

Dialectical Essay Prompt

On the morning of September 11, 2001, the United States experienced one of the most devastating terrorist attacks in its history. Coordinated by the extremist group Al-Qaeda, four hijacked planes targeted major symbols of American power. Nearly 3,000 lives were lost in New York City, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania. For many Americans, this was a moment of deep fear, confusion, and vulnerability. The images of the Twin Towers collapsing, first responders racing into danger, and families searching for loved ones became seared into national memory.

In the days and weeks following the attacks, the nation mourned — but also mobilized. The government responded with a promise to protect its people and prevent anything like this from ever happening again. President George W. Bush, standing at Ground Zero, declared that the U.S. would hunt down those responsible and take steps to secure the homeland.

One of the most sweeping changes came with the passing of the USA PATRIOT Act in October 2001. The law expanded the government's ability to monitor communications, access records, and detain individuals suspected of terrorism. Supporters argued that these changes were essential for national security in a new era of global terrorism. However, critics warned that the Act gave the government too much power, infringing on civil liberties, especially targeting people who looked, dressed, or worshipped differently — often Muslim Americans.

Did the government strike the right balance between protecting national security and preserving individual freedoms? Or did fear cause an overreach of power that changed the country in unintended ways? Should we ever give up personal freedoms for the sake of collective safety?

Essay Requirements and Scaffolding

1. Introduction (Hook + Context + Thesis)

- Begin with a compelling hook (a quote, fact, or question related to 9/11 or the Patriot Act).
- Provide brief background: what happened on 9/11, what the Patriot Act is, and why it was passed.
- End with your thesis: your position on whether the Patriot Act was the most appropriate way to protect the U.S.

2. First Body Paragraph – Arguments in Support of the Patriot Act

Use evidence from:

- George W. Bush's speeches or appearances (e.g., Ground Zero, Yankees game)
- Voting records showing bipartisan support
- Increases in patriotic behavior (military signups, flag sales)
- Department of Justice letter justifying the Act

3. Second Body Paragraph – Arguments Against the Patriot Act

Use evidence from:

- Primary sources showing Muslim-American experiences

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- Polls or articles about surveillance in American cities
- Comparisons between the Patriot Act and the Bill of Rights

4. Third Body Paragraph – Dialectical Thinking

- Acknowledge the tension: Can both national security *and* civil liberties be protected at once?
- Weigh the strongest evidence on each side.
- Consider: Did the U.S. go too far? Was there a better way?

5. Conclusion

- Reaffirm your argument.
- Reflect on the broader persistent issue:
What actions are justified in the interest of the welfare or security of the community?
- Suggest what future generations can learn from the response to 9/11.

Rubric

Criteria	Exceeds Expectations (4)	Meets Expectations (3)	Approaching Expectations (2)	Needs Improvement (1)
Thesis & Argumentation	Clear, nuanced thesis takes a strong, defensible position; addresses both sides with sophisticated insight.	Thesis is clear and takes a position; both sides are considered and explained.	Thesis is present but may be vague or underdeveloped; limited discussion of both sides.	No clear thesis; argument is missing or extremely unclear.
Use of Evidence	Uses 4+ well-chosen pieces of evidence (textual, visual, audio) from unit; integrates sources effectively and cites them when appropriate.	Uses at least 3 relevant pieces of evidence from unit materials; most are explained clearly.	Uses 2 pieces of evidence, but they may be weakly explained or not clearly connected to the argument.	Uses 0–1 pieces of evidence or evidence is irrelevant or misunderstood.
Dialectical Reasoning	Thoughtfully explores both perspectives; shows deep	Considers both perspectives with some critical thinking;	Mentions opposing view but lacks depth	Only presents one side; shows little to no

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	understanding of tensions between freedom and security.	recognizes key trade-offs.	or fairness in explanation.	dialectical thinking.
Organization & Structure	Essay flows logically with strong transitions; clear intro, body, and conclusion; each paragraph builds on the last.	Essay has a clear structure; paragraphs are organized and transitions are mostly smooth.	Organization is inconsistent or somewhat unclear; some abrupt shifts in ideas.	Disorganized or hard to follow; paragraphs may be missing or out of order.
Writing Conventions	Few to no errors in grammar, punctuation, or spelling; language is academic and precise.	Some minor errors, but they do not distract from meaning; language is mostly clear and appropriate.	Frequent errors that sometimes confuse the reader; informal language may be used.	Many errors in grammar or mechanics that make the essay hard to understand.
Conclusion & Reflection	Strong conclusion that connects to the persistent issue and shows thoughtful insight about freedom vs. security.	Conclusion summarizes position and touches on the persistent issue.	Conclusion is weak or off-topic; does not address the broader theme.	No clear conclusion or abrupt ending; no connection to the broader issue.