Balancing Depth and Breadth:
Teaching the AP U.S. History Curriculum
The College Board strongly encourages educators to make equitable access a guiding principle for their AP programs by giving all willing and academically prepared students the opportunity to participate in AP. We encourage the elimination of barriers that restrict access to AP for students from ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally underrepresented. Schools should make every effort to ensure their AP classes reflect the diversity of their student population. The College Board also believes that all students should have access to academically challenging course work before they enroll in AP classes, which can prepare them for AP success. It is only through a commitment to equitable preparation and access that true equity and excellence can be achieved.
The AP U.S. History Exam

SECTION ONE

Part A: Multiple Choice Questions ...............................55 minutes (40% of exam score)
55 questions (questions are organized in sets of 2-5)
- Each set of questions asks students to respond to a primary or secondary source, a historian's argument, or a historical problem.
- Individual questions within each set may ask students to make connections to thematically linked developments in other time periods.
- Questions stand independently. Students will not need to answer question #1 correctly before answering #2 correctly.

Part B: Short Answer Questions .................................40 minutes (20% of exam score)
3 questions (3 parts to each question)
- **Question #1:** Students will analyze a secondary source that addresses content from Periods 3-8 (1754-1980).
- **Question #2:** Students will apply the skill of either causation or comparison to a primary source that addresses content from Periods 3-8 (1754-1980).
- **Question #3:** Students will apply the skill of either causation or comparison to a question from either Periods 1-5 (1491-1877) or Periods 6-9 (1865 to the present). Students will choose from two questions to address the time period of their choice. Neither question will be based on stimulus material. Neither question will address the same skill as Question #2.
- Students should provide direct answers to the questions. Short-answer questions do not require students to develop and support a thesis statement.
- Students must contain their answer within the box provided on the exam and may choose to label each part of the answer as “a,” “b,” and “c.”

SECTION TWO

Part A: Document-Based Question ..............................60 minutes (25% of exam score)
1 question (7 documents)
- Students analyze historical documents, develop a thesis, and then support the thesis with relevant historical evidence taken from the documents.

Part B: Long Essay Question .................................40 minutes (15% of exam score)
1 question
- Students choose from three questions dealing with Periods 1-3 (1491-1800), Periods 4-6 (1800-1898), or Periods 7-9 (1865 to the present).
- All three question options address the same theme and assess the same reasoning skill (contextualization, causation, comparison, continuity and change over time).
- Students formulate a thesis and support it with historical evidence.
Multiple Choice Questions

Questions 1-4 refer to the following quotation.

Economic growth was indeed the most decisive force in the shaping of attitudes and expectations in the postwar era. The prosperity of the period broadened gradually in the late 1940s, accelerated in the 1950s, and soared to unimaginable heights in the 1960s. By then it was a boom that astonished observers. One economist, writing about the twenty-five years following World War II, put it simply by saying that this was a ‘quarter century of sustained growth at the highest rates in recorded history.’ Former Prime Minister Edward Heath of Great Britain agreed, observing that the United States at the time was enjoying ‘the greatest prosperity the world has ever known.’”


1. Which of the following factors most directly contributed to the economic trend that Patterson describes?
   (A) A surge in the national birthrate
   (B) The expansion of voting rights for African Americans
   (C) Challenges to conformity raised by intellectuals and artists
   (D) The gradual acceptance of détente with the Soviet Union

2. One significant result of the economic trend described in the excerpt was the
   (A) malaise of the 1970s
   (B) decrease in the number of immigrants seeking entry to the United States
   (C) rise of the Sun Belt as a political and economic force
   (D) decrease in the number of women in the workforce

3. Many of the federal policies and initiatives passed in the 1960s address which of the following about the economic trend described in the excerpt?
   (A) Affluence had effectively eliminated racial discrimination
   (B) Pockets of poverty persisted despite overall affluence
   (C) A rising standard of living encouraged unionization of industrial workers
   (D) Private industry boomed in spite of a declining rate of federal spending

4. The increased culture of consumerism during the 1950s was most similar to developments in which of the following earlier periods?
   (A) The 1840s
   (B) The 1860s
   (C) The 1910s
   (D) The 1920s
Short Answer Question
Answer a, b and c.
a. Briefly explain why ONE of the following options most clearly marks the beginning of the sectional crisis that led to the outbreak of the Civil War.
   Northwest Ordinance (1787)
   Missouri Compromise (1820)
   Acquisition of Mexican territory (1848)
b. Provide an example of an event or development to support your explanation.
c. Briefly explain why one of the other options is not as useful to mark the beginning of the sectional crisis.

Document-Based Essay Question
Answer the following questions using your analysis of historical documents to support your thesis.
Analyze major changes and continuities in the social and economic experiences of African Americans who migrated from the rural South to urban areas in the North in the period 1910–1930. (The support of the thesis will based on your analysis of 5-7 historical documents.)

Long Essay Question
Choose one of the following questions.
1. Some historians have argued that the American Revolution was not revolutionary in nature. Support, modify, or refute this interpretation, providing specific evidence to justify your answer.

   OR

2. Some historians have argued that the New Deal was ultimately conservative in nature. Support, modify or refute this specific evidence to justify your answer.

What must students be able to do to pass the AP U.S. History exam?
Think analytically
Write well
Know a significant amount of historical information
Disciplinary Practices and Reasoning Skills

Disciplinary Practices
1. Argument Development
   ❖ What position should I take on a historical question, and what evidence will support my position?

2. Analyzing Historical Evidence
   ❖ How reliable and relevant are the documents that I am analyzing?

Reasoning Skills
3. Contextualization
   ❖ When and where did something happen, and what else was going on?

4. Comparison
   ❖ Regarding two or more historical topics, how are they the same and how are they different?

5. Historical Causation
   ❖ Why did something happen in the past, and what was the impact?

6. Continuity and Change over Time
   ❖ What has stayed the same in history, and what has changed?
Applying Disciplinary Practices and Reasoning Skills to AP U.S. History Essays

1. The Short-Answer Questions will assess the following:
   • Analyzing Historical Evidence (primary and secondary sources)
   • Argument Development
   • Causation
   • Comparison

2. The DBQ will assess the following:
   a. Argument Development
   b. Analyzing Historical Evidence
   c. Contextualization (Two Types)

3. The Long Essay will assess Argument Development and one of the following reasoning skills:
   • Contextualization
   • Causation
   • Comparison
   • Continuity and Change over Time

AP U.S. History Concept Outline

For a copy of the concept outline, see the AP U.S. History Course and Exam Description. The concept outline provides the required course content for each of nine time periods. Teachers have flexibility and control over how they teach required concepts and should choose optional content they feel best helps students understand the learning objectives and conforms to state and local standards.

Example #1: Time Period 4: 1800-1848
Required Information
   “Supreme Court decisions established the primacy of the judiciary in determining the meaning of the Constitution and asserted that federal laws took precedence over state laws.” (4.1.I.B)
Optional Information to Use as Illustrative Examples
   • midnight judges
   • John Marshall
   • Marbury v. Madison, 1803
   • McCulloch v. Maryland, 1819

Example #2: Time Period 6: 1865-1898
Required Information
   “As migrant populations increased in number and the American bison population was decimated, competition for land and resources in the West among white settlers, American Indians, and Mexican Americans led to an increase in violent conflict.” (6.2.II.C)
Optional Information to Use as Illustrative Examples
   • San Elizario Salt War, 1866-1877
   • Great Sioux War, 1876-1881
   • Battle of Bear Paw Mountain, 1877
   • Lincoln County War, 1878
Thematic Learning Objectives for AP U.S. History

A. **American and National Identity (NAT)**
   This theme focuses on how and why definitions of American and national identity and values have developed, as well as on related topics such as citizenship, constitutionalism, foreign policy, assimilation, and American exceptionalism.
   1.0 Explain how ideas about democracy, freedom, and individualism found expression in the development of cultural values, political institutions, and American identity.
   2.0 Explain how interpretations of the Constitution and debates over rights, liberties, and definitions of citizenship have affected American values, politics, and society.
   3.0 Analyze how ideas about national identity changed in response to U.S. involvement in international conflicts and the growth of the United States.
   4.0 Analyze relationships among different regional, social, ethnic, and racial groups, and explain how these groups’ experiences have related to U.S. national identity.

B. **Politics and Power (POL)**
   This theme focuses on how different social and political groups have influenced society and government in the United States, as well as how political beliefs and institutions have changed over time.
   1.0 Explain how and why political ideas, beliefs, institutions, party systems, and alignments have developed and changed.
   2.0 Explain how popular movements, reform efforts, and activist groups have sought to change American society and institutions.
   3.0 Explain how different beliefs about the federal government's role in U.S. social and economic life have affected political debates and policies.

C. **Work, Exchange, and Technology (WXT)**
   This theme focuses on the factors behind the development of systems of economic exchange, particularly the role of technology, economic markets, and government.
   1.0 Explain how different labor systems developed in North America and the United States, and explain their effects on workers’ lives and U.S. society.
   2.0 Explain how patterns of exchange, markets, and private enterprise have developed, and analyze ways that governments have responded to economic issues.
   3.0 Analyze how technological innovation has affected economic development and society.

D. **Culture and Society (CUL)**
   This theme focuses on the roles that ideas, beliefs, social mores, and creative expression have played in shaping the United States, as well as how various identities, cultures, and values have been preserved or changed in different contexts of U.S. history.
   1.0 Explain how religious groups and ideas have affected American society and political life.
   2.0 Explain how artistic, philosophical, and scientific ideas have developed and shaped society and institutions.
   3.0 Explain how ideas about women’s rights and gender roles have affected society and politics.
   4.0 Explain how different group identities, including racial, ethnic, class, and regional identities, have emerged and changed over time.

E. **Migration and Settlement (MIG)**
   This theme focuses on why and how the various people who moved to and within the United States both adapted to and transformed their new social and physical environments.
   1.0 Explain the causes of migration to colonial North America and, later, the United States, and analyze immigration's effects on U.S. society.
2.0 Analyze causes of internal migration and patterns of settlement in what would become the United States, and explain how migration has affected American life.

F. Geography and the Environment (GEO)
   This theme focuses on the role of geography and both the natural and human-made environments on social and political developments in what would become the United States.
   1.0 Explain how geographic and environmental factors shaped the development of various communities, and analyze how competition for and debates over natural resources have affected both interactions among different groups and the development of government policies.

G. America in the World (WOR)
   This theme focuses on the interactions between nations that affected North American history in the colonial period, and on the influence of the United States on world affairs.
   1.0 Explain how cultural interaction, cooperation, competition, and conflict between empires, nations, and peoples have influenced political, economic, and social developments in North America.
   2.0 Analyze the reasons for and results of U.S. diplomatic, economic, and military initiatives in North America and overseas.

Eight Components of a Good AP U.S. History Class

1. Examining primary source documents.
   Examine written documents, photographs, political cartoons, charts, graphs, works of art, artifacts, etc. Learn to notice details and make inferences based on evidence in the documents.

2. Examining secondary source documents.
   Examine changing interpretations, shifting emphasis and different methodologies in the research and writing of history. Evaluate multiple perspectives on historical information.

3. Analyzing cause and effect in history.
   Analyze the “effect” (what happened) and the “cause” (why it happened) for significant historical events. Learn to put historical information in chronological order.

4. Identifying patterns, themes, and recurring issues in history.
   Make connections between time periods. Analyze patterns of continuity and change over time.

5. Categorizing and compartmentalizing historical information.
   Identify significant dates and turning points in history. Analyze the ways in which categorization and compartmentalization may favor one region or group, or historical narrative over another.

6. Comparing and contrasting two or more historical topics.
   Identify similarities between historical topics (compare). Identify differences between historical topics (contrast).

7. Placing information in historical context.
   Identify the time, place, and occasion surrounding the creation of historical documents. Consider a document’s audience.

8. Developing academic arguments in writing.
   State an assertion and defend the assertion with specific, accurate, and relevant information.
Balancing Depth and Breadth

✓ History teachers may find it difficult to cover every detail of the curriculum in a single survey course.

✓ History should provide students with much more than a laundry list of information to memorize.

Two Approaches to Teaching History

Ball-of-String Approach

Posthole Approach

[The AP® U.S. History Curriculum Framework] is not a detailed manual for how to teach the course, but presents a clear set of skills and learning objectives that will be measured on the AP U.S. History Exam. By helping teachers to prioritize among the possible topics to cover across the scope of U.S. history, the framework seeks to allow teachers to explore certain topics in greater depth. This course framework thus relieves the pressure for teachers to cover all possible events and details of U.S. history at a superficial level, while still preparing students well for the rigors of advanced college-level work in history.

– AP® U.S. History Course and Exam Description
Five Suggestions for Balancing Depth and Breadth and Completing the APUSH Curriculum in the Time Available

1. Rather than trying to cover all information in the textbook (the ball-of-string approach), focus on helping students develop academic skills at the highest levels while exploring a few well-selected historical topics in depth (the posthole approach).

   • Help students develop disciplinary practices and reasoning skills. The AP exam will not require students to have memorized historical content as much as it will require them to demonstrate an ability to think and write at the highest levels.

   • Provide students with historical documents and reading assignments that prompt them to ask questions and make inferences on their own. Help students learn to be independent thinkers and learners.

   • Require students to write often. Writing assignments should require students to make assertions and defend those assertions with specific, accurate, and relevant historical information.

2. Structure course content around a chronological outline that provides enough time to cover selected topics in depth.

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<th>Period</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Percentage of Instructional Time</th>
<th>Days to Complete in a 180-Day Course</th>
<th>Actual Days of Instruction</th>
<th>Percentage of AP Exam</th>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>5%</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1754-1800</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>1800-1848</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1865-1898</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<td>1890-1945</td>
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</table>
3. Provide students with study guides containing information that is essential to understanding each of the nine time periods.

   • Study guides should include both the required information from the AP U.S. History Course and Exam Description and the optional information selected by the teacher.

   • Cover the essential information as quickly as possible, leaving enough time to explore some topics in depth.

4. Use Essential Questions to focus attention on significant issues and topics in U.S. history.

   • Begin unit or lesson with a question that addresses an essential or “big picture” issue for students to explore. The answer to an Essential Question should be open to interpretation, and students should be able to apply the historical information they are learning to answering the Essential Question.

   • Teachers can use “Thematic Learning Objectives” and “Key Concepts” from the AP U.S. History Course and Exam Description to create Essential Questions. Teachers can also use their state and local standards and benchmarks to create Essential Questions.

5. Avoid being overly dependent on the textbook.

   • Avoid letting the textbook become nothing more than a string of information that must be unraveled from beginning to end. Create a history class that allows students to explore some topics in more depth than the textbook can provide. For topics explored in depth, the textbook can be used as a reference and a source for documents that will help students develop reasoning skills.

   • The suggestion to avoid being overly dependent on the textbook is much easier to achieve for experienced AP teachers. Teachers who are new to AP U.S. history are advised to ignore this advice and use their college-level textbook as a guide to the historical content necessary for understanding AP U.S. history.

The [AP U.S. History] concept outline does not list all groups, events, individuals, dates, and other historical details that might relate to every key concept. Such items, where not explicitly listed, are not required knowledge for the course. It is vital that teachers explore the key concepts of each period in depth by using relevant historical evidence of their own choosing as they keep in mind ways to make the course content meaningful and relevant to their students.

   – AP® U.S. History Course and Exam Description
Balancing Depth and Breadth
Putting It All Together

Two Components to Teaching AP U.S. History

Content
What must students know?

Skills
What must students be able to do?

The AP U.S. History Course and Exam Description

The AP U.S. History Course and Exam Description provides the disciplinary practices and skills necessary for passing the AP exam. The Course and Exam Description also contains thematic learning objectives and a concept outline of required course content. The AP U.S. History Course and Exam Description can be found at …


The curriculum framework is not a complete curriculum. Teachers create their own local curriculum by selecting, for each concept in the framework, content that enables students to explore the course learning objectives.

Teaching a Good AP U.S. History Class

Reduce the breadth of content covered.

Require a greater depth of study within a smaller number of topics.

Emphasize the development of reasoning and writing skills.