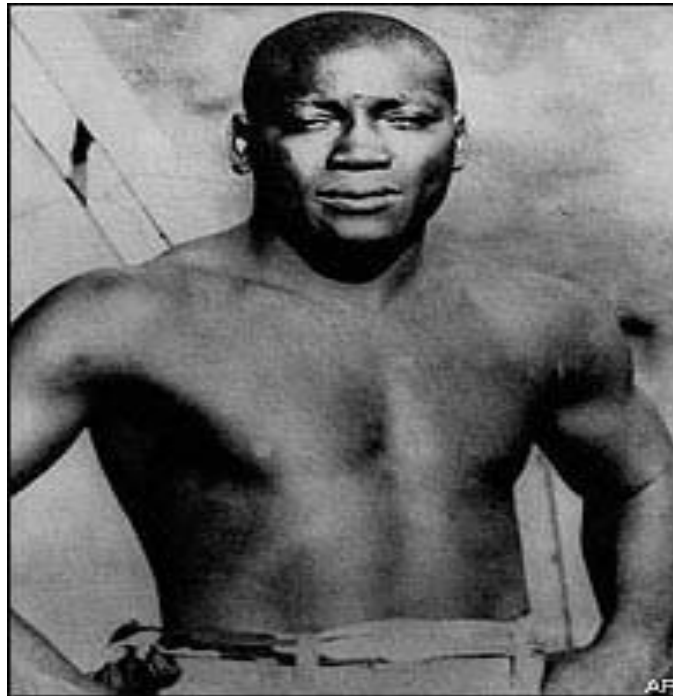


How did the portrayal of Jack Johnson in the media reflect the racial attitude of the United States at the turn of the 20th Century?

DOCUMENT BASED QUESTION



HOW DID THE PORTRAYAL
OF JACK JOHNSON IN THE
MEDIA REFLECT THE RACIAL
ATTITUDE OF THE UNITED
STATES AT THE TURN OF THE
20TH CENTURY?

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How did the portrayal of Jack Johnson in the media reflect the racial attitude of the United States at the turn of the 20th Century?

For African Americans, life at the turn of the 20th Century was extremely difficult. Some historians refer to the period as the “dark time” for blacks. Some insist that life under slavery was in some ways better because they were taken care of by slave owners, at least in some measure. Under slavery, “at least you were property with some sense of value to be at least kept alive. But once slavery was over, there was arbitrary violence to put you back in your place and deny you every opportunity. There was no one to defend African Americans.”¹ After emancipation, when they were no longer someone’s property, there was little or no value found in their existence. Living in a segregated society, with extreme hatred and even violence, was what blacks dealt with in their day to day lives, especially in the south. Dozens of black men were lynched each year, in many cases, simply for not behaving like a black should according to white standards.

During this time period, the heavyweight championship of the world was probably the most prestigious and glorified achievement in the country. “Many white people could not fathom that a black man was the heavyweight champion. In 1910, the importance of being the world’s heavyweight champ could not be underestimated. It was like the Heisman Trophy winner, Major League Baseball MVP and Olympic decathlon gold medalist all rolled into one.”² It is hard to compare to the 21st Century, where it is probably true that very few Americans can even name the heavyweight champion of the world. Based on attendance and television ratings, sports like basketball and football have taken over in the hearts and minds of most Americans, where once cherished sports like prize fighting have taken a back seat. Within the historical context of the overtly racist attitudes of the country and the love and honor bestowed upon boxing’s most prestigious

¹ Ray Hagar, Guy Clifton, *Johnson-Jeffries: Dateline Reno* (Canada: Pediment Publishing, 2010), 6-7.

² Hagar, Clifton, 12.

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award emerged one of the most controversial and perhaps forgotten black characters in American history, Jack Johnson.

Perhaps one of the most controversial sports figures in American history, Jack Johnson emerged as the heavyweight champion of the world at a time when most whites in the country thought that blacks were culturally, physically, and intellectually inferior. Based in the pseudo-science of the time and wrapped in a cloak of Social Darwinism, blacks were seen in the scientific world, literary circles, media, and certainly within society as slow, lazy, dim-witted, and even criminal. “The Negro race was notoriously carefree and prone to laziness, drunkenness, and disease.”³ For most, if not all white Americans, it was difficult to stomach the idea that a black man held the nations’ most respected and coveted prize.

Furthermore, through his own actions, it is obvious that Jack Johnson did not cave to American society’s expectations of blacks, perhaps even relishing in the idea that he was a thorn in the side of white America. “Certainly there was no other famous black American of his day who so utterly resisted racial barriers, no other who so openly assaulted white middle-class attitudes.”⁴ While most media portrayals of blacks reflected the racist belief by most white Americans that blacks were closer to apes than humans, Jack Johnson was extremely intelligent, culturally sophisticated, and physically gifted. Cartoons in newspapers were overtly racist and depicted Johnson as “an inky shape with popping eyes and rubbery lips”.⁵ Many depict Johnson participating in black stereotypes like eating watermelon or chasing around a chicken. They also refer to Johnson “even in

³ Randy Roberts, *Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 5.

⁴ Roberts, xii.

⁵ Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), xi.

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ostensibly objective news stories as the ‘dinge’, the ‘coon’, the ‘stove’, the ‘Texas Darky’, the ‘big smoke’, the ‘Ethiopian’ the ‘Senegamban’, and more often than one credit, simply ‘the nigger’.”⁶ None gave Johnson the credit he deserved.

The reality was that Jack Johnson was a successful business entrepreneur, vaudevillian actor, race car driver, and one of the best heavyweight champions of all time. In the historic fight against James J. Jeffries in Reno, Nevada on July 4, 1910, he thoroughly beat the man boxing historian Tracy Callis considers to be the best. “In Jim Jeffries is the extraordinary: an athlete built on the dimensions of the present day, but also with the grit of his time. I am of the view that Jeffries assets make him yet the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time.”⁷ If you measure one’s greatness on the victories over his quality opponents, then Johnson should rank among the best of all time, arguably the best, and certainly the best of his generation.

After the fight in Reno, Jack Johnson had finally quieted his critics for the time being. He certainly won the respect of the “Great White Hope” Jim Jeffries. In the aftermath of the battle he would comment that he could not have beaten Johnson on his best day. Fittingly, the headline in the Nevada State Journal the day after the fight on July 5 read, “Jack Johnson Is Now Champion”.⁸ The editors must have forgotten that Jack Johnson had won the Heavyweight Championship two years early and was defending the title, not fighting for it.

⁶ Ward, xi.

⁷ Hagar, Clifton, 20.

⁸ Hagar, Clifton, 88.

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Source 1: Excerpt from *Unforgivable Blackness*

Vocabulary:

- *Caricature*- exaggeration of a person looks, usually in a cartoon
- *Ostensibly*- to make something obvious
- *Derisive*- ridiculous
- *Declamatory*- strong declaration or statement

Document Note: Vaudeville was a stage entertainment consisting of various acts. (Usually comedic skits with joke telling, singing, and dancing.) A minstrel show was a vaudevillian performance usually performed by white performers who would paint their faces black (thus the reference to “blackface”) and pretend to be black. They would sing, dance, and tell jokes as if they were black. By doing so they were reinforcing the era’s stinging stereotypes of blacks as childlike, lazy, ignorant and racially inferior.

Johnson was the subject of hundreds, if not thousands, of newspaper cartoons during the course of his career. Those who drew them usually made some effort to produce recognizable caricatures of his white opponents, but Johnson himself looks the same in virtually all of them: an inky shape with popping eyes and rubbery lips, by turns threatening and ludicrous, that bears no resemblance of Johnson or any one else, it is as if Crazy Kat or Mickey Mouse had somehow been dropped down among human beings. Even in ostensibly objective news stories Johnson is called “the dinge”, the “coon”, the “stove”, the “Texas Darky”, the “big smoke”, the “Ethiopian”, the “Senegambian”, and—more often than one credit, simply “the nigger”. In the same derisive fashion, Johnson’s words were often rendered in a kind of minstrel dialect no one ever actually used offstage: “Deah’s one man dat Ah wahnts to fight. Dat’s Jeff. Ah don’e seen no good reason why Ah’s not entitled to a whack at Jeff fo de’ champeenship.” There are at least four dim old recordings of Johnson’s actual voice: in three he’s adopted the formalized declamatory style of the vaudevillian he was for thirty years; in the fourth he’s *trying* to mimic a blackface comic. In none of them does he sound remotely like the buffoon the sports pages made him out to be.

--excerpt taken from *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* by Geoffrey C. Ward (pg. xi)

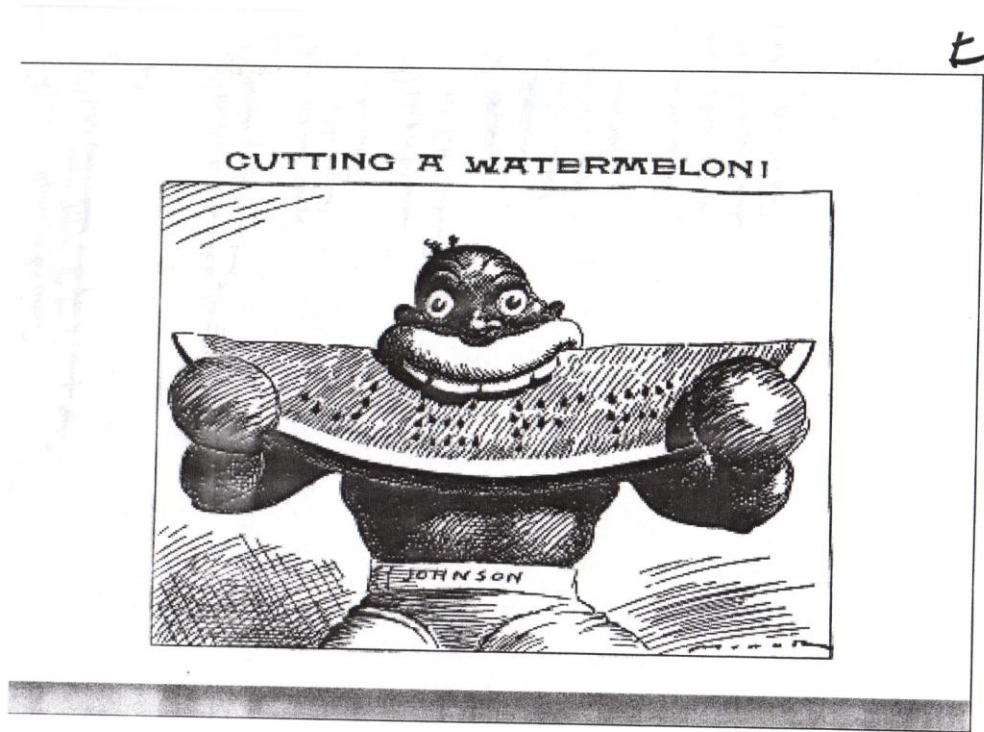
How did the portrayal of Jack Johnson in the media reflect the racial attitude of the United States at the turn of the 20th Century?

Please answer the following questions about Source 1:

1. According to Ward, what were some of the names used to describe Johnson in major news stories?
2. In what way was Johnson portrayed in newspaper cartoons?
3. Why would his white opponents be portrayed in cartoons more closely to reality (or recognizable)?
4. How does the audio evidence reject the “minstrel” dialect portrayal of Johnson?
5. What effect on the American public would these kinds of inaccurate portrayals have on their attitudes towards blacks?

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SOURCE 2: Johnson Cartoon



-Wayne A. Rozen, *America on the Ropes: a Pictorial History of the Johnson-Jeffries Fight* (Binghamton, NY: Casey Press,, 2004),j p. 274. (Cartoon by Robert Minor, St. Louis Post-Dispatch)

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Please answer the following questions about Source 2

1. Who is depicted in this cartoon?
2. What name is spelled out in watermelon seeds?
3. What kind of racial stereotypes are apparent in this cartoon?
4. Why is this cartoon titled "Cutting a Watermelon"?
5. If you only saw this image and knew nothing else about the fighter, what perception would you have of him?

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6. How is this cartoon connected to the author's statements in Source 1?

SOURCE 3: Excerpt from *Nevada State Journal*

Vocabulary:

- *Apprehension*- viewing the future with anxiety and/or alarm
- *Exultation*- a feeling of great happiness and excitement.
- *Deplore*- to strongly regret
- *Exalted*- raise in rank, power, or character
- *Denounced*- to pronounce something publicly as evil

Document Note: It is interesting to note that this story was found on Page 6 of the day's newspaper right next to other stories about the fight. (In fact the majority of the paper and almost the entire front page was dedicated to the "Fight of the Century", which would take place the next day.) Some of the other story titles around this story were: "Many Specials Due to Arrive: Thousands of Packed Cars are Racing Across the Continent"; "Picture Films to Be Rushed East"; "Race Rioting in Mississippi: Mobs of Whites Out Gunning for Negroes; Six Already Have Been Killed: May Call Out the Troops"

FEAR RESULT OF NEGRO WINNING (*Headline/Story from Nevada State Journal*)

Washington Apprehensive of Results if White Man Licked

FEELING MOST INTENSE

Many Colored People Believe This Will Settle Status of Races

Washington, July 2—According to reports received here today many citizens of the south have dire apprehensions regarding the result of the prize fight to be held in Reno next Monday afternoon, in which a white man and a black man participate.

The negro population of the south is intensely interested in the outcome of the great battle, believing that the fight will determine the social position of the black man in the society of the nation.

It is the contention of the south that if Johnson wins at Reno white ladies will be crowded off the sidewalks and insulted generally.

Southern congressmen think the contest at the Nevada city, which places the races face to face, absurd, and see many dire evils in the defeat of the white man by the black.

"Dangerous exaltation" is the term used by those who deplore the effect if the fight.

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Negro government clerks are said to be nervous and excited, as they expect their race to be greatly exalted in a social way by the fight.

While the fight is serving as a great advertisement for the state of Nevada and the city of Reno, it is expected here that the state and city in question will be severely denounced from all parts of the country.

Source: By United Press to the *Nevada State Journal*, July 3, 1910

Please answer the following questions from Source 3:

1. What date was this article written? From what city did this report come?
2. How close to the “Fight of the Century” was it written?
3. What are the various ways that this article refers to African Americans?
4. What are the fears of southern whites?
5. What are the hopes of some blacks?
6. How might this article reinforce the fears about African Americans in the mind of the reader?

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SOURCE 4: Excerpts from Jack London’s “Reports on the James J. Jeffries-Jack Johnson Championship Fight *New York Herald*”

Vocabulary:

- *Lackadaisical*- lazy or lethargic; undetermined
- *Symmetry*- excellence of proportion
- *Organic*- natural or living

Document Note: Born in San Francisco in 1876, Jack London was an author, journalist, and social activist. His most famous books were, *White Fang* and *Call of the Wild*. Later in his life he would become an advocate for workers rights, unionization, and even socialism. He was an avid boxing fan who even spent time as an amateur boxer. When Jack Johnson won the heavyweight championship from the white fighter Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia, London called for Jim Jeffries, the retired and undefeated ex-champ to come out of retirement to win back the title.

Reno, Nev., July 1—In the first place, never have to men like these ever faced each other in the ring, In all the contests of its long history, no two comparable giants have ever locked in combat. And in their own generation there is no third man who approaches them. It has taken not only a generation, but two races to produce them.

Johnson is a dusky wonder. For his size there has never been so clever a defensive boxer. Nor has there ever been a cooler-headed boxer. This coolness of his is one of his most remarkable attributes. So cool is he that his fighting at times seems lackadaisical, while at the same time it never has the seeming of brutality. In action there is very little hint of the fighting beast about him. There are hints of it, true, when sudden fierce moments come upon him and his face and force become tigerish. But it is not genuine. He simulates it. He is a play-actor deliberately playing a part. He is not mastered by this tigerishness. He is manufacturing it. Back in that cool brain of his he decides he needs this display of tigerishness in his business, and so he displays it...

And against this man will stand Jeffries, an even more remarkable man, a grizzly giant, huge and rugged, of a type we are prone to believe was more common in other days when the world was young. And, despite his hugeness and ruggedness, he is so well proportioned from heel to head that the combination is startling. His is a perfection of symmetry that is the fruit of the highest organic development. And, if science tells aright, we are justified in believing that no such symmetry obtained among those giants of the younger world. The human in those days was in the process of becoming. It was muscular efficiency minus beauty of form and line. The big modern Jim Jeffries has both...

And they will watch these two strangely diverse heavyweights battle, beside whom all other heavies look like middleweights, Johnson, the fighting boxer, will go up against Jeffries, the boxing fighter. Both are cool, both are experienced, both are terrible. It will not be a short fight. It will be a great fight.

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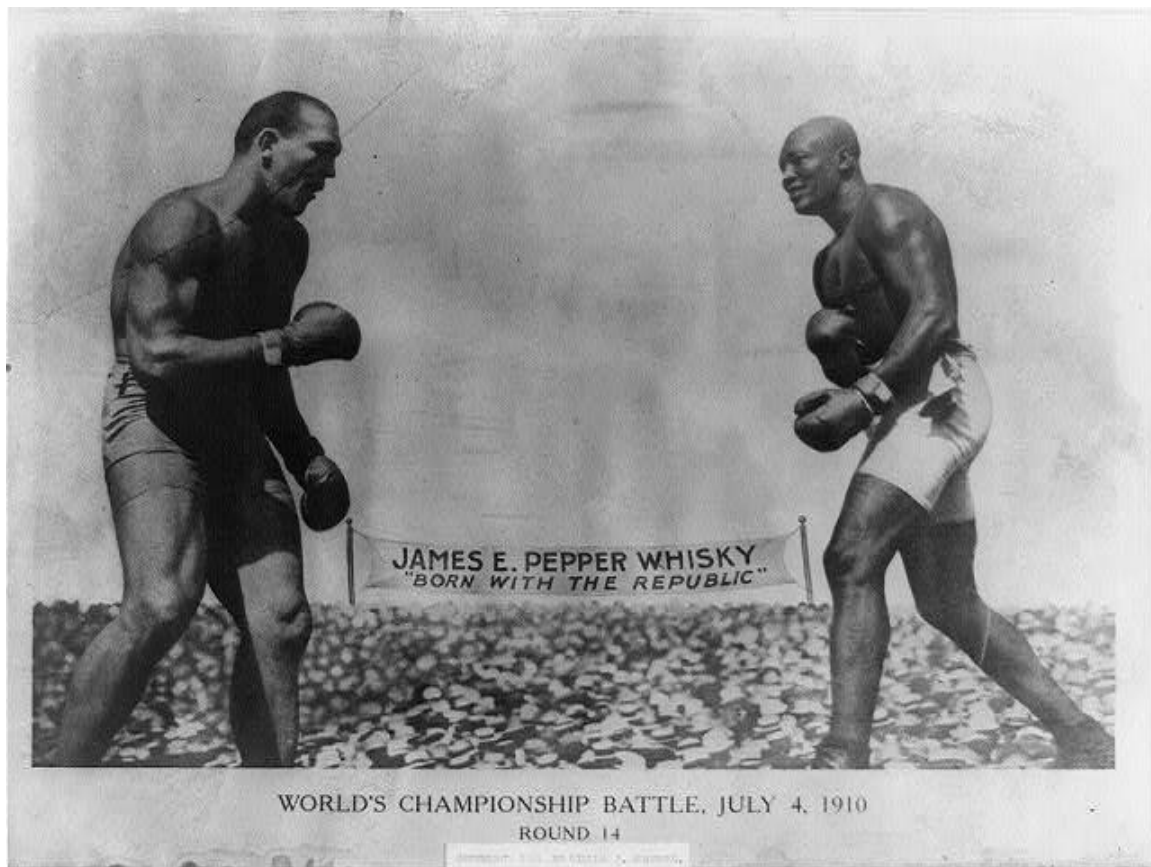
Source: From *Jack London Reports*; first published in the *New York Herald*, July 2, 1910

Please answer the following questions from Source 4:

1. Where is Jack London reporting from? When?
2. For what newspaper is he working for?
3. Describe some of the differences between the two fighters?
4. Describe some of the similarities of the two fighters?
5. Although London does not seem to be as prejudiced as some Americans in this account of the fight, why did he still use racist language?
6. Describe the tone of this article. How does it seem different from other portrayals of blacks in the media? How is it similar?

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SOURCE 5: Photo from Nevada Historical Society



Source: Nevada Historical Society Collection

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Please answer the following questions from Source 5:

1. What date was this photograph taken?
2. Who/What is depicted in this photograph?
3. Can you tell what the black fighter is using for his belt?
4. For what purpose do you think this image was used for?
5. What are the differences between the two fighters? Similarities?
6. How might this image affect the racial attitudes of Americans who viewed it?

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SOURCE 6: Excerpt from the *Nevada State Journal*

Vocabulary:

- *Sullen*- sad or gloomy

Document Note: It should be noted that although Reno was relatively peaceful in the aftermath of the fight, fights broke out all across the country and especially in the south. There were reports of violence in Houston, TX; Roanoke, VA; New York City; St. Louis, MO; Baltimore, MD; Philadelphia, PA; New Orleans, LA; and Columbus, GA. In all, twelve blacks and one white were killed and many others injured. (Three blacks were lynched in Uvaldia, Georgia for celebrating in the streets after the Johnson victory.) In fact, reports of violence throughout the country led to the banishment of the fight footage that would have added to greater revenue for Jeffries/Johnson and the fight promoters.

“Even if the negro spectators remained hidden until after the fight, there certainly was a gathering of them when the trains began to pull out toward the west. They were a happy lot, and one woman of dusky skin who attended the battle took off her hat before she boarded a train for home. When asked why she did so, she replied: ‘Cause ah wants everybody to know that ah’s a nigger, das why, an ah’m prahd of it.’ A great many laughed at the remark, away with sullen mutterings.”

Source: *Nevada State Journal*; July 5, 1910

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Please answer the following questions from Source 6:

1. In what newspaper was this article written?
2. What date?
3. Why would the outcome of the fight create pride in this black woman?
4. How did people respond to her remarks?
5. What does the historical evidence and the account in this story tell us about the racial attitude of Reno, NV around 1910? How was it similar to other areas of the country? Different?

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Students will write a coherent and thoughtful essay that answers the DBO.

1) Thesis

- 4 = Well developed argument
- 3 = Makes an argument
- 2 = Limited or undeveloped argument
- 1 = Weak argument
- 0 = No argument

2) Analysis

- 4 = Effective and balanced
- 3 = Effective but imbalanced (too much emphasis on one or two ideas)
- 2 = General or superficial analysis
- 1 = Inadequate or incorrect analysis
- 0 = No analysis

3) Documents

- 4 = Effectively uses a substantial number of documents
- 3 = Effectively uses some documents
- 2 = Paraphrases, quotes, or briefly cites documents
- 1 = Little or no understanding of the documents
- 0 = No use of documents

4) Outside Information

- 4 = Supports thesis with substantial and relevant outside information
- 3 = Supports thesis with relevant outside information
- 2 = Supports thesis with some relevant outside information
- 1 = Limited outside information that does not help to support thesis
- 0 = No outside information

5) Grammar and Spelling

- 4 = No errors
- 3 = Minor errors; don't detract from the quality
- 2 = Minor errors that detract from the quality
- 1 = Major errors that detract from the quality
- 0 = Numerous major errors

6) Organization

- 4 = Clearly organized and well written
- 3 = Organized and well written
- 2 = Acceptable organization
- 1 = Poorly organized and/or written
- 0 = No attempt to organize