

# AP Historical Themes

Just as each question on the AP exam deals with one or more of the historical thinking skills, each question will also relate to one or more of the following historical themes. The seven themes address board, recurring concerns in US history. They help students think about how political, economic, and cultural institutions, along with foreign relations, developed and changed over more than five centuries. The themes also include the study of interactions with the natural environment, effects of internal and external migration on people, and changes in national and group identities.

- 1. Identity (ID)**
- 2. Work, Exchange, and Technology (WXT)**
- 3. Peopling (PEO)**
- 4. Politics and Power (POL)**
- 5. American in the World (WOR)**
- 6. Environment and Geography (ENV)**
- 7. Ideas. Beliefs, and Culture (CUL)**

## **1. Identity:**

The theme of “Identity” focuses on the formation of both the national identity and group identities. Earlier historians often referred to identity in terms of the “American character.” Today, students should be able to explain how identities related to gender, class, ethnicity, religion, or region have often had surprising continuity but also change over time in response to events.

For example, the American Revolution changed the identity of Americans from British colonial subjects to citizens of a free and independent republic. The identity of African Americans and women changed dramatically over the past two centuries as their civil rights and roles in society changed.



## **2. Work, Exchange, and Technology:**

The “WXT” theme focuses on the development of the American economy from a primarily agricultural era to a highly industrialized and service economy. Students should understand the role of technology and innovation, various labor systems, and how government policies influenced the economy. This theme also explores how markets and international trade affected the development of the US economy.

For example, how the advances in transportation and creation of a market economy affected the way farmers made a living or how industrialization changed the lives of former agricultural workers and their families.



## **3. Peopling:**

This theme focuses on how and why people moved to and within the United States, the impact that these patterns had on American society, the values and cultural traditions that American Indians and migrants each had, and the conflicts that arose out of these differences.

For example, historians have made much out of the impact of Scots-Irish on the settlement on the frontier, in politics, and even on American diets. This theme includes understanding the debates over immigration from Irish, German Catholics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the arrival of the southern and eastern Europeans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the increase in Hispanic migration in recent decades. Students should be prepared to answer questions about the people who have lived in America.



#### **4. Politics and Power**

The “POL” theme includes not only how governments evolved from the colonial period to the present but how changes in citizen participation affects the political process. Students need to understand the conflicts over power between branches of government, the national and state governments, and voters and special interest groups. This theme also covers the roles of political ideology and political parties that started with the first debates over the US Constitution.



#### **5. America in the World**

The “WOR” theme explores the development of the United States from its origins in the global context of the “Atlantic World” of the 16<sup>th</sup> century through the emergence of the United States as a world leader in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Students need to understand this development as well as domestic debates over foreign policy from the Napoleonic Wars through the War on Terrorism and the impact of these policy decisions. This theme also explores the economic, labor, and migration impact of international involvement.



#### **6. Environment and Geography**

This theme focuses on the interaction of Americans with their environment. Students need to examine how geography and climate contributed to regional differences, the origins and changing debates over the use and control of natural resources, and the human-made environments created by technology.

For example, why were Americans on the frontier slow to notice their impact on the environment?



#### **7. Ideas, Beliefs, and Culture**

This theme explores many sides of American life, including ideas, beliefs, values, science, artistic expression, and popular culture. Students should be able to explain why and how cultural components both hold constant and change over time, as well as the conflicts between traditional and modern values.

For example, an exam question might ask how artistic expression changed in response to war or to the growth of industries and cities.

