

AP Historical Thinking Skills

The main difference between the College Prep and AP US History courses is in the way students approach the subject matter. In College Prep, students are expected to become proficient in their knowledge of US History and how different events are interconnected, whereas AP US requires students to not only learn about the same events, but also encourages students to become “apprentice historians”. The primary means of attaining that goal is to get students to like historians. To achieve this, the AP curriculum has identified nine historical thinking skills that will be assessed on the AP US History exam. All AP students are expected to master these historical thinking skills, as every question on their exams will require students to apply one or more of them.

1. Historical Causation

2. Patterns of Continuity and Change Over Time

3. Periodization

4. Comparison

5. Contextualization

6. Historical Argumentation

7. Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence

8. Interpretation

9. Synthesis

Skill Group 1:

Chronological Reasoning

1. Historical Causation

Thinking about causation involves the ability to identify, analyze, and evaluate the relationships among many historical events as both causes and effects. Historians often try to distinguish between immediate, proximate, and long term-causes and effects. Some events and conditions may have some *correlation* without proof of a direct causal relation while others are only *coincidental* or without a relationship.

The Civil War era is a rich resource for the study of causation. The firing on Fort Sumter sparked the armed conflict, much like the first shots at Lexington Green were the *immediate* cause that led to fighting in Massachusetts in 1775. One could argue that the secession of the Southern states from the Union after the election of Lincoln was the *proximate* cause of the conflict, but slavery, states’ rights, and deep-rooted economic and cultural differences were long-term causes of the North and South going to war. Were the failed attempts to compromise before secession *primary* or *secondary* causes of the Union’s breakdown? Some historians argue that the economic Panic of 1857 contributed to North-South divisions, while others see it as only a *coincidental* event. Understanding multiple causes and effects of historical events involves analyzing and making judgments about their relative significance.

2. Patterns of Continuity and Change Over Time

Thinking about continuity and change over time involves the ability to recognize, analyze, and evaluate the dynamics of history over periods of time of varying lengths. It often involves discovering patterns. The study of themes in history is often the tool of choice to understand change over time.

The decades before the Civil War raise interesting questions about the *continuity* or *change over time* concerning attitudes towards slavery in the North and South. Historians are interested in how the institution of slavery, which viewed as a “necessary evil” after the American Revolution, became views as a “positive good” in the South while many in the North came to view slavery as both economically unnecessary and morally wrong. Often continuity and change cannot be measured during a presidential administration or over a generation, but across longer periods of time. Tracing change over time by theme, such as changing views on slavery, often becomes clear only over a number of historical periods.

3. Periodization

Periodization involves the ability to analyze and organize history into blocks of time or periods. Periods in history are often identified as starting or ending with significant turning points, such as the start or end of a war. However, while historians recognize periodization is a handy tool in the organization of history in meaningful ways, the choice of specific dates depends on what the historian considers most significant, such as some political, economic, social, or cultural theme. Historical thinking involves not only being aware of how a historian's point of view will shape choices about periodization but how periodization can change a historical narrative from political to an economic or foreign affairs perspective.

The overlap between period 5 (1848-1877) and period 6 (1865-1898) in the AP US curriculum is not an oversight but an example of how different purposes of themes can change periodization. Period 5 primarily follows a political theme of disunion and the reconstruction of the Union after the Civil War along with the impact on African Americans, while period 6 focuses on the economy and the impact of industrialization. In period 5 from 1848 to 1877, the end of the Civil War in 1865 is just part of the narrative of supporting the larger political theme, while in period 6 the end of the war proved a useful point to turn attention to the primary theme of economic development.

Skill Group 2: Comparison and Contextualization

4. Comparison

Thinking about comparison involves the ability to describe, compare, contrast, and evaluate two or more historical developments in the same era or from different time periods. It involves the ability to study a given historical event or development from multiple perspectives.

Again using the Civil War era, the South from its perspective compared its struggle to fight for independence from the Union to the American Revolution. Historians have often compared and contrasted the struggle by African Americans to achieve equal rights after the Civil War with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s to better understand each development.

5. Contextualization

Thinking about contextualization involves the skill to see how a specific event or development fits into the context of larger and broader historical developments, often on the national or global level. For example, American historians have tried to understand the anti-slavery movement in the US in the context of 19th-century efforts by nations in Europe and Latin American to end slavery and even the movement to end serfdom in Russia, as well as how long it took to achieve equality after liberation.

Both the skills *comparison* and *contextualization* involve stepping back enough to recognize various perspectives and to discover commonalities and differences that broaden one's historical understanding.

Skill Group 3: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence

6. Historical Argumentation

Argumentation involves the ability to analyze a question and to address that question through the construction of a plausible and persuasive argument. Historical argumentation requires a focused and analytical thesis, supported by relevant historical evidence. The skill also involves the ability to evaluate the arguments and supporting evidence used by others.

For example, AP students may be asked, "Assess the extent to which slavery was the main cause of the disunion and the Civil War." This question demands a clear and comprehensive thesis that not only supports the position with persuasive and relevant evidence but also takes into account conflicting arguments. Skill 6 and skill 7 are closely linked together in the ability of "crafting historical arguments from historical evidence."

7. Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence

Use of evidence involves the ability to evaluate evidence from diverse sources, written primary and secondary sources, art and illustrations, artifacts, maps, and statistical data. Students need to be able to analyze evidence in terms of content but also (1) author's point of view, (2) intended audience of document, (3) purpose of document, and (4) historical context. This skill also involves the ability to make inferences and draw conclusions, while recognizing the limitations or errors in the source.

For example, the pro-slavery documents produced in the 1840s and 1850s are offensive by today's standards, but they provide insights into the divisions and the thinking of the times, and cast light on issues such as conditions of people working for wages and early critiques of a market-driven economy.

Skill Group 4: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis

8. Interpretation

Historical interpretation involves the ability to describe, analyze, and evaluate diverse interpretations of historical sources, and the skill to construct one's own interpretation. This thinking skill also involves understanding how particular circumstances and perspectives shape historians' interpretations. The skill challenges people to avoid interpreting the past in terms of the present and to recognize the tentative nature of many judgments about the past.

The influential historian John Hope Franklin described how changing perspectives affected the history of the post-Civil War Reconstruction era: "If every generation rewrites its history, then every generation since 1870 has written the history of Reconstruction. And what historians have written tells us as much about their own generation as about the Reconstruction period itself."

Historians often "rewrite" or revise history as a result of change in society, personal perspectives, the discovery of new sources and information and above all, the asking of new questions. Questioning is a primary tool that historians can use to "peel back the layers of the onion" to discover new Interpretation of the evidence. As many historians have said, "The quality of one's history is determined by the quality of one's questions."

9. Synthesis

Historical synthesis involves applying all of the other historical thinking skills, as well as drawing and fusing knowledge and methods from diverse sources and disciplines to develop a persuasive understanding of the past. Synthesis also involves working to combine diverse and contradictory evidence to avoid a one-sided or narrow interpretation of the past.

James McPherson set the standard for synthesis of the Civil War period in his book *Battle Cry of Freedom*. One reviewer of McPherson's book captured the objectives of historical synthesis. "Above all, everything is in living relationship with everything else. ...Omitting nothing important, whether military, political, or economic, he yet manages everything he touches drive his narrative forward. This is historical writing of the highest order."

Of course, the expectations for an AP US student writing an essay are more modest, but they do include combining diverse and contradictory evidence with differing interpretations in essay form to reveal a thoughtful and persuasive understanding of the past.