

MAIN TEXT / MAIN BODY

This is where the thesis is developed and substantiated. Your outline (in your introduction) provides the pillars around which you will structure your answer. You have to flesh out the skeleton by selecting the relevant factual details from your research notes to support your arguments. A good essay is clear and focused (Hugh Robertsson in *"The Research Essay"* claims that *"A successful essay has the focus and clarity of a laser beam"*). Therefore, ensure that all supporting material is explicitly linked to the central theme and securely anchored in the argument. Avoid the tendency to pack the essay with irrelevant and inert information, because extraneous facts will only serve to fragment the focus of the essay. Instructors and examiners look for incisive analysis and argument in an essay, not for chronological narrative, rambling description, or a wholesale dumping of unrelated facts. Your responsibility is to construct and advance a systematic, logical and convincing thesis – carefully structured, cogently argued, substantiated with evidence, and clearly expressed.

As mentioned in lesson one (Introduction), the main body is usually divided into three parts:

1. **Background**
2. **Arguments (and Evidence)**
3. **Discussion/Analysis**

1. BACKGROUND

This is the first part of the main body. You will show the historical context (what is usually referred to as *"when"*, *"where"*, *"who"* and *"what"*):

When is the event you focus on taking place (year, time-period, etc...)?

Where is it taking place (specific event, specific country, etc...)?

Who is involved (war, country/countries, political leader, etc...)?

What is going on (short overview)?

It's a short start, two-three sentences of your main text. It should provide the reader the necessary knowledge to be able to follow the coming text – the arguments, evidence and in the end discussion/analysis. Some students use a sentence (or two) in the introduction for a brief explanation of the historical context. This is perfectly OK, but my experience is that the IB Exam Essay benefit from having this part at the beginning of the main body. It gives the main text a great start, the structure becomes clearer, and it strengthens the general fluency of the essay. You could compare it to the beginning of a *"childrens story"* that starts with the fixed formula *"Once upon a time..."*

2. ARGUMENTS (AND EVIDENCE)

After the short historical context, you come to the *"main part"* of the main text – the arguments and evidence. Here you present arguments with supporting narrative facts in an organized manner. It will be a series of reasoned, relevant points made in much the same way as a lawyer presents a case in a court of law, though your case will not be as one-sided as a lawyer's and your judge will be the reader/examiner! You must overcome the difficulty of abundant information by concentrating on your basic response to the question or the main line of argument. You will be using the idea of a main argument or basic response to help direct your thoughts and contain the argument. *"The Modern History Manual"* use this metaphor *"The main argument method is like a set of blinkers for a horse in a race, forcing a straight line and avoiding distractions"*. Set yourself the task of suggesting a simple argument or answer and then you try to make out a case for it. The main argument or basic responses you have been searching for are short statements which represent a stance or attitude to the question. It may

be that you have chosen a difficult argument to support or defend. You will find that out as you arrange the information or evidence to back it up. Try to limit yourself to the six (more or less if necessary) most important reasons or pieces of evidence which support your suggested answer. To be able to create good arguments you need to *select* the information or facts *relevant* to the question and present it in a *logical argument*.

SELECTION: When writing a history essay, most people have more *facts* or knowledge available than they can conveniently use. If you have twenty pages of notes, it is obvious that not all of those twenty pages can go into your essay! The simple answer is that you must select information from your notes to suit the question. This may appear obvious, but it is surprising how many essays are spoiled because students include too much information, particularly information which is not relevant or does not suit their argument. Sometimes students repeat facts or information in a slightly different way. Piling up information for the sake of it can reveal a lack of understanding. In short, what you leave out of an essay can be as important as what you put in! In *"The Modern History Manual"* the authors (*Cloake, Crinnion & Harrison*) write *"It is better to kill the reader with kindness by selecting information for him than to batter him to death in a flurry of factual blows!"*. They continue *"To think of it another way, if you were asked to mend a broken chair you would not use every tool you had just for the sake of showing that you had them"*. So, it is with information in an essay. You only need to use the information that is suitable or relevant to that particular essay. Some pieces of information must go unused despite the fact that you have them available. Do not be lazy or shy about information; exploit your notes. Their value is determined by your particular purpose or essay. Be ruthless with your notes. Vigorously re-organize and select the information for the best effect to suit your planned answer.

RELEVANCE: Having agreed that some form of selection must take place, how do we go about selecting? The inclusion or exclusion of information is decided by our historical experience which is gained by reading, discussion and thought. The more you practice the better you will become at selecting historical information to suit firstly your essay and secondly your argument. The vital thing to do is to make sure that the reader understands *why* you are including a particular piece of information. Here we are dealing with the difference between *implicit and explicit relevance*. The relevance is implicit when it is left to the reader to appreciate the importance of a point within that particular answer. Explicit relevance is where the writer plainly states the importance of a point in relation to the question being dealt with. When students fail to make explicit the relevance of a piece of information, they are usually seen as not understanding or merely relying on memory. Explain clearly why you have included pieces of information. Make their relevance to your essay title or line of argument obvious. Reconsider, at various points in the essay, both the implications of the title and the actual wording of it. This should prevent wandering and waffle in your answer. Never assume the reader will know what you are referring to. The reader needs to be guided through the information you have selected. It is interesting to see a professional historian reminding the reader *explicitly* of the relevance of his facts, analysis and discussion.

Example of *explicit relevance* from **Henry Pelling's** book *"Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain"* (2nd edition London 1979) the author examines some of the problems of using the concept of a *"Labour aristocracy"*. Pelling's central idea is that the value of this concept is variable, and its use needs care. In Pelling's contribution to the Labour aristocracy debate the reader is reminded explicitly of the author's position by comments like:

1. *"Only in the 1840's and later did the situation begin to improve markedly; and the class which now emerged into comparative prosperity was not an elite of labour aristocrats but a more homogenous class of factory workers..."* (Page 47)

2. *"Employment on the railways as in other sections of the transport industry cannot be said to have been of such a character as to fit in with the theory of labour aristocracy."* (Page 51)
3. *"There was no real labour aristocracy in the staple export trades – coal and the main branches of textile manufacture".* (Page 52)
4. *"The concept of the Labour aristocracy has had its value in drawing attention to differences within the working class but if it implies the existence... of a labour elite distinctly separated from lower strata and marked by political behaviour of an acquiescent type then it is a concept that does more harm than good to historical truth".* (Page 61)

LOGIC ARGUMENTS: As well as selecting the relevant information you must arrange it in a logical way. The most important thing to remember is that every idea, comment or observation must be supported by facts or reasons. It is easy to have an opinion about a moral issue like capital punishment, but if you were to discuss it in an essay you would usually have to give your reasons. So, it is with history essays, you can have an opinion but you must back it up with fact or reasons. In historical writing you may need a great deal of factual information (narrative) to support your argument or opinion. Writing an essay is not a mechanical process. You may adopt the principle of statement and reasons, facts or evidence to your style and purpose. It is possible in a sense to work in "reverse", giving particular details and drawing a conclusion.

3. DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

In historical writing if you are to achieve a sense of movement through time, it is always necessary to counterbalance description and analysis on the one side with sufficient narrative on the other side. But in *all* types of writing, including history, if you are to achieve sufficient intellectual rigor, you must counterbalance any narrative and description (the easier aspects) with sufficient analysis. The two first parts of the main text, the background and the arguments + evidence, are pre-dominantly narrative. You might have ended each paragraph with some reflection of the evidence presented which is a beginning of an analysis, but it's the discussion at the end of the main body that brings together the different parts for a developed reflection/analysis. In some essays the information or opinions conflict. These opposing views should be brought together in the discussion. Do not suppose that all issues are equally balanced. In most cases, historical opinion favors one side or the other. It is the historian's job to do justice to both (or more) cases, however strong or weak, and justify this.