

Throughout the year, I assign students to write in-class essays in response to the following prompts. They complete these on Digiexam, which allows them to type their responses while locking them out of any other browser or application until they hit “submit.” Below are ChatGPT’s responses, each produced in seconds and requiring little to no revision. I have also included annotated feedback and a grade.

Prompt #1: In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs, writing as Linda Brent, recounts her experiences as an enslaved woman in the antebellum South. Her narrative shows how enslaved women could assert agency despite severe legal, social, and physical constraints. Using specific evidence from the text, analyze how Brent asserts agency through her personal choices, use of concealment, and role as a mother. Explain how these actions challenge slavery’s legal system and gender norms, and discuss the historical context that shapes her resistance.

ChatGPT-5 Response: *For the prompt, I asked ChatGPT-5 to quote from a freely accessible version of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl to inform its analysis. Note, however, that while this book is no longer under copyright, nothing currently prevents students from xeroxing copies of books—or portions of books—and uploading them to ChatGPT-5 to analyze for them.*

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Published in 1861, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—written under the pseudonym Linda Brent—offers an unflinching account of the unique struggles faced by enslaved women in the antebellum South. At a time when both law and custom denied them bodily autonomy, legal rights, and control over their children, Brent’s narrative reveals how enslaved women could nevertheless assert agency. Her story demonstrates this through deliberate personal choices to resist her master’s control, through the strategic use of concealment, and through determined efforts to safeguard her children’s futures. These acts challenged prevailing racial and gender norms, expanding our understanding of resistance under slavery.

One of Brent’s most overt assertions of agency comes in her decision to enter into a relationship with Mr. Sands in order to fend off Dr. Flint’s relentless sexual advances. While such a decision defied nineteenth-century ideals of female chastity, Brent frames it as an intentional act of self-preservation: “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion” (Ch. 10). In an era when white women were idealized as “pure” and Black women were denied any claim to sexual respectability, Brent’s choice directly challenged the moral framework of her audience. Her analysis of her own decision-making is as radical as the act itself—by insisting on the right to choose, even between limited options, she redefines virtue in terms of autonomy rather than compliance.

Brent's agency also takes the form of calculated invisibility. In 1835, she fled Flint's immediate reach and hid in a crawlspace above her grandmother's shed, which she famously called her "loophole of retreat." The space, she writes, was so small that "the air was stifling; the darkness total" (Ch. 21). She endured nearly seven years in this space, longer than the span of many political careers, emerging only when it became safe to escape north. While this hiding place could be seen as passive, Brent transforms it into a tool of control: from her cramped vantage point, she monitored her children, communicated with trusted allies, and denied Flint the power to physically possess her. The very act of waiting—usually portrayed as powerlessness—becomes an active resistance strategy when it is chosen deliberately to outlast an oppressor.

Her role as a mother provides yet another arena for resistance. The legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* dictated that her children's enslaved status followed her own, and mothers had no legal rights to protect them. Yet Brent found ways to intervene. When a slave trader agreed to help remove her children from Dr. Flint's control, she admitted her complicated feelings: "Much as I despise and detest the class of slave-traders, whom I regard as the vilest wretches on earth, I must do this man the justice to say that he seemed to have some feeling... he was willing to aid them in getting out of Dr. Flint's power, even without charging the customary fee" (Ch. 27). This moment captures the moral complexity of enslaved motherhood—Brent must rely on a member of a despised profession to protect her children—but it also illustrates her unyielding determination to use every available channel, however tainted, to safeguard her family.

By making strategic personal choices, by transforming concealment into a weapon of defiance, and by intervening in her children's lives against the structural power of slavery, Linda Brent challenged the norms of her time. Her actions defied both the legal apparatus of slavery and the social codes that sought to define women solely by their compliance and purity. In recording these choices for publication in 1861, Jacobs ensured that the resistance strategies of enslaved women—often quiet, often constrained, but deeply intentional—would enter the historical record. Her story forces us to reconsider what agency looks like under oppression and reminds us that resistance can take many forms, from public defiance to the unseen resolve of survival.

Likely grade for in-class essay: A (provided citations are addressed).

Prompt #2: Write a formal and thorough analysis of President Harry S. Truman's decision to use atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, effectively ending World War II. Use historical evidence, insight, and critical thinking to assess whether Truman's action was appropriate given the circumstances. Your essay should reflect a deep understanding of the topic and engage thoughtfully with the ethical and historical aspects of the decision. Your essay should reflect a deep understanding of the topic and a thoughtful engagement with the ethical and historical aspects of Truman's decision.

ChatGPT-5 Response:

President Harry S. Truman's decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima (August 6, 1945) and Nagasaki (August 9, 1945) was shaped by a combination of military necessity, diplomatic strategy, and moral

controversy. While the action effectively ended World War II, its appropriateness remains debated, as it balanced the aim of swiftly defeating Japan with the unprecedented humanitarian consequences of nuclear warfare. Examining each of these factors in turn reveals why this decision remains one of the most contested in history.

From a standpoint of military necessity, Truman believed the bomb was the surest way to end the war quickly and avoid an invasion that would cost enormous numbers of American and Japanese lives. The Battle of Okinawa (April–June 1945) had left over 12,000 American and 100,000 Japanese military dead, with staggering civilian losses, shaping expectations for Operation Downfall, the planned invasion of the Japanese home islands. Casualty estimates for such an invasion ranged from hundreds of thousands to over one million U.S. troops, with far greater Japanese losses. Japan's rejection of the July 26 Potsdam Declaration, combined with the successful Trinity Test on July 16, convinced Truman that using the bomb aligned with his duty to end the war swiftly. In this light, the bomb was not only a new weapon but the ultimate extension of the strategic bombing campaign aimed at forcing unconditional surrender.

Diplomatic strategy also played a critical role in Truman's decision, reinforcing the thesis that the bomb served more than a purely military purpose. By early August 1945, the Soviet Union was poised to enter the war against Japan, as promised at Yalta, threatening to expand its influence in Asia. Dropping the bomb before Soviet advances could claim Japanese territory offered the United States the chance to dictate postwar terms without sharing control. The rapid succession of the Hiroshima strike on August 6 and the Nagasaki strike on August 9—coinciding with the Soviet invasion of Manchuria—maximized both shock and speed. This sequence strongly suggests that the bomb was also a diplomatic tool, signaling U.S. power not just to Japan but to the Soviet Union as the postwar balance of power began to take shape.

The moral controversy surrounding Truman's decision remains the most enduring pillar of the debate, confirming the thesis that humanitarian considerations were weighed, but ultimately subordinated to military and diplomatic aims. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not purely military targets; both cities were heavily populated, and tens of thousands of civilians died instantly, with many more suffering from burns, radiation sickness, and long-term health effects. Critics argue that alternatives existed—such as a non-lethal demonstration or modifying surrender terms to preserve the emperor—that could have achieved Japan's capitulation without targeting civilians. Supporters counter that only direct, devastating attacks would compel Japan's leadership to surrender. This tension between immediate wartime objectives and the ethical limits of warfare underscores why Truman's choice remains morally divisive.

In the end, Truman's decision reflected a calculated blend of military necessity, diplomatic advantage, and acceptance of grave moral cost. While the bombings succeeded in ending the war on U.S. terms, they also introduced the world to the nuclear age and the ethical dilemmas it carries.

Likely grade for in-class essay: B+ (easily could be an A with a clearer thesis).

Prompt #3: Analyze the three most important developments leading up to the American Civil War? In a well-structured essay, assess why these developments should be considered the most important.

ChatGPT-5 Response

The American Civil War was the result of decades of deepening political, economic, and social divisions between the North and South, but three developments stand out as especially decisive in bringing the

nation to armed conflict. The Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 each played a pivotal role in escalating sectional tensions. These events were the most important because they shaped the political boundaries of slavery, transformed compromise into conflict, and ultimately convinced Southern leaders that secession was their only recourse.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was the first major political attempt to manage the growing divide over slavery's expansion, setting the pattern for future disputes. By admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state, and banning slavery north of the 36°30' line in the Louisiana Territory, Congress sought to preserve the balance of power in the Senate. While it temporarily calmed tensions, the compromise also entrenched the idea that the federal government could regulate the spread of slavery—a precedent that angered many in the South. More importantly, it framed the expansion of slavery as a zero-sum contest between regions, ensuring that future territorial growth would reignite the debate. This initial effort at compromise demonstrated both the necessity of political solutions and their fragility, making it one of the foundational developments on the road to war.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 marked a turning point by replacing careful political compromise with violent confrontation. Authored by Senator Stephen A. Douglas, the act repealed the Missouri Compromise's geographic restriction on slavery and allowed settlers in Kansas and Nebraska to determine the status of slavery through popular sovereignty. In practice, this led to "Bleeding Kansas," a period of armed conflict between pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers that shocked the nation. The act not only destroyed the Missouri Compromise's political framework but also shattered trust between North and South. By opening territories once closed to slavery, it convinced many Northerners that the "Slave Power" intended to dominate the federal government, while Southerners saw Northern resistance as an existential threat. The Kansas-Nebraska Act moved the slavery debate from Congress to the battlefield, making it a critical development on the path to civil war.

The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 was the final development that transformed sectional hostility into outright secession. Lincoln's victory, without carrying a single Southern state, convinced many Southerners that they had permanently lost political power at the national level. Although Lincoln repeatedly stated he had no intention of abolishing slavery where it already existed, his opposition to its expansion into the territories directly challenged the foundation of Southern political strategy. For the South, Lincoln's election confirmed that the balance of power had shifted irrevocably toward the North. Within weeks, South Carolina seceded from the Union, soon followed by six other states. This made Lincoln's election not just a political milestone, but the trigger that made war unavoidable.

In sum, the Missouri Compromise of 1820, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 were the three most important developments leading to the Civil War. The first established the fragile framework for managing sectional conflict, the second destroyed that framework through open violence, and the third convinced the South that separation was the only path forward. Together, these events reveal how repeated attempts at compromise eventually gave way to political breakdown, secession, and the bloodiest war in American history.

Likely grade for in-class essay: A.

Prompt #4: The American Revolution followed years of escalating conflict between Great Britain and its North American colonies. Were the colonists justified in demanding independence? Using evidence from the *Stamp Act Resolves* (1765), the *Declaration of Independence* (1776), and the *Olive Branch Petition* (1775), write an essay evaluating their case. Explain how each document supports or complicates the argument for independence and place each in its historical context.

ChatGPT-5 Response:

The American Revolution, declared on July 4, 1776, followed more than a decade of escalating disputes between Great Britain and its North American colonies. Determining whether the colonists were justified requires examining three issues: Britain's violation of political rights through taxation without representation, the economic restrictions and punitive measures that undermined self-government, and the rejection of peaceful petitions. The *Stamp Act Resolves* (1765), *Declaration of Independence* (1776), and *Olive Branch Petition* (1775) trace the shift from protest to independence.

The first justification came from Britain's violation of colonial political rights. On May 30, 1765, the Virginia House of Burgesses adopted the *Stamp Act Resolves*, declaring "that the Taxation of the People by themselves... is the distinguishing characteristic of British freedom." Parliament's Stamp Act (1765) and Townshend Acts (1767) taxed colonists without elected representation. British leaders defended this under the theory of *virtual representation*, claiming that members of Parliament acted for the good of the entire empire, not just their own constituents. Colonists rejected this as a constitutional fiction, arguing that only assemblies chosen by the people could legitimately tax them. This disagreement went beyond policy—it was a fundamental dispute over sovereignty.

Economic restrictions and punitive measures formed a second pillar of the case for independence. The Tea Act (1773) granted the British East India Company a monopoly and retained the Townshend tea tax, a symbolic assertion of parliamentary supremacy. Colonists saw it as an attempt to force acceptance of Parliament's taxing power. The Boston Tea Party in December 1773 triggered the Coercive Acts (1774), which closed Boston's port, altered the Massachusetts charter, and allowed royal officials accused of crimes to be tried in England. These measures targeted the principle of self-government, as colonial legislatures lost authority over local affairs. The *Declaration of Independence* charged the king with "abolish[ing] the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province" and "suspend[ing] our own Legislatures," framing the acts as part of a deliberate pattern to dismantle representative rule.

The third major justification came from Britain's rejection of peaceful petitions. In July 1775, the Continental Congress adopted the *Olive Branch Petition*, pledging loyalty to King George III while requesting "a happy and permanent reconciliation." The king refused to receive it and, on August 23, 1775, issued the Proclamation for Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition, declaring the colonies in revolt. This rejection demonstrated that Britain viewed the crisis not as a constitutional disagreement but as a rebellion to be crushed. As the *Declaration of Independence* later stated, "In every stage of these Oppressions... repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury."

By 1776, the erosion of political rights, the imposition of economic and legal punishments, and the dismissal of peaceful reconciliation convinced many colonial leaders that independence was the only

viable course. While the Revolution excluded many groups from its promises, the colonists' grievances—rooted in both constitutional tradition and Enlightenment ideals—provided a coherent and well-documented case for separation. In this sense, the demand for independence was both politically justified and historically significant.

Likely grade for in-class essay: A-