paragraph and Thesis Statement

1. Establish the **setting** of the essay. Briefly introduce the reader to the subject.
  - Example: "By the time America entered the twentieth century, Social Darwinism had already made a lasting impact on American society."
2. Provide an **insightful comment** that establishes your basis for analysis.
  - Example: "In determining whether Social Darwinism was a conservative doctrine, one must assess the extent to which change was permitted in society."
3. Provide **partitions** that establish three major sub-topics you plan to discuss (your "plan of attack").
  - Example: "Politically, Social Darwinism advocated the non-intervention of government in the affairs of business; a strict adherence to laissez-faire economics. Socially, Social Darwinism implied a rigid stratification of society into classes from which one had no chance to escape. Racially, Social Darwinism insisted upon white supremacy in every aspect of life."
4. Finish the paragraph with a **clear thesis statement** that establishes the purpose of the essay.
  - Example: "Thus, Social Darwinism was a truly conservative doctrine that influenced American society at the turn of the twentieth century and continues to do so today."

### Thesis Types

1. **Simple thesis.** "Social Darwinism was a truly conservative doctrine." (Rating: poor)
2. **Complex-simple thesis.** "In some respects, Social Darwinism suggested a strict adherence to the status quo in American society. Some applications of Social Darwinism suggested, however, the possibility of limited movement within social classes." (Rating: fair)
  - The analytical aspect of this thesis is promising; however, no partition is established. The thesis does not establish IN WHAT WAYS Social Darwinism was conservative.
3. **Simple-split thesis.** "Social Darwinism was a conservative doctrine in terms of government non-intervention in the affairs of business, and in respect to social status and racial hierarchy as well. (Rating: fair)
  - Thesis provides a partition: business, social status, and racial hierarchy
  - Thesis lacks an explanation or general analysis in each of the three areas in the partition (a more detailed "plan of attack")
  - Note: This thesis would merely be a "simple thesis" if the question ALREADY contained a partition.
4. **Complex-split thesis.** "Politically, Social Darwinism advocated the non-intervention of government in the affairs of business; a strict adherence to laissez-faire economics. Socially, Social Darwinism implied a rigid stratification of society into classes from which one had no chance to escape. Racially, Social Darwinism insisted upon white supremacy in every aspect of life." (Rating: superior)

5. **The Gray-Area thesis.** Many AP questions allow the student to formulate a thesis with more nuances. Here is a more sophisticated complex-split thesis to the above question: "Although Social Darwinism advocated a policy of non-intervention of government in the affairs of business, a rigid stratification of society into distinct social classes, and a racial hierarchy based upon white supremacy, some Social Darwinists suggested that moderate change within the social class or racial hierarchy was possible, even admirable. Thus, to a larger extent, Social Darwinism was a conservative doctrine, but it was not completely conservative in issues of class and race."
- Notice that the above thesis argues "to a larger extent." When answering a question, the writer **must take a position**. It is not enough to state "to some extent" or "to another extent." Phrases such as "to a larger extent," "to a lesser extent," "more important," "less important," etc., reveal that the writer has taken a **definite position** on a question.
  - It is important not to try to write a thesis that is all "black" or all "white." The most effective essays will attempt to navigate the "gray areas" in a more sophisticated fashion. (The antithesis) The highest scores on AP exams tend to be in the "gray areas," although not exclusively there alone.

### **Writing Strategy and Tips**

1. Read the question three times. Do not move on until you fully understand all parts of it.
2. Identify the task(s) by circling the main words.
3. Ask yourself "what do I have to prove?"
4. Pay special attention to PERSIA areas to be considered. (Political, Economic, Religious, Social, Intellectual, Artistic)
5. Brainstorm a list of outside information (if it's a DBQ) or all the information you know about the topic (if it's a FRQ).
6. If it's a DBQ, examine the documents, underlining any key words or phrases that you many use later in the essay. (NOTE this did not say sentences or paragraphs – key words or phrases only – try not to quote unless absolutely necessary)
7. Construct a thesis that is well-developed and clear.
8. Begin writing the essay.
  - Start with the outside information FIRST, then do the documents, then do the thesis
  - Be PRACTICAL when creating a thesis. It is better to argue something that can include most/all of the documents, than arguing the point of view that you happen to agree with or believe in. I'd rather be "practical" and score well, than to be "right" and struggle to prove my point.
  - Use as many documents as you can, as long as they fit into the thesis. (3/4+)
  - Don't EXPLAIN documents. That is NOT your task. Use them only to reinforce your points. Every exam reader already knows what each document says/means.
  - Reference the authors you are citing ("In a letter written by Abraham Lincoln...." instead of saying "Document A said 'Four Score and Seven Years Ago'." After all, Lincoln did say it...not the document!)
  - Refer to the authors and works you are citing as outside information in the same way. People said things and wrote things...the documents aren't living and can't say or do anything.