

AP U.S. History SAQ Step-by-Step Guide (PA Test Ready)

What Is an SAQ?

A Short-Answer Question (SAQ) has 2–3 parts (A, B, C). Each part is usually worth 1 point. You earn points by being accurate, specific, and brief. No thesis. No conclusion. No quotes.

STEP 1: Identify the Task Word

Before writing anything, circle the verb in the question. Common task words include identify, describe, explain, compare, and contrast. If the question says explain, you must give a reason or cause.

STEP 2: Label Your Answers

Always label each response clearly as A, B, and C. This helps graders quickly find your answers and prevents losing easy points.

STEP 3: Use the AP SAQ Formula (ACE)

A – Answer the question directly

C – Cite a specific historical fact

E – Explain how the fact supports your answer

Example sentence structure: One reason ___ is ___, as shown by ___, which demonstrates that ___.

STEP 4: Be Specific

Avoid vague language. Use names, laws, events, groups, and approximate dates. Specific details earn points.

STEP 5: Use the Stimulus (If Provided)

If a quote, chart, or political cartoon is provided, refer to it directly and connect it to outside historical knowledge.

STEP 6: Keep It Short

Two to four sentences per part is ideal. Long answers do not earn extra points. Clear writing matters more than fancy wording.

STEP 7: Avoid Common Mistakes

- Do not write a thesis statement

- Do not use first person (I think)
- Do not quote the document word-for-word
- Do not tell a story without answering the question
- Do not leave parts blank

Model SAQ Response Example

Question: Describe one cause of the Great Migration.

Sample Answer: One cause of the Great Migration was increased job opportunities in northern cities. During World War I, factories in cities like Chicago and Detroit needed workers, which encouraged African Americans to move north for industrial employment.

Timing Tip for the PA Test

Spend about 2–3 minutes per part. If you are unsure, write something specific rather than nothing. One accurate sentence can earn the point.

Final Student Checklist

- Did I answer the question directly?
- Did I include a specific historical example?
- Did I explain how it connects?
- Did I label A, B, and C?