The Little ID: A Guide For Answering Identification Questions Effectively


*Identifications* test both factual knowledge and an understanding of the significance of people, events, and concepts in the context of their times—unlike essay questions which rely on an ability to interpret historical events, use judgment, and include factual knowledge in appropriate ways to support a thesis and to draw conclusions based on evidence and that thesis.

Unfortunately, typical written responses by students to identification questions on exams include enough information to show they are vaguely familiar with the person, event, or concept, but little or nothing that reveals an understanding as to why the item is important. Thus, in a curious way the word *identification* is a misnomer; it can easily be—and often is—defined narrowly to mean nothing more than the ability to merely recognize or identify the item. In many a student’s mind, the charge to *identify* does not involve analyzing significance. What follows are suggestions to guide students both in knowing how to study for exams and for improving ways to use what they have read so as to respond effectively with their answers to identification questions.

Following these suggestions (offered here in two variations) should not be especially taxing, but it does take an understanding of what to look for when one studies and then practicing enough so as to incorporate the thinking behind these suggestions into one’s own routine exam preparation. After sufficient practice, this
broad way of studying and thinking should become easier, if not second nature, and it will likely also result in improved grades.

One approach, or variation, follows the journalistic principles of what, who, where, when, and why. These five principles are easy enough to remember, as they guide students toward covering the areas necessary to write a thorough identification response that will reveal a thinking mind at work. By way of example, let's use the Spanish Armada of 1588.

**What is the term (i.e., name, person, event, or concept)?** Say who it was if it's a person or what it was if it's an event or concept. In the case of our example, the Spanish Armada was a naval flotilla sent against England by Philip II of Spain with the aim of picking up seasoned Spanish troops in the Netherlands, invading England, and ultimately overthrowing Elizabeth and returning England to the Catholic faith.

**Who or what was involved, under what circumstances, and with regard to what relevant background?** This should be specific but concise: Philip II, Habsburg King of Spain, and Elizabeth I, Tudor Queen of England; the Duke of Medina Sidonia, who was a last-minute replacement as admiral of the Spanish fleet, and Sir Francis Drake, one of the commanders of the English navy. The intended attack by the Armada was part of the war between Spain and England that was itself the result of years of increasingly intense rivalry and conflict—religious, military, economic—between the two countries. Including a couple of brief examples of this

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1 I liberally adapted this description of the use of these journalistic principles from Dr. Carol Pixton, my wife and a history teacher at the Polytechnic School (Pasadena, CA).
larger conflict would demonstrate a student’s fuller understanding of the key issues involved.

**Where and how did it happen?** Provide just enough information to demonstrate familiarity with events: The Armada sailed from Spain toward the English Channel and then east for a planned rendezvous with the Duke of Parma, whose troops the Armada was to ferry across the Channel to England where the actual invasion and assault would begin. But the Spanish were attacked successfully in the Channel, then at Calais, and then again at Gravelines where the English used *hellburners*, or fireships, to damage the fleet further. After this Spanish defeat, the remaining ships of the Armada, in retreat, sailed north and then around the British Isles, suffering further losses, including the grounding of ships on the Irish coast—especially due to weather and rough seas—before finally hobbling back to Spain.

**When did the event happen, or when did the person live, or when was the concept formulated or introduced?** Some terms or names elicit an exact date, others an era: in this case it’s a specific year, 1588. If the exact year or specific date(s) are not remembered, students should try to place the date as close as possible to the date(s) in question; sometimes the use of the part of the relevant century will be sufficient (e.g., late-16th century in the case of the Armada). Many teachers, however, in an effort to render history more about understanding and meaning than about the memorizing of dates, will provide the necessary dates on the exam page.
What is its significance? Why is the event, person, or concept important, both in and of itself and in a broader historical sense? For example: What led up to or caused the event, or helped set the stage for the concept, or made it possible for the person to achieve what makes him or her significant in history? What were the short- and long-term influences and consequences? Who or what was affected, and in what ways? Think in terms of cause and effect, impact upon, connections, links or relationships as the significance is being analyzed: The Armada was launched as the culmination of the growing conflict between Queen Elizabeth and King Philip II, especially over the fate of Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots (cousin of Elizabeth and her possible successor) and the religion of England. The Spanish defeat was a blow to Spain’s prestige and finances, whereas it helped to crystallize English feelings of pride and nationalism. In this regard, the defeat of the Armada signaled the beginning of the decline in the fortunes of Spain (i.e., the end of Spain’s Golden Age), even as Spain continued to be the dominant European power into the first quarter of the 17th century. In contrast, England’s rise could be marked by the event, although the unsuccessful attack by the Armada also added to negative perceptions—perceptions that would linger for centuries—that English Protestants had of English Catholics. Including examples or specifics would further strengthen the impression of the student’s understanding. This section, with its emphasis on significance, is the critical part of responding to identifications, and it should be the longest, most detailed, and best supported; it should reflect the student’s thinking and feel for history.
In responding to identifications by using the *what, who, where, when, and why* approach, all this information and analysis should be combined together into one or more smooth-flowing, essay-like paragraphs; that is, students should not answer each of the parts separately or one at a time in a Question-&-Answer format. In addition, any references to books read or from class lectures/discussions that might support the analysis would be a welcome bonus.

An alternative approach to the above journalistic principles is one that can be remembered easily via the acronym I-BAD, with the letters representing *identify, before, after, and during* with regard to identifying and analyzing the significance of a person, event, or concept. Thus if we use *mercantilism* as our sample ID, we could *identify* it as the economic concept (i.e., a set of ideas or policies or even a doctrine, really, rather than a formal theory) that argues in favor of placing the economy in the service of the state in order to add to its power and wealth by regulating as much of the national economy as possible; the doctrine also accepts as fact the erroneous belief that the amount of wealth in the world is finite and that a nation must attempt to secure as much of it as possible in order to sustain and increase its power, yet that could only be made to happen at the expense of other nations.

The background—the *before*—is that mercantilism developed in western Europe from the latter part of the 16th century and prevailed during the early modern period, as some states, such as France and England, began to become more centralized and unified in an effort to build up their military and industrial strength as they competed with other states for dominance in Europe; in fact, it was also believed
that war could help to advance the economy and strengthen the state simultaneously.

The during segment of this I-BAD approach—mercantilism as practiced—should call attention to the ways mercantilism was implemented: by accumulating as much gold, silver, and other precious metals as possible (as these, like trade, were also mistakenly considered finite and thus limited in quantity; this aspect of mercantilism is known as bullionism); by exporting more than importing in order to improve the balance of trade; by building a strong navy; by encouraging the growth of domestic industry so as to increase the potential tax base; by implementing domestic reforms, such as improving roads, revising the tax structure, and establishing standards for weights and measures; and by acquiring colonies to provide raw materials and, eventually, protected markets for goods produced by the parent country. Providing examples of these means—say by referring to Colbert’s measures in France under the reign of Louis XIV, England’s navigation acts, and the creation in several countries of East and West India companies—would demonstrate a student’s understanding of the concept as a living, functioning phenomenon.

The after segment—the consequences and significance of mercantilism—should call attention to how mercantilism led some governments to regulate commerce during the 17th and 18th centuries as well as to engage in economically motivated wars. Along with specific examples, the shortcomings of mercantilism (e.g., how the cost of the wars also contributed to some mercantilist goals not being fulfilled, as was the case with Colbert), the reasons behind the unevenness of success among mercantilist countries, as well as its critics (e.g., the Physiocrats and others
advocating an economic system characterized by *laissez-faire*) should comprise what is addressed as part of an analysis of significance.

Just as the advice when employing the journalistic principles is to write one or more coherent paragraphs—in short essay fashion—incorporating the specifics that these principles call to mind, so it should be with the I-BAD approach, with each of the four parts flowing from one another and with references made to materials read and to what was heard and discussed in class.

One goal of these approaches is to help students demonstrate their ability to think historically. It is also to help them see people, events, and concepts not as isolated from the world around them—something to be memorized but little understood and soon forgotten—but integral to their surroundings, their pasts, and their connections to the future. Thus it would not be farfetched to say that learning how to respond effectively to identifications, along with essays and constructive discussions, contributes to creating better students and, ideally, better and more active citizens. To paraphrase the French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, nothing is understandable except through history. Learning how to think historically as well as critically contributes to an informed and thinking citizenry.