

CLASSWORK: Please read the sample student essay and answer the questions *in complete sentences* in the spaces provided.

Q1) *What specific evidence is provided to support the idea that the French Revolution was a failure?*

Q2) *What specific evidence is provided to support the idea that the French Revolution was a success?*

Q3) *After reading the essay, do you believe the Revolution was more of a success or a failure? Explain.*

Q4) *What characteristics made this a good essay?*

Q5) *If you were the teacher, what grade would you give this essay? Explain the reasons for your grade.*

Why was the French Revolution both a success and a failure? (Student Response)

Like many radical upheavals, the French Revolution resulted in some successes as well as many failures. Even the outcomes that were viewed as positive, however, came at a very high price. Different groups of Frenchmen had varying ideas of what the Revolution should accomplish. The rural peasants and urban sans-culottes were more interested in having enough food to eat than the reforming ideals of revolutionary leaders. Many delegates to the first National Assembly were in favor of replacing the absolute monarchy with a constitutional monarchy. They also believed the system of taxation should be revised and that all men should be treated equally before the law. With these and other competing interests all playing major roles, especially as the Revolution became more radical, the results were decidedly a mixed bag.

One of the most obvious failures of the French Revolution was the Reign of Terror from 1793-94. The Terror, which was orchestrated by Robespierre and his followers, was ostensibly a way to provide for the security of the Republic by exposing traitors to the people. In reality, it was used by Robespierre as a means to consolidate and strengthen his hold on power. Instead of putting into practice the democratic ideals of liberty and equality that he spoke of in public, Robespierre used the Terror to execute or imprison thousands of people who he viewed as a threat. The Terror came to an end only after Robespierre himself was sent to the guillotine.

Violence and chaos were two of the main characteristics of the Revolution. Besides the Reign of Terror, there were revolts by rural peasants against their lords; bread riots by the sans-culottes in the cities; the September Massacres . . . and the brutal handling of the insurrection in the Vendean department. On top of all this, France was at war with most of Europe for all but the early years of the Revolution.

The French Revolution also failed to establish a constitutional monarchy or a representative government. France began in 1789 with the absolute monarch of Louis XVI and ended with the military dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte. In between there were various elected legislative bodies, but these groups became more radical and dogmatic as the Revolution progressed. The leaders of these Assemblies cared for the people only to the extent that they could help them hold on to power. Men such as Robespierre, and later the members of the Directory, used the National Assembly for their own personal gain.

There were some gains made by the Revolution in France. While the sans-culottes of Paris were not much better off by the end of 1799, the peasants of rural France had made some progress. The old feudal rights of the lords had been abolished in 1789, and much of the church land that had been seized by the government and sold to investors eventually ended up in the hands of the peasants. The system of taxation had also been revised so the burden did not fall so heavily on the peasants and other members of the Third Estate. The National Assembly also issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which said that men are born free and are equal before the law. How well this Declaration was observed, however, is debatable.

Perhaps one of the most important outcomes of the French Revolution is that it gave many citizens a taste of liberty, equality, and power, however briefly it lasted. It also stirred feelings of national pride that had not existed before. The Revolution also saw the beginnings of socialist theory, such as the necessity of economic planning and a greater equality between the rich and the poor. These theories, along with a growing nationalism, would play a significant role in European politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.