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STS.036 Technology and Nature in American History
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STS.036
Sample analytical paragraphs
10 April 2008

Here are a couple of sample paragraphs designed to give you a sense of what I am looking for in an analytical historical essay, in terms of paragraph structure and length, historical specificity, balance between ideas and historical details, and use of sources. This is not meant in any way as a rigid format that you all have to follow, but rather a general sense of what I was thinking of when I designed the second paper assignment.

In the marginal comments I have made a descriptive outline that explains how each sentence functions in relation to the rest of the paragraph. I also mention a few basic writing strategies that might be helpful.

Between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, the federal government rationalized the American landscape in a way that facilitated the commodification of nature. In 1785, Congress passed Thomas Jefferson's proposal for the U.S. Rectangular Land Survey, which essentially transformed the Western landscape into a checkerboard pattern. Land surveyors went west to divide the land into grids, the basic unit of which was the 160 acres that was considered the average size for a single farm. Jefferson's grid made the process of buying and selling land more efficient, and it also turned the land itself into a commodity. As environmental historian Ted Steinberg describes it, the grid was "a uniform set of boxes easily bought and sold."¹ The grid's primary purpose was one of commodification: transforming the world of nature into the world of economic markets and exchange.

During the Civil War, Congress rationalized the western landscape on a far more sweeping scale as it enacted legislation that parceled out land to individual citizens, corporations, and educational institutions. In 1862, under the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railroad Act, and the Morrill Land Grant Act, the federal government began granting parcels of land—for both use and sale—to homesteaders, transcontinental railroad companies, and state institutions of higher education. Both Jefferson's survey grid and the Civil War land grant legislation sought to promote economic development and democracy. According to cultural historian Rebecca Solnit, "The grid meant rationality in its regularity and democracy in its equal apportionment of space."² Although the rationality of the grid proved to be an enormous economic benefit (for railroad corporations especially), its democratic principles did not extend to the Native Americans who were violently and abruptly pushed off their lands to make way for settlement and industrial development.

Comment [JP1]: Topic sentence that presents the overarching idea for the paragraph. It also says who did what, when, and why it was important.

Comment [JP2]: Here are some specific historical details that basically explain how the grid was created and what it was for. (This part is the "what.")

Comment [JP3]: This sentence is more analytical than factual; it explains the significance of the details in the previous 2 sentences. (This part is the "so what?")

Comment [JP4]: Here is one way to integrate a direct quotation into your own prose. (There are other ways, and you should feel free to use a variety of methods.)

Comment [JP5]: In general it is always a good idea to take the last word in a paragraph. In other words, don't end a paragraph with a quote. This sentence underscores the main theme of the paragraph.

Comment [JP6]: As much as possible, I try to avoid the passive voice ("to be" verbs). Instead of saying that "land was granted," I specify that it was the federal government who was making the land grants to various groups. Your writing will be more precise if you always specify who is doing what to whom, and when.

Comment [JP7]: This is another way to conclude a paragraph—qualify an earlier statement or challenge someone else's assertion. And this sentence leads into what might be the next paragraph on Native Americans' experience of mid-19th century industrialization.

¹ Theodore Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 60.

² Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 195.