

Thesis Writing and Document Analysis

In order for students to be critical thinkers and writers, they need systematic and *frequent* practice in analyzing and interpreting a variety of written and visual stimuli. The discipline of history provides this opportunity through thesis writing and document analysis.

A thesis statement is a one-sentence argument that takes a position on a specific topic or question and provides organizational categories that will be used in the essay (or paragraph if analyzing a document).

How to Analyze a Document

The two questions that students must always ask themselves when analyzing or writing about history are: *What is this about?* and *Why is it important?* (*Answering these two questions will provide the basis for developing your thesis statement.*) In addition to these two questions, here are some simple steps to doing a document analysis in one paragraph:

- 1. If using a visual document (such as a map, photograph, or cartoon), divide the visual into four quadrants and write down *what you see and what is happening* in each of the quadrants.**
- 2. In writing the first sentence of the paragraph, state the *author* of the document's thesis (not *your* thesis of the document). This is accomplished by stating the *author's purpose and point of view (bias)*.**
- 3. In the next two to four supporting sentences, provide evidence of the author's thesis with specific information from the document—and from outside information as well.**
- 4. In the last sentence of the paragraph or document analysis, state the *significance* of the document or its ideas—thus placing the document into its *historical context* (or time frame). This can be done while expressing your agreement or disagreement with the author's bias and your reason for agreement/disagreement.**

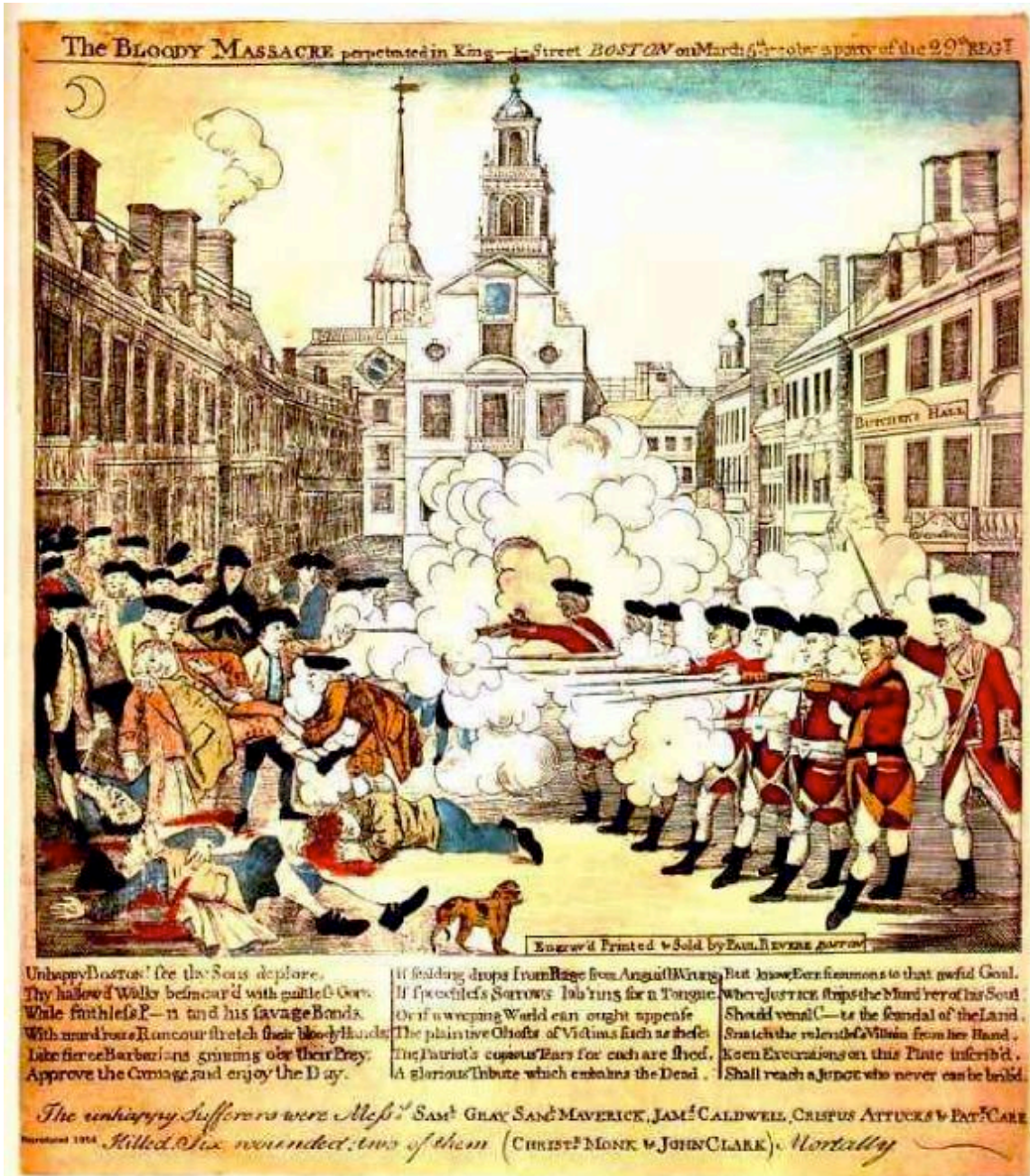
*

*

*

As a general rule, a scholarly paragraph should be four to six sentences in length—not too short or too long. For purposes of Advanced Placement or pre-AP document analysis, a three- or four-sentence paragraph should suffice because of time constraints on AP exams.

Document Analysis Application



chnm.gmu.edu/.../bostonmassacre/assignment.php

Sample Document Analysis

This engraving of the Boston massacre in 1770 by Sons of Liberty leader Paul Revere symbolized the patriot view that the British troops were murderous occupiers of Boston—and by extension, the American colonies—who were determined to rob the colonists of life and liberty. Revere illustrates this interpretation by presenting the townspeople as innocent, unarmed civilians whose faces register shock and horror at being fired upon. Also, note the dog placed at the bottom middle of the picture as an artistic device to portray the citizens' pacific intentions. In contrast, the soldiers are depicted with aggressive, angry expressions while their commander, standing behind them, coolly orders the slaughter. Revere also changes the name of the Customs House (behind the soldiers) to “Butcher’s Hall” for added impact. Although the soldiers’ trial revealed that the citizens were, in fact, a provocative group that taunted the troops with snowballs and cursing, Revere’s engraving would be remembered as a masterpiece of revolutionary propaganda influencing American and world public opinion in favor of independence.

Breakdown of Sample Document Analysis

Thesis (of the document's author):

This engraving of the Boston massacre in 1770 by Sons of Liberty leader Paul Revere symbolized the patriot view that the British troops were murderous occupiers of Boston—and by extension, the American colonies—who were determined to rob the colonists of life and liberty.

Supporting Statements:

- (1) Revere illustrates this interpretation by presenting the townspeople as innocent, unarmed civilians whose faces register shock and horror at being fired upon.
- (2) Also, note the dog placed at the bottom middle of the picture as an artistic device to portray the citizens' pacific intentions.
- (3) In contrast, the soldiers are depicted with aggressive, angry expressions while their commander, standing behind them, coolly orders the slaughter.
- (4) Revere also changes the name of the Customs House (behind the soldiers) to "Butcher's Hall" for added impact.

Significance:

Although the soldiers' trial revealed that the citizens were, in fact, a provocative group that taunted the troops with snowballs and cursing, Revere's engraving would be remembered as a masterpiece of revolutionary propaganda influencing American and world public opinion in favor of independence.