



Essay Writing

History



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Annotated Example

The first year History essay on the following pages was written in response to the question:

Why did the British establish a penal settlement at Botany Bay, Australia?

OUTLINE

Orientation

Contextualise period of British decision to establish a penal settlement:

1. imperialism
2. American independence.

Thesis

1. traditional argument: overcrowded hulks; loss of American colony
2. counter argument: several reasons for settlement.

Point 1

Examine traditional argument: overcrowding of hulks and American independence, so alternative prison colony needed.

Discuss evidence which suggests conditions had improved in the hulks .

Point 2

Several reasons for the choice of Botany Bay as penal settlement:

1. advantages for navigation and commerce
2. look at the importance of these factors in assessment of other sites.

Point 3

Botany Bay offered many advantages:

- (one advantage) provision of flax, hemp and timber (naval supplies).

Point 4

another advantage of Botany Bay:

- base for trading purposes
- strategic military base in the Pacific.

Conclusion

Restate main thesis and main arguments.



ANNOTATIONS TO THE ESSAY

The annotations in the right-hand column below highlight significant features of the essay, such as structure and how evidence for the argument is incorporated, and referencing conventions.

Example: student essay (Pt 1)

The latter half of the eighteenth century was a time of war and competition for much of the world. It was a time of imperialistic ventures and strategies. It was a time when economic and military gains meant wealth, and wealth meant power. Humiliation by America in the form of revolution and a declaration of independence did not sit well with such a powerful nation as Britain. And to top it all off, the nation was overflowing with convicts waiting to be transported "for [their] country's good."¹ The conditions were right for Britain to reassert her power and extend her influence to a new part of the globe. Thus in 1786, the decision to colonise New South Wales at Botany Bay was declared.

The debate as to the overriding motive for the choice of Botany Bay has long been contested. The traditional argument asserts that the primary reason for the settlement at Botany Bay was in reaction to the overcrowded gaols and hulks: New South Wales was to be a dumping ground for the convicts of Britain. However, Botany Bay was attractive for several reasons. One reason was its apparent fertile soil and suitable climate conducive to the transportation and establishment of the convicts. Another reason was the strategic and economic advantages of Botany Bay. Reports from Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks, and proposals by James Matra, John Call and George Young all mention the economic and naval advantages that Botany Bay offered. The more the British found out about Botany Bay, the more attractive the new country became. The question could be posed, if Britain were so desperate to solve the problem of overcrowding in its gaols and hulks, why wasn't the choice of Botany Bay examined years earlier? The cost of sending convicts so far away could be justified by the countless other advantages that could be reaped from the land down under. Thus, it can be asserted that "Transportation was the mode but not the motive of Britain's colonisation of Australia"²

Orientation to topic

Provides historical context to the British decision to establish a penal colony.

Thesis

Outline of traditional argument (reason for settlement: overcrowding of hulks)

Outline of counter argument: several reasons for settlement

i) fertile soil, suitable climate

ii) strategic, economic and naval advantages

LANGUAGE FEATURES

- discipline-specific terms (imperialism, transportation)
- discourse markers (one reason, another reason)
- nominalisation (argument, advantages, humiliation, independence)
- passive voice (the decision was declared)
- no contractions, colloquial phrases or rhetorical questions

¹ Alan Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages: Illusions of Australia's Convict Beginnings* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990), p.10

² Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages*, p.40



Example: student essay cont'd (Pt 2)

The traditional argument for the reasons behind the settlement of New South Wales is that Britain needed to find a solution to its overcrowded gaols. After America revolted in 1776, Britain's could no longer transport criminals to its former colony, and the policy of transporting criminals was abruptly halted. In the expectation that the situation would soon be resolved, the convicts were kept temporarily in hulks. However, as the problem persisted and the numbers of convicts sentenced to transportation continued to increase, the hulks soon became overcrowded. Conditions were unsanitary, diseases such as typhus and smallpox spread out of control, several convicts escaped, and it was feared that the hulks acted as "schools of villainy and vice."³ Thus, merchants in charge of the hulks such as Duncan Campbell of the *Justitia*, set about improving conditions and instituting rehabilitation schemes in the hulks. Changes in government policy abated overcrowding by sending some convicts to serve in the army and navy. The 'Hulks Act' in 1779 sentenced many to hard labour raising sand, gravel and soil and clearing the water and banks on the Thames for three to ten years. The numbers of convicts in the hulks continued to fall due to these policy changes, the expiration of sentences, and the decrease of convicts sentenced to transportation. Conditions in the hulks continued to improve until the decision was made to reinstate transportation in 1784, when the numbers began to rapidly rise once again. Frost asserted that contrary to popular opinion, "the decision to transport criminals to Botany Bay did not relate directly to the presence of large numbers of criminals but rather was consequent upon earlier decisions, taken at times when the numbers were not extraordinary, to reassert transportation as a central aspect of British penal practice"⁴. Once again, overcrowding became a problem, and Botany Bay offered the answer.

topic sentence

evidence in support of traditional argument

evidence questioning the validity of this argument as main reason for establishing a settlement

Concludes point - quotes authority to support conclusion

Britain considered several areas before deciding on Botany Bay, many of which were considered for more reasons than just to serve as a convict colony. The Committee on Transportation established to make this decision reported that:

topic sentence - counter point that there were several reasons for settlement

the Plan of establishing a Colony of young Convicts in some distant Part of the Globe, and in New-discovered Countries, where the Climate is healthy, and the Means of Support attainable, is equally agreeable to the Dictates of Humanity and sound Policy, and *might prove in the Result advantageous both to Navigation and Commerce*.⁵ (emphasis added).

primary source quoted to support new claim

The Committee was seriously considering the area of Das Voltas Bay based on initial reports of a fertile environment and suitable climate, as well as the presence of copper in the mountains, "a fine Bay and Harbour for the Shelter of Shipping," and also the hope that it might "promote the Purposes of future Commerce or of future Hostility in the *South Seas*."⁶ However, this option was abandoned when a survey of the area in 1786 yielded very disappointing results. The option of Lemain on the River Gambia was supported by the probability "that it would in a short series of Years be of considerable Advantage to this Country... [as] Gold is often found in the Interior Parts as well as other articles of value."⁷ This scheme, however, had to be called off due to the wet season, and problems with the natives. Thus, an 'ulterior motive' was always a consideration.

elaborates on importance of these factors in assessing potential sites: quotes sources to support point

³ Manning Clark in Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages*, p. 13.

⁴ Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages*, p. 40.

⁵ Alan Frost, *Convicts and Empire: A Naval Question, 1776-1811* (Melbourne: OUP, 1980), p.8.

⁶ Beauchamp Committee in Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, p. 43.

⁷ Mollie Gillen, 'The Botany Bay Decision, 1786: Convicts, Not Empire', *English Historical Review*, vol. XCVII, no. CCCLXXXV, (1982), p. 759.



Example: student essay cont'd (Pt 2)

According to the reports of Captain James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks, Botany Bay offered many advantages. These included a coastal area with a sheltered port, friendly natives, a pleasant climate, fertile soil, food sources including wild fruits, vegetables, birds and fish: an environment in which they could be self-sufficient in a year. It was also attractive due to its great distance from Britain and the fact that the convicts would have no means of escape. In addition, it offered two significant advantages: it promised to be an important naval store of flax, hemp and timber; and it was a strategic stronghold in the East.

topic sentence - Botany Bay offered many advantages
transition to next paragraph (about potential source of naval supplies etc.)

Britain needed to find new sources of naval supplies. Its sources had been endangered with the onset of the American Revolutionary War. The timber that it had once obtained from New England was no longer available for obvious reasons, and the flax and hemp that had been secured from Russia was in jeopardy as well due to Russia's sympathy for America. The Seven Years War in 1756-1763 and the American Revolution in 1776-1783 had left the British Navy seriously damaged. In 1781, Sir Samuel Hood described the

topic sentence - importance of finding supplies of timber, flax and hemp

strange fatality that seems to have attended the operations of his Majesty's fleet in these seas for some time past, not four ships in the whole are in a fit state to go any distance with a view of meeting the enemy, being totally destitute of spare masts, yards, sails and every other species of stores.⁸

quotes source in support of argument

Call observed that unless something was done about the situation "very serious consequences [were] to be apprehended in diminution of the Strength and Durability of the Royal Navy."⁹ In an attempt to increase its own supplies of timber, flax, and hemp, Britain set up an investigation into its Royal lands and forests. Upon discovering that great improvements were needed, a widespread oak reforestation was recommended in 1782. Thus, at this time, Cook's descriptions of the flax that covered the shores of Norfolk Island and New Zealand so that it was "scarce possible to get through it" and the "Spruce Pines which grow [there] in vast abundance and to a vast size, from two to three diameter and upwards" were very appealing.¹⁰ This fact was recognised in Lord Sydney's 'Heads of a Plan' when he stated "It may not be amiss to remark in favour of this Plan that considerable advantage will arise from the Cultivation of the new Zealand Hemp, or Flax Plant in the new intended Settlement, the supply of which would be of great consequence to us as a Naval Power..."¹¹

new point about significance of Cook's description of flax and timber

Britain also needed to secure significant bases for trading purposes. They had just lost their most significant holdings with the American Revolution and were far behind the other superpowers regarding strategic holdings in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The only site which Britain possessed between Europe and India was St. Helena, a small island with no harbour, and not easily reached from Britain due to the prevailing south-east winds. Based on descriptions from Matra, Britain had the conception that New South Wales was located conveniently close to the Indian Sub-Continent, China, the East Indies, and the Spice Islands, and only about a month's trip from the Cape of Good Hope. It had the potential to be the centre of a lucrative trading network with Asia involving spices, fur and tea. It was also strategically located so they might attack the Dutch in the East Indies and the Spanish in the Philippines safely and easily. The need to strengthen their position to the East was intensified by the recovery of a

topic sentence - claim that it was important to find new bases for trading purposes

perceived suitability of NSW as a trading base.

perceived suitability of

⁸ Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages*, p. 62.

⁹ Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, p. 24.

¹⁰ Cook in Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, p. 123.

¹¹ Lord Sydney in Frost, *Botany Bay Mirages*, p. 45.



Example: student essay cont'd (Pt 2)

document revealing French plans to "isolate the British in Europe before launching a land and sea war against them in Asia."¹² The urgency to act on this information may explain the rather hasty decision to send the First Fleet out to Botany Bay. The area was not resurveyed to reconfirm Cook and Bank's observations, as had all the other areas that had been suggested. Word from British spies about a French expedition by La Perouse to inspect the timber of New Zealand, and the possible establishment of a settlement further hastened Arthur Phillip with his First Fleet. When Phillip arrived in Botany Bay on February 1, before even unloading stores or disembarking passengers, he immediately ordered Philip Gidley King to proceed to Norfolk Island with a party, presumably to beat other European nations. It is clear that foreign competition for the area spurred Britain to work quickly.

NSW as a strategic base

importance of establishing a strategic base in the Pacific

Thus, the evidence strongly suggests that Britain had several reasons for choosing to establish a penal colony at Botany Bay. Though overcrowded hulks and gaols may certainly have been a stimulus for the choice of Botany Bay, many other factors were pertinent for the final decision. The government certainly was not ignorant of the presence of vast supplies of flax, hemp and timber in Norfolk Island and New Zealand. Cook and Banks offered plenty of information about the abundance and extraordinary quality of these products, while Young, Matra and Call repeatedly referred to this fact in their proposals. Likewise the possibility of New South Wales becoming an integral port for Pacific trading networks was anything but secret. In addition, it is clear that countries such as France were interested in the area as well, and that this competition undoubtedly had some influence on Britain's actions. It is impossible to assert that Britain chose Botany Bay as the location to establish a penal colony for only one reason. In this case, Botany Bay offered Britain a little bit of everything: a solution to its transportation problem, an extraordinary naval store, and a strategic port for trade and defence in the Pacific.

Conclusion - restates initial thesis statement

reiterates all main points made throughout to construct the argument

The structure and cohesive flow of information through the argument is facilitated by phrases such as 'according to', 'in addition', 'also'. Words indicating the writer's evaluation and judgement include: 'strongly', 'repeatedly', 'vast', 'extraordinary', 'pertinent' and 'may'.

Quotes longer than three lines are indented, and not enclosed in inverted commas. References are given as footnotes. The reference list has not been included here, but you must include a reference list or bibliography in all your assignments. Also, this essay is of course only one possible response to the question.

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¹² Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, p. 94.

