

HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS ON THE AP[®] UNITED STATES HISTORY EXAM

Historical thinking skills form the backbone of AP[®] United States History. On the AP[®] exam that you take in May, every question will make you apply the same history thinking skills that historians use when they approach their studies. The exam asks you to think like a historian.

Knowing how to navigate through these thinking skills will make a big difference in how you approach the course, how you understand the material, and ultimately how you perform on the exam.

Following you can find a description of each historical thinking skill with examples of how you can apply these skills in your AP[®] United States History class.

Skill Type I: Chronological Reasoning

- 1. Historical Causation**
- 2. Patterns of Continuity and Change over Time**
- 3. Periodization**

The historical thinking skills remind us that history is more than just a list of everything that happened a long time ago. We try to find meaning and patterns to events that occurred in the past. Part of this process involves describing cause-effect relationships, some of which are long term and some short term. The skill of Historical Causation involves understanding these connections.

Change is the building block of history and one of the reasons why the study of history fascinates so many people. We want to recognize what has changed and then understand why this change happened. Continuity represents the opposite of change. It relates to what has stayed the same over periods of time.

At times historical change can lead to a turning point that frames how we view history. The historical thinking skill of Periodization deals with this issue. Periodization explores why history divides into segments and how we clump these segments together into different periods of history. The AP[®] United States History course, for example, is divided into nine specific periods whose beginning

and ending dates may overlap: 1491–1607, 1607–1754, 1754–1800, 1800–1848, 1844–1877, 1865–1898, 1890–1945, 1945–1980, and 1980–present.

The choice of any specific date, even those used for this course, may favor one interpretation of history over another. For example, political historians may use election cycles or electoral realignments to divide history. Social and cultural historians, in contrast, have selected different frameworks. Thinking historically means that you can understand how these systems of Periodization set up categories and what they might represent about how people view history.

Example of Chronological Reasoning: Consider the American Civil War. Can you examine the long- and short-term historical causes and effects of the Civil War? Can you examine what changed as a result and what stayed the same? Finally, can you examine how the Civil War represents a turning point in United States history?

Skill Type II: Comparison and Contextualization

- 4. Comparison**
- 5. Contextualization**

Comparison involves looking at similarities and differences. The skill of Comparison can apply to two issues within one area or, more commonly, the same issue in different regions. Historians also use the skill of Comparison to find what is in common and what is different with two accounts of the same event.

Contextualization involves the skill of relating broad historical issues to smaller events and placing a single historical issue into a much larger national or global process. Contextualization is especially important in AP[®] United States History because the course spans from 1491 to the present. To deal appropriately with all of this information, we need to be able to see the bigger picture and examine how individual case studies might fit into the larger patterns of history.

Example of Comparison and Contextualization: Consider the progressive era and the New Deal. Can you examine the similarities and differences in these two reform periods? Can you examine how specific events in either of these reform periods apply to broader transformations occurring at that time?

Skill Type III: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence

6. Historical Argumentation

7. Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence

Historical Argumentation involves figuring out a historical question and addressing that question through a clear argument. For example, when you write an essay, you do a great deal more than just regurgitate all of the facts that you know about the question. Ideally, you make an argument that is strong and answers the question. The core of that argument appears as the thesis. You then follow your thesis with evidence. In the document-based question (DBQ), which is required on the AP® exam, much of the evidence flows from the documents themselves, but you will also need to include relevant examples not included in the documents. In the case of the long essay question, you will need to provide the facts. The exam will also include four required short-answer questions that may ask you to identify relevant historical evidence in order to illustrate a main point or support a conclusion. Furthermore, the multiple-choice questions may require you to select historical evidence that best reflects an interpretation or substantiates a point of view.

Historical Argumentation also involves your ability to judge the arguments of others. Can you pick out the thesis statement in other peoples' essays? Can you evaluate how well other people put together their arguments?

Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence connects directly to the skill of Historical Argumentation. This skill involves drawing useful information from different sources. When a document comes from the point of view of an eyewitness to a particular event or period of time, it is considered a primary source. Evidence that comes from someone who did not experience an event firsthand and comes after a particular period of study is considered a secondary source. Secondary sources usually provide some analysis of or commentary on a past event or person and can also come from maps, charts, graphs, and statistical data of all kinds. The document-based question specifically tests your ability to work with primary sources, while

multiple-choice questions include both primary and secondary source excerpts.

Primary sources include both written and non-written evidence. Government pronouncements, personal letters, diaries, newspaper stories, and official autobiographies are all examples of written evidence. Nonwritten evidence might include photographs and artwork, or artifacts like furniture and tools of daily living. Because the revised AP® United States History course includes more information about North American Indian populations, any document-based questions about that period would likely include non-written evidence. The skill of analyzing historical evidence applies equally to written evidence, artistic works, artifacts found in archeological sites, historical photographs, and architectural monuments.

Example of Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence: Consider the illustration on page 123 of *The American Pageant*. Can you examine this depiction of the Boston Massacre in order to draw conclusions about the relationship between the British and the colonists prior to the American Revolution?

Skill Type IV: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis

8. Interpretation

9. Synthesis

Historians try to make sense of the past, and in doing so they form historical arguments. We explored the practice of making these historical arguments in Skill Type III. Understanding the different ways that historians view the past involves the skill of Interpretation.

A college-level course in history goes beyond just knowing what happened. We need to be able to make sense of what happened and create theories dealing with the evidence using chronological thinking, comparisons, and historical context. We then take one more step to see how historians might view these issues differently based on their perspective.

Historians look at history through their own interpretive lens. Some see economics, religion, social class, or the environment as the prime mover of historical events. Certainly people's political views influence how they view the world and consequently their interpretation of history.

For the AP® United States History exam, the skill of Interpretation is handled most directly by the document-based and long essay questions, but it may also be addressed in the short-answer and multiple-choice questions. For example, on the document-based question you need to provide point-of-view analysis for

why a certain person might create a particular document at that specific time and place. Addressing that issue is addressing Interpretation.

Synthesis, the last of the historical thinking skills, involves putting it all together. If you analyze a topic in history by using many historical thinking skills—such as Comparison, Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence, Historical Causation, and Interpretation—you are synthesizing the material. Synthesis can also connect ideas that you have about history to other issues, such as how you view events in the present. You even display the skill of Synthesis when you use ideas from other fields of knowledge to gain insight into history. Finally, the skill of Synthesis relates to the difficult process of trying to relate very different or even contradictory evidence when making a coherent argument.

Example of Interpretation and Synthesis: Consider the effects of the civil rights movement on modern

American society. Can you examine how different historians from different political positions might come to different conclusions about how people experienced the civil rights movement? Can you examine how the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century might provide lessons for modern-day society? Can you describe how other disciplines, such as economics, literature, and urban studies, provide us with a variety of insights about the dramatic changes during the civil rights movement? Finally, can you examine all of this information through the use of multiple historical thinking skills?

The historical thinking skills are similar to skills gained in any aspect of your life, such as athletics, dance, or music. The more you practice, the better you get. An entire year of rigorous study in AP® United States History will get you far. At best, these skills will create habits of mind that will serve you for a lifetime.