

I. Historical Thinking Skills

This section presents the historical thinking skills that are meant to be explored by students throughout the AP U.S. History course. Every AP Exam question will require a student to apply one of the historical thinking skills to one of the thematic learning objectives (see Section II). See Section IV for more details about how the mastery of both skills and content will be assessed on the AP Exam.

The AP U.S. History course, along with the AP World History and AP European History courses, seeks to apprentice students to the practice of history by explicitly stressing the development of historical thinking skills while learning about the past. In the section that follows, four types of historical thinking skills are defined for teachers, accompanied by definitions of the specific historical thinking skills that are part of that type.

- The sections on **chronological reasoning** and **comparison and contextualization** focus on “thinking historically,” or the habits of mind that historians use when they approach the past in a critical way.
- The sections on **crafting historical arguments from historical evidence** and **historical interpretation and synthesis** focus on describing the skills used by historians when they construct and test historical arguments about the past.

Each of the skills below is defined and then followed by a statement of the proficiency that students are expected to show in this skill on the AP Exam. This is accompanied by discussion of how this skill can be developed in tandem with an exploration of the content of the AP U.S. History course.

Students best develop historical thinking skills by investigating the past in ways that reflect the discipline of history, most particularly through the exploration and interpretation of a rich array of primary sources and secondary texts, and through the regular development of historical argumentation in writing. The skills can also be developed by teachers through explicit attention to historical thinking in individual or group activities, open-ended research and writing assignments, and skills-based formative assessment strategies. Students should engage in these activities to investigate and formulate historical arguments about the major developments in U.S. history.

Skill Type	Historical Thinking Skill
I. Chronological Reasoning	1. Historical Causation
	2. Patterns of Continuity and Change over Time
	3. Periodization
II. Comparison and Contextualization	4. Comparison
	5. Contextualization
III. Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence	6. Historical Argumentation
	7. Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence
IV. Historical Interpretation and Synthesis	8. Interpretation
	9. Synthesis

Skill Type I: Chronological Reasoning

Skill 1: Historical Causation

Historical thinking involves the ability to identify, analyze, and evaluate the relationships among multiple historical causes and effects, distinguishing between those that are long-term and proximate, and among coincidence, causation, and correlation.

Proficient students should be able to ...

- Compare causes and/or effects, including between short- and long-term effects.
- Analyze and evaluate the interaction of multiple causes and/or effects.
- Assess historical contingency by distinguishing among coincidence, causation, and correlation, as well as critiquing existing interpretations of cause and effect.

How could this skill be approached in the AP U.S. History course?

This skill asks students to identify and compare basic causes and/or effects and to distinguish between both short- and long-term causes and effects. Over the span of the course, students should move from describing causes to analyzing and evaluating the interaction of multiple causes and/or effects.

In U.S. history, arguments about causation are similar to those in other histories or subdisciplines. For example, an effective analysis of the significance of the Civil War might consider both long-term and proximate causes as well as short- and long-term effects. So, discussing the long-term impact of growing economic divergence between the North and South could be weighed against the relatively short-term Congressional gridlock leading up to the outbreak of hostilities. Citing multiple contributing causes may also provide students with more compelling evidence to support larger investigations than focusing on a single cause. For example, teachers can explore the roots of the modern environmental movement in the Progressive

Era and the New Deal, as well as debate underlying and proximate causes of environmental catastrophes arising from pesticide use and offshore oil drilling.

Skill 2: 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 the ability to relate these patterns to larger historical processes or themes.

Proficient students should be able to ...

- Analyze and evaluate historical patterns of continuity and change over time.
- Connect patterns of continuity and change over time to larger historical processes or themes.

How could this skill be approached in the AP U.S. History course?

This skill asks students to recognize, describe, and analyze instances of historical patterns of continuity and change over time. Although world historians frequently have to look for very large patterns of continuity and change across centuries, U.S. history researchers can focus on individuals and a somewhat narrower scope of time. Although this difference in scale can sometimes lead to an overemphasis on details rather than a description of larger patterns, it underscores the importance of integrating content with course themes. For example, the course theme and concept of identity can be discussed as both the denial and extension of political and economic rights to specific groups over different periods of time while simultaneously highlighting the heroic accomplishments of individuals during their struggle for recognition. A teacher might choose to examine the restrictions of rights during America's wars in contrast to the opportunities for minorities to show their patriotism by serving in the armed forces, such as the internment of Japanese Americans and the heroism of Daniel Inouye in World War II.

Skill 3: Periodization

Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, analyze, evaluate, and construct models that historians use to organize history into discrete periods. To accomplish this periodization of history, historians identify turning points and recognize that the choice of specific dates gives a higher value to one narrative, region, or group than to other narratives, regions, or groups. How a historian defines historical periods depends on what the historian considers most significant — political, economic, social, cultural, or environmental factors. Changing periodization can change a historical narrative. Moreover, historical thinking involves being aware of how the circumstances and contexts of a historian's work might shape his or her choices about periodization.

Proficient students should be able to ...

- Explain ways that historical events and processes can be organized within blocks of time.
- Analyze and evaluate competing models of periodization of U.S. history.

How could this skill be approached in the AP U.S. History course?

Students should be familiar with different ways that historians divide time into historical periods and identify turning points in the past. Students might begin to develop this skill by examining and evaluating the model of periodization provided in this framework. Students might then compare this periodization against competing models, such as the one used in their textbook.

Periodization has become increasingly relevant to U.S. history because recent historical researchers have challenged traditional ways of categorizing the past, particularly in relation to such underrepresented groups as American Indians. The result is that different texts and syllabi may use different periodizations for unit titles. This is an opportunity for teachers to challenge students to reflect on how the choice of different beginning and ending dates and the labels for specific “time periods” (such as the Progressive Era) can alter the historical narrative and give a higher value to one group over another.

For example, the dates one sets for the beginning of the “new conservative” movement in the United States can emphasize one political and social narrative over another, impacting one’s interpretation of the extent of social and political “reforms.” Teachers can pose questions such as: What is the best way of dividing the history of the United States into meaningful periods? What are the consequences of choosing one set of dates for a particular movement instead of another time frame? Application of this skill can promote healthy discussions and deeper analyses of historical evidence.

Skill Type II: Comparison and Contextualization**Skill 4: Comparison**

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.

Proficient students should be able to ...

- Compare related historical developments and processes across place, time, and/or different societies or within one society.
- Explain and evaluate multiple and differing perspectives on a given historical phenomenon.

How could this skill be approached in the AP U.S. History course?

This skill asks students to compare related historical developments and processes across place, time, or different societies (or within one society). More sophisticated students might be able to compare related historical developments and processes across more than one variable, such as geography, chronology, and different societies (or within one society), recognizing multiple and differing perspectives on a given historical phenomenon.

In contrast to the research conducted in other histories, U.S. history researchers can focus on specific phenomena among fewer cultures over just a few centuries. One of the central questions of world history might be: How similar and how different were historical changes in different parts of the world? A similar comparison question in U.S. history might be: How similar and how different were the periods of U.S. expansion, or how does “conservatism” compare in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s? Another means of teaching this skill is to ask students to compare thematic developments in different time periods, such as how environmental attitudes and policies in the first decade of the 20th century compare with those in the last decade of that century, or the comparative impact of migrations to the United States in the 1890s and the 1980s.

Skill 5: Contextualization

Historical thinking involves the ability to connect historical events and processes to specific circumstances of time and place and to broader regional, national, or global processes.

Proficient students should be able to ...

- Explain and evaluate ways in which specific historical phenomena, events, or processes connect to broader regional, national, or global processes occurring at the same time.
- Explain and evaluate ways in which a phenomenon, event, or process connects to other, similar historical phenomena across time and place.

How could this skill be approached in the AP U.S. History course?

This skill asks students to recognize and explain ways in which historical phenomena or processes connect to broader regional, national, or global processes. The “context” for world history is the world as a whole; for European history, it is Europe as a whole; and for U.S. history, it is primarily the United States itself. The skill of contextualization therefore takes on different forms depending on the scope of time and geography. One of the central questions of world history is: How does the history of this specific region or era fit into the larger story of world history as a whole? For U.S. history, that same contextualization question might be: How does the history of a particular group, region, or era fit into the larger story of the development of the United States? However, there are a growing number of topics in which teachers

should consider challenging students with the broader context, especially when considering the theme of America in the world. For example, U.S. territorial expansion, emancipation, the Great Depression, and, of course, foreign policy initiatives are increasingly bringing into play the perspectives of other nations and world regions. One could also explore the interaction between a watershed event like Reconstruction and the civil rights movement.

Skill Type III: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence

Skill 6: Historical Argumentation

Historical thinking involves the ability to define and frame a question about the past and to address that question through the construction of 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. In addition, argumentation involves the capacity to describe, analyze, and evaluate the arguments of others in light of available evidence.

Proficient students should be able to ...

- Analyze commonly accepted historical arguments and explain how an argument has been constructed from historical evidence.
- Construct convincing interpretations through analysis of disparate, relevant historical evidence.
- Evaluate and synthesize conflicting historical evidence to construct persuasive historical arguments.

How could this skill be approached in the AP U.S. History course?

This skill asks students to be able to describe commonly accepted historical arguments about the nature of the past and then explain how such arguments have been constructed from historical evidence. Over the span of the course, students should move from describing to evaluating the conflicting historical evidence used in making plausible historical arguments. In U.S. history, the skill of historical argumentation often operates in conjunction with course themes that transcend several periods and with other skills. For example, in conjunction with the theme of politics and power, students might be asked to examine evidence and construct an argument about the causes of the Civil War. The application of argumentation and causation might take students back to previous centuries to construct a coherent thesis with supporting evidence that includes a sophisticated analysis of the introduction of slavery to North American colonies, relative growth and economic divergence of geographic regions, the impact of migration and technology, Congressional gridlock, and political ideas about democracy and federalism.

Skill 7: Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence

Historical thinking involves the ability to describe and evaluate evidence about the past from diverse sources (including written documents, works of art, archaeological artifacts, oral traditions, and other primary sources) and requires students to pay attention to the content, authorship, purpose, format, and audience of such sources. It involves the capacity to extract useful information, make supportable inferences, and draw appropriate conclusions from historical evidence while also noting the context in which the evidence was produced and used, recognizing its limitations, and assessing the points of view it reflects.

Proficient students should be able to ...

- Analyze features of historical evidence such as audience, purpose, point of view, format, argument, limitations, and context germane to the evidence considered.
- Based on analysis and evaluation of historical evidence, make supportable inferences and draw appropriate conclusions.

How could this skill be approached in the AP U.S. History course?

This skill asks students to analyze documents for one or more of the following features: audience, purpose, point of view, format, argument, limitations, and context germane to the historical evidence considered. Based on their analysis of historical evidence, students should then be able to make supportable inferences or draw appropriate conclusions. AP teachers can expose students to a variety of sources to help them draw their own conclusions and inferences. Recent research in U.S. history highlights the inclusion of underrepresented groups and cultures, which also has increased the diversity of sources that historians use. For example, in determining the relationship of Native American tribes to their environment and making assertions about why some persevered and others disappeared, students may have to rely on archaeological or geographical analysis instead of the more traditional forms of evidence in historical research. In addition, popular culture provides useful sources for examining decades such as the 1950s; when exploring the course theme of America in the world, students may have to examine evidence beyond American actors and actions.

Skill Type IV: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis

Skill 8: Interpretation

Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, analyze, evaluate, and construct diverse interpretations of the past, and being aware of how particular circumstances and contexts in which individual historians work and write also shape their interpretation of past events. Historical interpretation requires analyzing evidence, reasoning, determining the context, and evaluating points of view found in both primary and secondary sources.

Proficient students should be able to ...

- Analyze diverse historical interpretations.
- Evaluate how historians' perspectives influence their interpretations and how models of historical interpretation change over time.

How could this skill be approached in the AP U.S. History course?

This skill asks students to both describe and evaluate diverse historical interpretations. To help students create their own interpretation of U.S. history, students and teachers should examine changing historical interpretations over time, such as the different ways that historians have interpreted the institution of American slavery or evaluated Reconstruction. Historians have the added challenge of addressing “presentism,” or how contemporary ideas and perspectives are anachronistically introduced into depictions and interpretations of historical events. The skill of interpretation becomes particularly important as students progress from describing what they are learning about past events to reflecting on assorted historical evidence in terms of contextual values and cultural bias.

Skill 9: Synthesis

Historical thinking involves the ability to develop meaningful and persuasive new understandings of the past by applying all of the other historical thinking skills, by drawing appropriately on ideas and methods from different fields of inquiry or disciplines, and by creatively fusing disparate, relevant, and sometimes 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.

Proficient students should be able to ...

- Combine disparate, sometimes contradictory evidence from primary sources and secondary works in order to create a persuasive understanding of the past.
- Apply insights about the past to other historical contexts or circumstances, including the present.

How could this skill be approached in the AP U.S. History course?

This skill asks students to demonstrate an understanding of the past by making an argument that draws appropriately on ideas from different fields of inquiry or disciplines when presented to them in the form of data and/or arguments. Synthesis takes distinctive forms depending on the subdiscipline or history course because each grapples with such diverse materials. Unlike the other histories, in U.S. history there is a predisposition of developing a single narrative that consolidates and merges many different cultures. Yet, the development of such a narrative raises the historiographical question about which groups are included or excluded from the story. Increasingly, historians are pulling evidence from a variety of disciplines and using a variety of other skills in the creation of new conceptions about past events. Students should be encouraged to challenge the narratives to which they are exposed so that they will have a better understanding of their place in an increasingly globalized and diverse world.