Writing in AP U.S. History

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APUSH Curriculum Assessment and Development Committee

A Bit O’ Irish

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U.S. History Essay Writing Information

The AP U.S. History Exam is three hours and five minutes long. In Section I, students are given 55 minutes to answer 80 multiple-choice questions. In Section II, students are given a 45-minute exercise in the use of historical evidence (the document-based question or DBQ), which includes a 15-minute reading period; then students select 2 other essays to write on (one essay will be from the first half of the course, the other will be from the second half of the course).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Grade</th>
<th>Number of Questions</th>
<th>Time Allotted</th>
<th>Reading Period</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section I</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>55 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section II</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3 Essay Questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part A</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>1 DBQ Essay</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part B</td>
<td>12½%</td>
<td>1 FRQ Essay</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part C</td>
<td>12½%</td>
<td>1 FRQ Essay</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
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AP United States History Exam - Writing Requirement

Part A: Document Based Question (DBQ) Essay
Part B: Free Response Question (FRQ) from the 1st half of the course
Part C: Free Response Question (FRQ) from the 2nd half of the course

College Board Historical Thinking Skills

Historical Argumentation: Historical thinking involves the ability to define and frame a question about the past and to address that question by constructing an argument. A plausible and persuasive argument requires a clear, comprehensive and analytical thesis, supported by relevant historical evidence—not simply evidence that supports a preferred or preconceived position. Additionally, argumentation involves the capacity to describe, analyze and evaluate the arguments of others in light of available evidence.

Use of Relevant Historical Evidence: Historical thinking involves the ability to identify, describe and evaluate evidence about the past from diverse sources (including written documents, works of art, archaeological artifacts, oral traditions and other primary sources), with respect to content, authorship, purpose, format and audience. It involves the capacity to extract useful information, make supportable inferences and draw appropriate conclusions from historical evidence while also understanding such evidence in its context, recognizing its limitations and assessing the points of view that it reflects.

Historical Causation: Historical thinking involves the ability to identify, analyze and evaluate multiple cause-and-effect relationships in a historical context, distinguishing between the long-term and proximate.

Patterns of Continuity and Change Over Time: Historical thinking involves the ability to recognize, analyze and evaluate the dynamics of historical continuity and change over periods of time of varying lengths, as well as relating these patterns to larger historical processes or themes.

Periodization: Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, analyze, evaluate and construct models of historical periodization that historians use to categorize events into discrete blocks and to identify turning points, recognizing that the choice of specific dates favors one narrative, region or group over another narrative, region or group; therefore, changing the periodization can change a historical narrative. Moreover, the particular circumstances and contexts in which individual historians work and write shape their interpretations and modeling of past events.

Compare and Contrast: Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, compare and evaluate multiple historical developments within one society, one or more developments across or between different societies, and in various chronological and geographical contexts. It also involves the ability to identify, compare and evaluate multiple perspectives on a given historical experience.

Contextualization: Historical thinking involves the ability to connect historical developments to specific circumstances in time and place, and to broader regional, national or global processes.

Interpretation: Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, analyze, evaluate and create diverse interpretations of the past — as revealed through primary and secondary historical sources — through analysis of evidence, reasoning, contexts, points of view and frames of reference.

Synthesis: Historical thinking involves the ability to arrive at meaningful and persuasive understandings of the past by applying all the other historical thinking skills, by drawing appropriately on ideas from different fields of inquiry or disciplines and by creatively fusing disparate, relevant (and perhaps contradictory) evidence from primary sources and secondary works. Additionally, synthesis may involve applying insights about the past to other historical contexts or circumstances, including the present.
The Thesis Statement – What is it?

The Thesis Formula: X. However, A, B, and C. Therefore, Y.
‘X’ represents the strongest point against your argument.
‘A, B, and C’ represent the three strongest points for your argument.
‘Y’ represents the position you will be taking – in other words, your stand on the prompt.

Let’s take a look at a basic prompt, a simple way to set up the essay, and a sample of a thesis statement.

**Prompt:** Assess the validity of the following statement, “Teaching is the most important profession in the world and everyone should consider it as a possible career choice.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally satisfying</td>
<td>Physically demanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make a difference in the world</td>
<td>Low pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summers off</td>
<td>Long work hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work during the summer for more pay</td>
<td>Not much respect in our society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much competition – job market</td>
<td>Requires certification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only need a bachelors degree</td>
<td>Have to do additional work – coach, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work usually comes home with you</td>
<td></td>
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**Thesis Statement:** Teaching is an emotionally satisfying profession. However, teachers rank consistently at the bottom of the pay scale, often work at home without just compensation, and receive a lack of respect in our society. Therefore, teaching is clearly not the most important profession and would be an unwise career choice.

**Levels of Specificity / Developing a Summary Statement – How Much Do I Say?**

Suppose we are at a conference in Ireland and someone asks you, “where do you go to school at?” There are a number of answers you can give them, the best answer to this question in this particular situation would be “I go to school at Seven Lakes High School in Katy.” So the situation will call for different levels of specificity in order to be properly understood.

How much specificity to include in the Summary Statement should be a balancing act, on the one hand, you don’t want to be too general (Level Three Generalization), but on the other hand you don’t want to be too specific (Level One Specification). Let them know where you are going, but don’t give away all your information. We want the reader to keep reading! We will call the right amount of specificity **Level Two Specificity**.

Consider the following prompt: Evaluate the extent to which the Articles of Confederation were effective in solving the problems that confronted the new nation.

**Level Three Thesis (not enough):** The Articles of Confederation was successful as a first attempt at building a government. However, the Articles of Confederation was weak politically, socially, and economically. Therefore, the Articles of Confederation did not provide an effective answer to the problems facing the new nation.

**Level Two Thesis:** Under the Articles of Confederation, the Land Ordinance and Northwest Ordinance created a well organized system for dealing with newly acquired territories and providing a financial means to increase needed revenue. However, the Articles established a loose confederation of individual states that lacked a sense of national unity, it created internal gridlock that failed to establish a system of checks and balances, and it created a government that did not have the necessary powers to conduct basic governmental business or regulate interstate issues such as trade. Therefore, the Articles of Confederation proved futile and was not effective in solving many of the problems faced by the newly formed United States.

**Level One Thesis (too much):** Under the Articles of Confederation, the Land Ordinance of 1785 and Northwest Ordinance of 1787 created a well organized system for dealing with newly acquired territories and a plausible means to increase government revenue in a time in which the country was facing massive debt. However, it established a decentralized government with limited sovereignty, creating a league of friendship, with limited effectiveness; it was unable to foster any sense of nationalism, most votes of Congress required nine votes of and amendments required unanimous vote; it contained a lack of leadership and a lack of independent judiciary; it lacked provisions for raising revenues and collecting taxes from the states, as well as failing to handle the abuses of paper money, with no control over interstate commerce; and could not protect the country from rebellions like Shays’ Rebellion. Therefore, the Articles of Confederation proved unable to handle the problems faced by the country after the American Revolution.
Before writing the essay, it’s necessary to establish what exactly the essay is asking the writer to do. This means conceptually setting up the essay. For example, if the prompt is asking you to compare and contrast (or just compare or just contrast), you need to create a Venn Diagram. Whichever side you decide on, the “x” statement will come from the opposite source of information. For example, if the prompt asks you to compare and contrast the Chesapeake and the New England colonies, you need to decide if they are more similar or different, whatever position you take, the information in the other area will be your “x” statement. If the prompt asks you to decide whether the 1920’s was a time of conservatism or radicalism, you need to create a three column content frame. Draw a line through the middle of the boxes, the upper half will be information of conservatism, the bottom half will be information of radicalism. Whichever side you decide on, the “x” statement will come from the opposite source of information.

Essays that ask you to compare and / or contrast.

Essays that ask you to take a position.

Let’s now take a look at the more complex examples of what kinds of prompts students will be asked to write on. Consider the CB Historical Thinking Skills:

**Periodization and Contextualization:**
Students will be given a traditional period in American History, then they will be asked to identify when the period began and ended, as well as cite specific evidence within the timeframe which supports the idea of the period and goes against it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period: Colonial Period</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start Date / Key Event:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining Characteristics of the Period:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End Date / Key Event:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undefining Characteristics of the Period:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Continuity and Change Over Time:**

Students will be asked to formulate specific evidence which shows change over a specified time period. They will be asked to frame the period, identify discrete (or pivotal) points which explain the change within the time period. Students will also have to identify continuity over the time period.

**Prompt:** Explain why political participation increased between 1815 and 1840 in the United States and analyze the reasons for those changes taking place.

Continued disenfranchisement of many Americans, wealthy continued to dominate the political process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>Debates in Many State Legislatures, Increasing the Franchise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>Election of John Quincy Adams, the Corrupt Bargain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>Election of Andrew Jackson, rise of the Common Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td></td>
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**To Conclude or Not To Conclude – What is the Answer?**

There are lots of different theories about whether or not you need a conclusion; my belief is that if you have time to write one, then great. But if you are running short of time, then scrap it and don’t worry about it. There is nothing in the AP rubric that says you have to have a conclusion. As an AP reader / grader, I can tell you that not having a conclusion ever lowered a grade. But adding a bad conclusion did. So my advice is, if you have one, you better make sure it is good – **DO NOT** introduce any new information in the conclusion!

In no circumstance should your history essay have fluff in it, this is not an English class (I apologize to all the English teachers). They have different requirements and different expectation for their essays. In History class you are expected to write a history essay, in English class you are expected to write an English essay – they are two different tasks, skills, and assignments. Learn what each is asking of you and be like Nike – “just do it.”

**The Opening – A Global Statement**

There are lots of different theories about whether or not you need a global statement to open your first paragraph. You can have one, it’s not critical, but some students like to have it as a way of introducing the topic. The global statement should not be your thesis statement – that comes next.

**How to reference the documents in the DBQ?**

The most unsophisticated way to reference a document in a DBQ essay is to do the following, “According to ‘Document A’ blah, blah, blah.” This is supposed to be a historical paper. **DO NOT** laundry list the documents in your paper, “Document A says this, document B says this . . . etc.” Instead, you should show the reader that you understand the documents and use them effectively within the argument of your paper. **DO NOT** quote documents, the readers know the documents, quoting may be appropriate for an English paper, but is not appropriate for a history paper. So how do I use a document? Suppose you have an excerpt from the Clayton Antitrust Act, you could make the following assertion, “The Clayton Antitrust Act was implemented during the Wilson administration to help support the antitrust legislation of the earlier and somewhat inefficient Sherman Antitrust Act.” There you go, you just used the document and probably brought in some outside information, by mentioning it was implemented under Wilson.
Scoring Rubric for both the DBQ and the FRQ

Name: _________________________________________________________  Grade: __________  Predicted AP Score: __________

100 – 90  ____  Contains a well developed thesis which clearly addresses all aspects of the prompt.
9 - 8  ____  Presents effective analysis of all aspects of the prompt and has organized material and documents around major categories; treatment and analysis must be even among all aspects of the prompt.
   ____  Effectively uses a substantial number of the documents.
   ____  Supports thesis with substantial and relevant outside information.
   ____  Is clearly organized and well-written.
   ____  May contain minor errors.

89 – 80  ____  Contains a thesis which addresses the prompt.
7 - 5  ____  Has limited analysis and has organized material and documents around major categories; is mostly descriptive and treatment of the prompt is uneven; also may contain some chronological flaws.
   ____  Uses some documents effectively.
   ____  Supports thesis with some outside information.
   ____  Shows acceptable organization; language errors do not interfere with comprehension.
   ____  May contain errors that do not seriously detract from quality of essay.

79 – 70  ____  Presents limited, confused and / or poorly developed thesis.
4 - 2  ____  Deals with the prompt in a general or superficial way; offers a simplistic explanation of the prompt.
   ____  Quotes or briefly cites documents and uses only minimum number of documents (50% + 1), almost no analysis of documents.
   ____  Contains little outside information, with confused chronology.
   ____  Demonstrates weak organizational and / or writing skills with interfere with comprehension.
   ____  May contain major errors.

69 – 50  ____  Contains no thesis or a thesis which does not address the prompt.
1 - 0  ____  Shows inadequate or inaccurate understanding of the prompt.
   ____  Shows little or no understanding of the documents or ignores them completely.
   ____  Includes inappropriate or no outside information.
   ____  Is so poorly organized or written that it is difficult to understand.
   ____  Contains numerous errors, both major and minor.

49 - 0  ____  Did not attempt to complete the assignment as given.

(Comment – this is the generic scoring rubric that I will use to grade all of your essays, both the DBQ and the FRQ’s. This scoring rubric is identical to the one used by the College Board at the reading / grading of the APUSH Exams. The scoring is done holistically. You will receive two scores, only one will count for our purposes. The grade that you receive will be the one recorded in the gradebook, but the predicted AP score will also be recorded on the rubric. That score is just to let you know what grade that essay probably would have gotten at the reading / grading.)