

A How-to Guide: Writing “Defend or Refute the Following Statement” essays

Introduction:

This class has two exams, and both exams require you to write one essay. The essay will be prompted with the direction:

“Defend or refute the following statement.”

And then, a statement will appear, such as:

“The Black Death, the plague that wiped out as much as a third of Europe in the fourteenth century, was an absolute disaster, with no positive impact.”

The statement will never be clear-cut, such as “The United States became independent in the year 1776.” That is simply a fact, and as such requires no further discussion. The statement I give you will be complex. The statement will always have two sides to it. To write a good and nuanced essay, you must address both sides of the issue.

Organizing your thoughts:

Your first step in writing a good essay is not, as you have often been told, writing a good thesis statement. If you are planning your essay (as you should do!) you must organize it and plot it out before you even think of writing a thesis statement. A thesis statement should reflect your thoughts and opinions; you should not write a thesis statement first, and then attempt to graft the facts onto it. The facts come first.

Figure out what’s being asked:

In this case, you’ve been given a question about the Black Death, and you are being asked to write an essay that expresses an opinion on whether or not it was an absolute disaster. First, read the prompt very carefully. The key words here are “absolute disaster, with no positive impact.” That is your clue. You know that you will never be asked a simple question, so (being the incisive scholar you are) you recognize that there must have been some good effects to go along with the bad effects. This gives you a sense of how you should construct your essay.

Determine your categories (or “buckets”):

The first step in organizing the facts is coming up with categories. These categories, when you compose your essay, will become your paragraphs. You’re being asked about whether the effects of the Black Death were “all bad,” so, in this case, you come up with two categories: “Good effects of the Black Death” and “Bad effects of the Black Death.” On a paper, draw two buckets (one for each category). Now, you are going to fit some facts into them. Add a third “bucket” to your chart, and label this one “Trash.” This will be used for facts or ideas that may be true, but don’t belong in your essay.

Organize your facts into the buckets:

On a separate piece of paper, write down all the facts you can think of regarding the Black Death. Many of these may be facts about the Black Death itself; its biological properties; the manner in

which it spreads; the nature of the suffering it induces; the death count; its origins in Asia, and so on. Since the Black Death (aka, the Bubonic Plague) is a really terrible affliction, odds are that most of these facts are going to end up in the “Bad effects of the Black Death” bucket.

“Bad effects of the Black Death”



Bubonic Plague
Origins
Death Count
Suffering
Spread

But what about the “Good effects” bucket? For, as you know, the question will not be one-sided. So you do some research. You think back to the lectures, the book chapters, and independent research you do (be it on the internet or, better yet, at a library) and you come to realize that the Black Death, while terrible, actually may have had a positive impact in Europe. You gather your facts, and prepare the “Good effects” bucket:

“Good effects of the Black Death”



Lower population led to higher wages for workers
Higher wages for workers made machines cost-effective
Rise in automation led to Industrial Revolution in Europe
Industrial Revolution in Europe made European powers the strongest on earth
Bubonic plague was not limited to Europe

Are there any facts that don't belong in the essay? There are. So, move some of those to the “Trash” basket.

“Trash”



Origins (What does it matter where it started?)

Bubonic plague was not limited to Europe (This is not really an “impact,” is it?)

Writing the essay:

Getting to a thesis statement:

Don’t look now, but you’ve successfully organized your essay into two main body paragraphs: “Bad effects of the Black Death,” and “Good effects of the Black Death.” Now, you must come up with a thesis statement that reflects your thoughts on the matter. So, re-read the prompt.

“The Black Death, the plague that wiped out as much as a third of Europe in the fourteenth century, was an absolute disaster, with no positive impact.”

Now, having done all this work, you know that the statement is inaccurate. But you still must respond to it in a way that demonstrates your understanding of the material and its nuances. Let’s start with a very basic thesis statement, one that sets your opinion out there:

“While the Black Death was really terrible, there were also some good impacts.”

This is not a bad place to start, but as a thesis statement, it has a major weakness. That is, it does not really tell the reader anything about what you are going to say. Your thesis statement should be able to stand on its own—it should say everything your entire essay is going to say, and the essay should only offer evidence in support of the thesis statement. In this case, you already know some of the positive and negative effects, so why not put them into the thesis statement itself? For example:

“While the Black Death **caused massive suffering and death in Europe**, it was not all bad.”

That last sentence? A strong start, and a weak finish. If you can offer specific emphasis on both sides of the issue, then your essay will basically write itself. How about the following:

“While the Black Death **caused massive suffering and death in Europe**, the **decreased population**, and **consequent higher wages and incentive for automation**, may have paved the way for the **Industrial Revolution**.”

Now we’re talking. *Now* the reader (in this case, your Professor) knows exactly what you are going to say. All that is left is for you to say it.

Writing the introduction:

Start with a background statement. This will set the stage. In this case, something to the effect of, “The Black Death, or Bubonic Plague, wiped out about a third of Europe in the fourteenth century.” Don’t waste time trying to put the topic into a grand historical context. Phrases that often appear on college essays, but should never appear, include:

“Throughout history...”

“Historically,...”

“Since the beginning of time...”

“Since the dawn of civilization...”

You don’t need to write anything so grand as all that. Just get right to the point.

Once you have written your introductory sentence (or perhaps two), put your thesis statement in. Once your thesis statement is established, get right to...

Body Paragraph #1:

You have a set of facts. In this case, you’re talking about bad effects of the Black Death. So, start with a simple topic sentence that reflects the category you’ve given to the bucket. For example:

“The Black Death had a catastrophic impact on Europe.”

And then you write down your facts. Note how all the facts you have support that topic sentence; and the topic sentence serves to prove your thesis statement. Death count; suffering; spread, etc., all demonstrate the catastrophic impact.

Body Paragraph #2:

You are showing how nuanced your understanding of the issue is, so start your second paragraph with a topic sentence that contradicts or elaborates on Body Paragraph #1. For example:

“However, as terrible and infectious a disease as it is, there is evidence to suggest that the overall impact of the Black Death on Europe was a positive one.”

You then go on to show how it might have contributed to the Industrial Revolution by bringing in the facts you sorted into your “Good effects” bucket.

Writing the Conclusion:

Your conclusion need not be elaborate. In this case, however, I would go back to the original prompt, and emphasize the ambiguity of your answer. The initial statement is neither absolutely true nor absolutely false, and your essay explains why.

Final Thought:

Every essay you will ever write, no matter what the prompt, can be reduced to a “defend or refute the following statement” format. Sometimes, you have to come up with the statement to defend or refute; but you are always **arguing a position** when you write an essay. The very best essays are the ones that argue a clear position by demonstrating not only why that position is correct, but why alternative perspectives are incorrect.