

HISTORY 2111
SAMPLE ESSAY ANSWERS
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Below is a range of answers to the following essay question, ranging from high A to low F. Carefully read and compare each answer and my analysis of each to get an idea of how to prepare to answer the essay questions on the actual exams.

Question: Write a history of Europe from the fall of the Roman Empire to the beginning of the Age of Exploration.

Note the good grammar, spelling, and sentence structure. I don't count off for these things, but they indicate that the student is taking his time and getting things right.

Here the essay goes right down the list of things mentioned in the outline that resulted from the fall of the Empire in the West.

A point not expressly found in the course outline: You needed to be in class to hear me discuss this.

Notice how, here and elsewhere, how the essay follows chronology. First the empire collapses. Then it is replaced by the feudal system.

The student has drawn his own conclusion here from his own analysis. It isn't just about regurgitation.

ANSWER 1

This is a very high-A answer.

In the 400s AD, that part of the Roman Empire that lay in Western Europe was overrun by Germanic invaders and collapsed. Although the eastern part of the Roman Empire (i.e., the Byzantine Empire) survived for another 1000 years and became a major border between Christian Europe and the Muslim world to the east and south, things in western Europe were very different. The collapse of the western empire meant the destruction of political unity, the breakdown of communications as the roads became dangerous to travel, and a decline in population, especially in the cities (deurbanization). The result of all of this was a nosedive in western Europe's wealth, including trade and other economic activity. This was partly because wealth is produced by labor, and with the population decline less labor was available to produce wealth.

With the Empire gone, the system that replaced it was the feudal system. Feudalism was a military/social/landholding system based on personal relationships between lords (who controlled the land) and the lord's vassals, to whom the lord would convey some of his land in exchange for military service and protection. The vassals in turn could subinfeudate some of their land to their own vassals. The whole feudal system was based on these interlocking personal relationships rather than a public government or a sense of nationality or commonality or unity among an ethnic people. The basis of all of it was land, since land produced wealth when farmed. In this arrangement, there was no social mobility and your role in life was determined by your birth and status rather than your desire or ability to get ahead.

During this time, partly because of the lack of wealth and incentive for change, there was practically no exploration. The Norsemen or Vikings, from Scandinavia, were a

*Cause and effect: Population increase **causes** increased labor **causes** increased wealth.*

Again, you needed to be in class to get this info.

This essay is organized in easy to understand chronological, cause-and-effect order; it includes practically everything on the relevant portions of the outline; it adds material from class; it includes the student's own analysis; it doesn't include material that doesn't belong; and it is easy to read from a grammar and organization perspective. 58 to 60 points.

seafaring/raiding culture, who after the 800s began raiding Western Europe by sea. During their travels they moved as far west as Iceland, Greenland, and finally, around 1000 AD (under Leif Erikson) Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, although their settlements there were small and didn't last long.

Because these settlements were temporary, they had no large impact either on the Americas or Europe. Probably the biggest impact was that rumors and legends of a land to the west beyond the ocean circulated in Europe for hundreds of years thereafter and perhaps eventually fueled European desires to explore to the west.

After 1000 came the High Middle Ages (1000-1300) and then the Late Middle Ages (1300-1500). During these periods the population began to increase, which meant a greater amount of labor was available, which in turn meant an increase in overall wealth (since as mentioned previously, labor is the source of productivity and thus wealth). In the mid-1300s the Black Death struck, probably coming down the Nile out of Africa to infect Europe and Asia and killing as much as half of Europe's population in just a few years. While at one level this reduced, in absolute terms, the total amount of labor available, it did mean that the remaining land and other wealth was shared by fewer people, which meant greater wealth per capita. It also meant that the remaining population could sell its labor at higher prices (as supply goes down, demand increases). This led to greater social mobility since laborers were in a better position to bargain with their lords. The peasants thus had more money available for luxuries, which in turn spurred trade.

During this same time Western Europe also witnessed a revival in learning, first as the earliest universities were founded and then during the Renaissance, which began in the Late Middle Ages. Learning requires that a society be rich enough that some people don't need to be producing short-term wealth but can instead invest in their future through education, which they can use in the long term to make more money. During the Renaissance, moreover, Europeans rediscovered from the Muslims the writings of earlier thinkers such as Aristotle. These writings caused a rebirth of knowledge of and interest in science and the natural world, as well as experimentation. This would ultimately give rise both to the curiosity needed for exploration as well as the technology needed for exploration. Thus, by the 1400s, Europe was poised on the brink of the Age of Exploration.

ANSWER 2

This is another very high-A answer.

*In this answer the student sets up an analytical framework here. In the 400s, conditions are X. By the 1400s (the beginning of the Age of Exploration) conditions are Y. **How**, and **why**, did things change during these to centuries? The rest of the essay answers this question.*

This isn't expressly in the outline. Did the student hear it in class, or did she come up with it herself based on her own analysis of the material? Either way, it's a hugely important point.

The student doesn't just throw around a word she doesn't understand. She explains it for me.

*Again: **how** and **why**?*

Another original thought, or one that came from class?

In the 400s, throughout Western Europe, the Roman Empire collapsed. 1000 years later, this same region was poised to begin an Age of Exploration that would expand western culture throughout the Americas and the rest of the world. What happened in between these two dates that accounts for these changes?

To understand that, we have to understand the impact of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. When it went, it took a lot of things with it: government and political unity, easy communications, big cities, and even people, given that the population declined. The Eastern part of the empire may have survived and became known as the Byzantine Empire, the border between Christian Europe and the Islamic world of the Middle East and North Africa, but in the west the economy stagnated, since labor is the source of wealth and there were fewer people and their ability to trade was limited.

Without trade, the big source of wealth was agriculture. The big landowners in the west would give control of some of their lands to people who in return swore to provide military service to the landowner. This was the beginning of feudalism, which for lack of a better word was the government of western Europe for most of the Middle Ages. Lords gave land to vassals, who paid with military service and protection. The vassal could also become a lord to his own vassals, a process called subinfeudation. This meant that the whole landowning and military and agricultural system was based on these interlocking personal loyalties and agreements. If you were a peasant, your job was to farm the land. If you were born into that job, then no matter how smart or capable you were, you were pretty much stuck with it because there was no way to move into a different social or economic class.

So how and why did this change? The short answer is that for hundreds of years, it didn't. There was little if any trade or exploration because Europe couldn't afford it and there was no point in it; the source of wealth was the land and what your labor could grow on it, not in trade. Nevertheless, the Norse (from Scandinavia) did travel in that they carried out seaborne raids in other parts of western Europe (if you can't grow it yourself, take it from somebody else). This meant that they were a seafaring culture, and during their travels they sailed west into the Atlantic. First they made it to Iceland; then they made it to Greenland; and finally, around the year 1000, Leif Erikson made it as far as the coast of present-day Canada. They established short-term timber or maybe fishing settlements there, but they didn't stay long. The biggest impact these discoveries had was

She's putting in dates, and they're the correct ones.

Good analysis of the various possible and actual effects of the Black Death.

Cause and effect. Why did trade increase: because of the Black Death.

Cause and effect again. Increased wealth per capita means some people are free to go to school.

The student has picked up on the fact that the material in the "Transformations" section of the outline, while not a direct answer to the essay question I have asked, are related closely enough to that question to deserve mention. Outstanding! More analytical than the previous answer, but just as thorough and complete. 58-60 points.

that they probably gave rise to legends, throughout Europe, of lands to the west of the ocean. Possibly these legends influenced later explorers.

But before these later explorers could act on the legends (if that's what they actually did), they had to be able and willing to explore, and that means that things had to change. The first changes occurred during the High Middle Ages (1000-1300) and the Late Middle Ages (1300-1500). First, the population slowly began to increase, which meant more available labor, which meant more available wealth. Then in the mid-1300s came the Black Death, probably down the Nile from Africa. This killed nearly half of Europe's population in just a few years. It would seem at first glance that this would set Europe back by several hundred years since it devastated the labor supply. But in fact it meant two things: first, that the survivors had more wealth per capita since there were fewer people they had to share the wealth with. Second, it meant that because labor was now in short supply, it was in greater demand. Peasants could now drive a harder bargain when they sold their labor, and they had more money, so they could afford luxuries. That stimulated trade.

While this was going on, because of the increased wealth per capita, not everybody had to constantly work to grow food. That meant that some people were freed up to spend their time learning. This was when the first universities were founded. People could go to school and learn things that they could use to make a better living in the long term. At about the same time the Renaissance (1450-1650) began, which was a revival of learning throughout Western Europe. While Western Europe had forgotten much about the ancient world, the Muslims had retained some of that knowledge, such as the writings of Aristotle. These writings focused on ideas about nature and experimentation. This helped bring about the rise of modern science, as people became interested in exploring, discovering, and learning about the natural world.

At this point Europe was on the brink of the Age of Exploration. The final changes were about to happen. Among these were new economic and religious motivations for oceanic voyages of exploration and discovery; technological advances such as navigational instruments and new ship types (probably at least partly a result of the new learning in the universities and f renaissance thought); and the rise of the modern state, which started replacing feudalism in the 1300s just as feudalism had started replacing the Roman government 1000 years earlier. By the 1400s, Europe was ready to make the leap out into the Atlantic.

ANSWER 3

This is an A answer. It's a variation on Answer 1 above.

Compare this to the first answer. Is something missing here?

The student has used a word without defining it, but it's not really a technical word; a reasonable person should know what this means, so it's no big deal.

This answer is missing an important discussion of the source of labor. Nothing the student wrote here was wrong, but it isn't as complete as it should be.

No mention of Scandinavia.

Correct, but this answer is missing the more specific dates of the first essay. Leif Erikson is also missing.

Why not? The first essay answers this question; this one doesn't.

No mention of the periods known as the High Middle Ages and the Late Middle Ages.

Why? Where did it come from? This student apparently was absent that day.

When the Western Roman Empire was overrun by Germanic invaders and collapsed, the Byzantine Empire survived for another 1000 years and became a major border between Christian Europe and the Muslim world to the east and south, but things in western Europe were very different. The collapse of the western empire meant the destruction of political unity, the breakdown of communications as the roads became dangerous to travel, a decline in population and deurbanization. The result of all of this was a nosedive in western Europe's wealth, including trade and other economic activity.

With the Empire gone, the system that replaced it was the feudal system. Feudalism was a military/social/landholding system based on personal relationships between lords (who controlled the land) and the lord's vassals, to whom the lord would convey some of his land in exchange for military service and protection. The vassals in turn could subinfeudate some of their land to their own vassals. The whole feudal system was based on these interlocking personal relationships rather than a public government or a sense of nationality or commonality or unity among an ethnic people. The basis of all of it was land, since land produced wealth when farmed. In this arrangement, there was no social mobility and your role in life was determined by your birth and status rather than your desire or ability to get ahead.

During this time, partly because of the lack of wealth and incentive for change, there was practically no exploration. The Norsemen or Vikings, were a seafaring/raiding culture, who began raiding Western Europe by sea during the Middle Ages. During their travels they moved as far west as Iceland, Greenland, and finally Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, although their settlements there were small and didn't last long.

These settlements had no large impact either on the Americas or Europe. Probably the biggest impact was that rumors and legends of a land to the west beyond the ocean circulated in Europe for hundreds of years thereafter and perhaps eventually fueled European desires to explore to the west.

After 1000 the population began to increase, which meant a greater amount of labor was available, which in turn meant an increase in overall wealth (since as mentioned previously, labor is the source of productivity and thus wealth). In the mid-1300s the Black Death struck, killing as much as half of Europe's population in just a few years. While at one level this reduced, in absolute terms, the total amount of labor available, it did mean that the remaining land and other wealth was shared by fewer people, which meant greater wealth per

Here the student has omitted an important observation about the relationship between the economy and learning. Compare it to the first answer.

While this answer is fundamentally the same as the first one, the student has left out some important analytical points, some important dates, and an important name or two. Still an A, but not a high one. 54-57 points.

capita. It also meant that the remaining population could sell its labor at higher prices (as supply goes down, demand increases). This led to greater social mobility since laborers were in a better position to bargain with their lords. The peasants thus had more money available for luxuries, which in turn spurred trade.

During this same time Western Europe also witnessed a revival in learning, first as the earliest universities were founded and then during the Renaissance, which began in the Late Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, moreover, Europeans rediscovered from the Muslims the writings of earlier thinkers such as Aristotle. These writings caused a rebirth of knowledge of and interest in science and the natural world, as well as experimentation. This would ultimately give rise both to the curiosity needed for exploration as well as the technology needed for exploration. Thus, by the 1400s, Europe was poised on the brink of the Age of Exploration.

ANSWER 4

This is a B answer. It's a variation on Answer 1 above.

Where did the Byzantine Empire go?

This student has left some things out here. He has also substituted "king" for "lord" which is not necessarily right.

Some information about the Norsemen is missing, and another wrong statement: we know that the Norsemen made it to modern-day Canada, but we don't know about the United States.

The student omits a discussion of the effects of the population increase, and gets the date of the Black Death wrong by a hundred years.

The student gets part of the effects of the Black Death on the peasants but omits the other part.

In this answer the student has left more things out than Answer 3 did. Furthermore, this is the first answer in which the student has actually put in things that are wrong. Still a fundamentally sound essay, though. 51-54 points.

When the Western Roman Empire was overrun by Germanic invaders and collapsed it meant the destruction of political unity, the breakdown of communications as the roads became dangerous to travel, a decline in population and deurbanization. The result of all of this was a nosedive in western Europe's wealth, including trade and other economic activity.

With the Empire gone, the system that replaced it was the feudal system, which was based on personal relationships between kings (who controlled the land) and the king's vassals, to whom the king would convey some of his land in exchange for military service and protection. The vassals in turn could subinfeudate some of their land to their own vassals. The whole feudal system was based on these interlocking personal relationships.

During this time, partly because of the lack of wealth and incentive for change, there was practically no exploration. The Norsemen who began raiding Western Europe by sea during the Middle Ages. During their travels they moved as far west as Iceland, Greenland, and finally the future United States, although their settlements there were small and didn't last long.

These settlements had no large impact either on the Americas or Europe. Probably the biggest impact was that rumors and legends of a land to the west beyond the ocean circulated in Europe for hundreds of years thereafter and perhaps eventually fueled European desires to explore to the west.

After 1000 the population began to increase, but in the mid-1200s the Black Death struck, killing as much as half of Europe's population in just a few years. While at one level this reduced, in absolute terms, the total amount of labor available, it did mean that the remaining land and other wealth was shared by fewer people, which meant greater wealth per capita. It also meant that the remaining population could sell its labor at higher prices (as supply goes down, demand increases). This led to greater social mobility since laborers were in a better position to bargain with their lords.

During this same time Western Europe also witnessed a revival in learning known as the Renaissance, which began in the Late Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, Europeans rediscovered from the Muslims the writings of earlier thinkers such as Aristotle. These writings caused a rebirth of knowledge of and interest in science and the natural world, as well as experimentation. This would ultimately give rise both to the curiosity needed for exploration as well as the technology needed for exploration. Thus, by the 1400s, Europe was poised on the brink of the Age of Exploration.

ANSWER 5

This is a low B or high C answer. It's a variation on Answer 1 above.

Whoops! The Western Empire was overrun by Germanic tribes, not by the Byzantines!

In this essay I first start to ask what point the student is trying to make about the feudal system. Not only has he left a lot out, but he hasn't related it very well to the cause-and-effect flow of history other than to say it came after the Roman Empire. It doesn't explain how it contributed to the static society that was later replaced as a prelude to the Age of Exploration. Same problem with the Norsemen.

I'm seeing a pattern here. The student is omitting the whole theme of wealth being produced by labor. That is going to cost him some points.

The student is leaving out more things—important things—and putting in more wrong things. 48-51 points.

When the Western Roman Empire was overrun by Byzantine invaders and collapsed it meant the destruction of political unity, a decline in population and deurbanization. The result of all of this was a nosedive in western Europe's wealth, including trade and other economic activity.

With the Empire gone, the system that replaced it was the feudal system, which was based on personal relationships between kings and the king's vassals, to whom the king would convey some of his land in exchange for military service and protection. The vassals in turn could subinfeudate some of their land to their own vassals.

During this time, partly because of the lack of wealth and incentive for change, there was practically no exploration. The Norsemen who began raiding Western Europe by sea during the Middle Ages. During their travels they moved as far west as Iceland, Greenland, and finally the future United States, although their settlements there were small and didn't last long.

After 1000 the population began to increase, but in the mid-1200s the Black Death struck, killing as much as half of Europe's population in just a few years. While at one level this reduced, in absolute terms, the total amount of labor available, it did mean that the remaining land and other wealth was shared by fewer people, which meant greater wealth per capita.

During this same time Western Europe also witnessed a revival in learning known as the Renaissance, which began in the Late Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, Europeans rediscovered from the Muslims the writings of earlier thinkers such as Aristotle. These writings caused a rebirth of knowledge of and interest in science and the natural world, as well as experimentation. This would ultimately give rise both to the curiosity needed for exploration as well as the technology needed for exploration. Thus, by the 1400s, Europe was poised on the brink of the Age of Exploration.

ANSWER 6

This is a low C answer. It's a variation on Answer 1 above.

Western Roman Empire was overrun by Byzantine invaders and collapsed it meant the destruction of political unity, a decline in population and deurbanization. The result of all of this was a nosedive in western Europe's wealth, including trade and other economic activity.

With the Empire gone, the system that replaced it was the futile system, which was based on personal relationships between kings and the king's vassals, to whom the king would convey some of his land in exchange for military service and protection. The vassals in turn could give some of their land to their own vessels.

During this time The Norsemen who began raiding Western Europe by sea during the Middle Ages. During their travels they moved as far west as Iceland, Greenland, and finally the future United States, although their settlements there were small and didn't last long.

After 1000 the population began to increase, but in the mid-1200s the Black Death struck, killing a lot of people. This meant that the remaining land and other wealth was shared by fewer people, which meant greater wealth.

During this same time Western Europe also witnessed a revival in learning known as the Renaissance, which began in the Late Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, Europeans rediscovered from the Muslims the writings of earlier thinkers such as Aristotle. These writings caused a rebirth of knowledge of and interest in science and the natural world, as well as experimentation. This would ultimately give rise both to the curiosity needed for exploration as well as the technology needed for exploration. Thus, by the 1400s, Europe was poised on the brink of the Age of Exploration. Christopher Columbus was an important part of this as in 1492 he sailed all the way to North America. He made several voyages along with de Gama and Vespucci.

I don't count off for spelling, but since "futile" is a totally different thing than "feudal" I have to ask whether the student has actually grasped what feudalism is. This is reinforced by the term "vessels" instead of "vassals."

Not greater wealth; only greater wealth per capita.

*Ummm . . . In the first place, Columbus doesn't really belong in this essay. If the student had included a discussion of Portugal and Spain and **why** they started exploring, it would fit in better, but the student ignores all that, at least until he then adds de Gama as an afterthought. And if he's going to include de Gama, he also needs to include Diaz. So this is just dropping in random and unconnected facts that probably don't belong here. 42-45 points.*

Notice a couple of things here: First, it's getting really short, indicating that the student can't recall many facts—he's leaving out a lot of things.

Next, he's putting in things that are unrelated to the question. What is Columbus doing here, for instance? What is the Columbian Exchange doing here?

Next, some of the things the student has written are just plain wrong. The Roman Empire had nothing to do with feudalism. The Byzantine Empire was Christian, not Muslim. Columbus first arrived in 1492, not 1517. The Black Death actually had some effects that encouraged the Age of Exploration.

Low D. 36-39 points.

ANSWER 7
This is a D answer.

The Roman Empire was in western Europe. It had a system called feudalism that involved the Roman king giving land to people for protection. This wasn't how it worked in the eastern Byzantine Empire which was Muslim.

Peasants were too busy trying to farm the land and get ahead to explore. Some of them such as Leaf Erikson did manage to explore places such as Iceland, Greenland, etc. but they didn't stay. They didn't stay permanently until Columbus arrived in 1517 with the Columbian Exchange. This was an exchange of animals, plants, and disease such as the Black Death that killed most of the Native Americans.

The Black Death also hit Europe around AD 800-1000 and during that time killed half of the population. This greatly reduced Europe's wealth and made it even harder for Europe to enter on the Age of Exploration. The Renaissance and Universities however did increase learning that made exploration possible with compasses and lateen ships. Portugal was the first nation-state.

This essay has two problems: one of them big and one of them huge.

First (the huge problem): it doesn't answer the question I asked. I asked for a history of Europe from the fall of the Roman Empire to the beginning of the Age of Exploration. This answer starts at the beginning of the Age of Exploration and goes (mostly) forward from there.

Second: even if I had asked a question about the Age of Exploration, this isn't a particularly good answer to that question. It leaves a lot

ANSWER 8
This is an F answer.

The Age of Exploration involved religious motivations, economic motivations, technical advances, and political changes. When Byzantium fell it made it hard for Europe to get access to the Silk Road because of the Muslims. It also stunned the Christian World because it was a major loss of a major Christian city to the Muslims. This made the Christians in Europe want to expand in search of new territory and since the Muslims were to the east the expansion had to be to the west.

The technology was also improving with such things as accurate clocks, astrolabes (a form of early computer), compasses, lateen sails, and the caravel, the first deep-ocean vessel of western Europe. These things were made possible by universities and the Renaissance.

Finally the modern state emerged which replaced the feudal system. It collected money through taxes that could be used to support and pay for explorations such as those of Henry the Navigator and Christopher Columbus.

<p><i>out (for instance, the definition of a state) and gets some things wrong (Henry the Navigator wasn't himself an explorer). If you're going to open the door and talk about explorers, you had better list all of them and not include people who aren't on the list.</i></p> <p><i>It also does throw in universities and the Renaissance; those are really the only things in the essay that are related to the question that I actually asked.</i></p> <p><i>18-24 points.</i></p>	
<p><i>Does this answer even need comment?</i></p> <p><i>5-10 points.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">ANSWER 9 <i>This is an F answer.</i></p> <p>Universities were created under futilism after the roman empire fell as part of the renaissance. This cost money that could have been used for exploration like Erikson's. The Back Death interfered with these explorations and killed lots of indians because of Columbus's Exchange. Because of De Soto not finding any gold the door was left open for the English in North America. The English colonized Roanoke, Jamestown, and Massachusetts.</p>
<p><i>You have had every possible essay question in your possession (along with, on the Course Outline, a lot of the information needed to answer each and every one of those questions) since the very first day of class. Is there any excuse for this?</i></p> <p><i>Zero points.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">ANSWER 10 <i>This is an F answer.</i></p> <p>[nothing in the bluebook but a blank page where an essay is supposed to be]</p>