

Introducing the Advanced Placement U.S. History Examination

The Advanced Placement (AP) Examination in United States History is one of the most popular of the subject examinations administered by the College Board in cooperation with high schools and colleges across the country. Every May more than 150,000 students take the exam. Although the exam is open to all students, most are high school juniors enrolled in a special AP U.S. history class that is similar to a university-level survey course in terms of the depth of coverage and the reading required. Those who score well on the exam can receive advanced standing, credit, or both from the college they plan to attend.

Format of the Exam

The AP U.S. history exam is three hours and five minutes long and consists of eighty multiple-choice and two types of essay questions. The exam questions are intended to measure your factual knowledge of the material usually covered in a university U.S. history survey course. Most questions require that you recall specific information about key events, personalities, or movements in U.S. history. There are five possible answers for each question (A through E), and you indicate the correct one by filling in a small oval space in pencil on a separate answer sheet. At the end of the time period for Section I, the answer sheet and the booklet containing the multiple-choice questions are turned in to the proctor. You have fifty-five minutes for Section I.

Section II, the essay portion of the exam, has three parts. Part A is the Document-Based Question (DBQ). All students write on the same DBQ. The DBQ asks you to write an essay based on your analysis of a group of documents and your understanding of the period of U.S. history referred to in the question. You are expected to analyze the documents, select those that are most relevant to the topic, draw on information not provided in the documents, and argue your interpretation effectively. Section II starts with a fifteen-minute required reading period. You will be instructed to use the time to go over the DBQ and documents, making notes and outlining your answer in the green question booklet; if time permits, you are also encouraged to review the essay choices in Parts B and C. As soon as you finish the DBQ, you can go on to the other essays. The suggested time for the DBQ is forty-five minutes.

The documents used in the DBQ cover a broad range of historical sources: excerpts from written materials such as diaries, letters, speeches, novels, magazine articles, court decisions, and laws as well as graphs, charts, tables, maps, photographs, political cartoons, and even artwork. There are usually seven to ten documents presented, and each is identified and dated.

Parts B and C provide you with a choice of essays. You are required to answer one question in each part, and a total of seventy minutes is allotted to write two essays. The instructions encourage you to spend five minutes planning and thirty minutes writing each essay.

The essay questions in Section II are in a green booklet; you are given a pink booklet in which to answer both the DBQ and the standard essays.

You should be aware that the College Board may change the format of the exam from time to time. In recent years, for example, the number of multiple-choice questions has been reduced and the time allowed for essay writing has been increased. Your AP teacher will inform you of any revisions in the exam format. The overall intent of the exam, however, remains the same — to evaluate your ability to analyze and comprehend U.S. history as taught at the college level.

Subject Matter of the Exam

In theory, the exam covers the period from the earliest settlements to the present; in reality, equal emphasis is not given to each era or theme in American history. The percentage distribution of questions in the multiple-choice section roughly breaks down as follows:

Colonial America to the New Nation (1789)	17%
New Nation to World War I (1914)	50%
World War I (1915) to present	33%

The focus is clearly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although there may be multiple-choice questions on events after 1975, the DBQ and the standard essays won't focus entirely on contemporary U.S. history. This focus reflects the amount of material that can be reasonably covered in your AP U.S. history class by the time the exam is given in May.

The exam does not completely accept the maxim that history is “past politics.” Only about a third of the questions in both the multiple-choice and free-response sections deal with political institutions and public policy. Another third emphasize social and economic history, and the rest pertain to international relations as well as social and cultural movements.

Neither the time periods nor the subject areas covered by the exam are absolute. You will be expected to compare (or contrast) developments in different eras — for example, progressivism and the New Deal — and explore the economic, social, or cultural impact of a political decision.

The College Board now provides you with the time frame the DBQ will cover. On the 2000 exam, the period was from 1875–1925, and on the 2001, it will be from 1920–1970. (The sample DBQ in Practice Test 1 is on the period 1875–1925.) This information is extremely helpful to you in allocating your preparation time, and it emphasizes that the focus of the exam is on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It will do little good to complain after the fact that you devoted all your studying to colonial America and the American Revolution, for example, and just skimmed over what you were told the DBQ would cover. The DBQ on the 1999 exam, however, dealt with the colonies on the eve of the American Revolution (1750–1776).

How the Exam Is Scored

The exam is scored on a five-point scale:

- 5 — extremely well qualified
- 4 — well qualified
- 3 — qualified
- 2 — possibly qualified
- 1 — no recommendation

A grade of 3 is considered passing. The breakdown of the grades on the 1999 exam was as follows:

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Percentage Earning Grade</i>
5	8.89.4%
4	19.819.6%
3	21.921.8%
2	36.335.9%
1	13.2%

Source <http://www.collegeboard.org/ap/history/html/grade99.html>.

As you can see from the grading scale, a score of 3 is considered passing. Colleges and universities participating in the Advanced Placement Program set their own policies with respect to awarding advanced standing and/or credit for AP examinations. You should check with your college counselor or the schools you plan to apply to for their AP policy.

Scoring the Multiple-Choice Section

The multiple-choice section is worth fifty percent of the score. The difficulty of the questions is such that you must answer about sixty percent correctly to “pass” with a grade of 3. A quarter point is taken off for each incorrect answer. The deduction is intended to discourage “wild” guessing. The multiple-choice score is computed by subtracting the number of wrong answers multiplied by one quarter ($\frac{1}{4}$ or .25) from the number of correct answers. While no points are lost if you leave a question blank, skipping too many will not give you enough points for a passing grade. If you can narrow down the possible answer to two or three choices, guessing may be worthwhile.

Grading the Essays

While the multiple-choice answer sheets are fed into a computer and automatically scored, AP readers grade the essays. About half are college professors and the other half come from the ranks of high school AP teachers. No distinction is made between the college professor and the high school teacher; each brings his or her own expertise to the reading table. AP readers don't just sit down and begin reading. They undergo an intensive orientation session and work toward a clear understanding of what scores apply to what levels of quality the essays will have.

AP readers face a formidable task. Each year the number of students taking the AP U.S. history exam increases (now over 150,000), which means that the readers must go through about 450,000 essays in a week's time. Every morning they face a pile of essays that must be read quickly and efficiently. There is no set time limit for reading an essay, but pressure to get through the pile is a fact of life. On average, a reader takes ninety seconds to grade an essay. All the time you put into studying for the test, the hours, weeks, and months you gave to your AP class, are reduced in the end to a few minutes for the free-response section.

All the readers read the DBQ; they are assigned the essays in Part B depending on how many students have answered individual questions. Your standard essays will not be read by the same person who reads your DBQ. Readers are identified only by their own code numbers. This system of confidentiality protects both the student and the readers and insures a maximum degree of objectivity in grading the essays.

Seven readers, including a table leader, work as a team. Before each annual AP session, the table leaders meet and begin reading essays, searching for representative examples of student work at several levels of quality. These essays are photocopied and presented to the AP readers at their orientation. Under the leadership of the table leader, the readers evaluate them, and the evaluations are then compared with the consensus score reached earlier by the table leaders. At the end of the process, all readers understand and agree on the criteria by which the essays are measured.

Readers use a list of standards in scoring the essays. The standards are on a scale from 0 to 9 and grouped from a high range of 8 to 9 to a low of 0 to 1. The following is a typical example of the standards on the 9-point scale that gives you a general idea of what the readers are looking for in the DBQ:

Standards for the DBQ	
Score	Comments
8–9	<p>Contains a well-developed thesis. Makes thorough use of most of the documents. Supports thesis with substantial and significant outside information. Is well written and organized. May contain minor errors.</p>
5–7	<p>Contains a thesis. Uses some of the documents. Supports the thesis with some outside information. Limited analysis. Writing and organization are acceptable. Factual errors do not detract from essay.</p>
2–4	<p>Confused or poorly developed thesis. Quotes or briefly cites documents. Contains minimal or scattered outside information. Poorly written and organized. May contain major factual errors.</p>
0–1	<p>No thesis statement. Ignores the documents or has no understanding of them. No outside information. Difficult to understand because of poor writing and organization. Numerous major factual errors.</p>

The table leaders usually supply a list of suggested outside information examples to aid the readers in evaluating the DBQ.

The standard essays are scored by the same system. Each of the essay questions has a list of standards that may call for student awareness of specific content. A 1988 free-response question, for example, called for an analysis of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in light of his statement in 1858 which seemed to accept racial inequality. Students were asked to reconcile Lincoln's positions.

The standards for this question included the following:

Standards for the General Essay	
Score	Comments
8–9	Clear argument regarding the issue of reconciliation. Sophisticated understanding of Lincoln’s view on race and slavery. Solid understanding of historical context of the 1850s and 1860s; may emphasize one period. Accurate factual evidence. May contain minor errors.
5–7	Addresses issue of reconciliation. Understanding of Lincoln’s views on race and slavery. Understanding of the historical context of the 1850s and 1860s; may emphasize one period. Some factual evidence presented but may contain errors.
2–4	Attempts to address issue of reconciliation. Discussion of Lincoln’s views and of 1850s–1860s historical context may be uneven. Limited factual evidence. Some major errors.
0–1	No attempt to address issue of reconciliation. No factual evidence, or evidence irrelevant, inaccurate, confused. Inept or inappropriate response to question. Numerous major errors.

Although the grading standards are given in a range, the essays receive a single number score. Section II is worth half of the total score. Forty-five percent of your score in Section II is the DBQ, and the two standard essays count for a total of 55 percent.

Questions Commonly Asked about the AP U.S. History Examination

The Advanced Placement Examination in United States History is often called the toughest test a student will ever take. With that reputation in mind, you naturally want to know as much about the exam as possible. The following are questions students have asked. You'll certainly have others to put to your AP teacher.

Q. What should I bring to the exam?

- A.** Two Number 2 pencils with good erasers, two medium ballpoint pens with dark blue or black ink, and a watch; leave everything else — notes, study guides, books — at home.

You have to use a Number 2 pencil to fill in the answer sheet for the multiple-choice section. It should not be sharpened to a fine point. A pencil point that is somewhat rounded is easier to use when marking the answer sheet. Number 3 pencils make marks that are too light and may not be picked up by the electronic scanner. Always have a spare pencil if one breaks. Your mark should be made firmly and clearly.

You should also have a high-quality eraser in case you change your mind about an answer. You must erase that choice thoroughly or else the scoring machine may register two answers for one question. This will be marked wrong.

Don't use pencil to write your essays. Invest some money in two good, medium ball-point pens. A cheap ball-point that you've had in your backpack all semester may smear the ink on the paper. The same is true for felt-tip pens that may skip or leave dots of ink on the paper. You want to avoid anything that makes your essays difficult to read.

Make sure you have the school code for your high school. Your AP teacher or your college guidance counselor can provide you with the number.

You should also have a watch. Although the proctor for the exam will keep you informed about the time, it is always helpful to be able to check the time yourself.

Q. Should I guess on the multiple-choice questions?

- A.** If you draw a complete blank on a question, you have two options: (1) you can put down a wild guess and almost certainly get it wrong or (2) you can go on to the next question. Wild guessing is a bad idea because a quarter point is deducted for each wrong answer. Leaving too many questions blank may not give you enough points to do well on the multiple-choice section. If you can eliminate two or three choices, make an "educated" guess from the remaining answers.

Q. Does penmanship and spelling count?

- A.** No, as long as things don't get out of control. With so little time allotted for each essay, the readers look for key phrases and content words; they don't worry if an occasional word is misspelled or subject and predicate don't agree. They understand that you're writing under pressure. If your handwriting is really poor, you must make an extra effort to write as legibly as possible. Remember how much time the readers will spend on your essays; it's impossible for them to take five minutes to "decode" what you've written.

Q. Where can I outline my ideas for the essay questions?

A. The best place to write an outline, make notes, or jot down key words and personalities is in the green booklet that contains the DBQ and standard essay questions. The booklet is yours to keep. Your essays go in a separate pink booklet. While you're not penalized for putting an outline in the pink booklet, it's not a good idea. You want your essay to look as clean as possible.

Q. Should I use all the documents in the DBQ?

A. You should use as many documents as you feel confident can be applied to your answer. Attempting to use all the documents, regardless of how well you understand them or how pertinent they are to your essay, may create an essay that seems artificial and strained. At the same time, you should use more than just two or three of the documents provided; your essay will otherwise lack the authority the documentation can give it. Your ability to use the documents authoritatively is an important element that the readers are looking for in the DBQ.

Q. If I finish my essay early, should I go back and add to it?

A. The readers don't have the time to twist the test booklet around to decipher asterisks and arrows pointing to additional material. Last minute revisions, inserted here and there, can create the impression that your essay is poorly organized. Chances are that you've said all you were going to the first time around, and it's not a good idea to put in something new at the end.

Q. What if I start an essay and then change my mind about doing it? Will I be penalized if I start another essay?

A. If this happens, just draw an X through what you've written. The reader will score only the essay you complete. There's a box on the pink booklet for the number of the essays; make sure this corresponds to the essays you've written. The only thing you lose by starting another essay is time. Use the fifteen-minute mandatory reading period between the multiple-choice and free-response sections to go over the essays and choose the ones you feel most confident in handling.

Q. How long should my essays be?

A. Your essays are scored on content, not length. Obviously, you want to write enough to answer the question as effectively as you can within the time limit of the exam. Avoid adding information that may not be particularly relevant to your answer just to show how much you know or to simply increase the number of pages. It's important to remember that an essay measures your powers of organization as well as your knowledge.

The essays require a balanced allotment of time. Don't hurt your score by devoting too much time to any one of the three questions in Part II. You won't be told that the forty-five minutes for the DBQ is up and to go on to the standard essays. Use the sample questions in this book to practice writing essays in the time allotted on the exam.

Q. How much outside reading should I do for the test?

A. Preparing for the exam involves more than going over your textbook and class notes. Your teacher can suggest useful history monographs or articles in journals. The "Reading United States History" section and the annotated bibliographies beginning on page 101 will also

be helpful. Always take notes on what you read, and write a brief summary of the books, highlighting the main points and arguments of the authors. If time becomes a problem, go to the reviews of the books in major history journals.

Q. How much review time should my AP class have before the test?

A. The amount of time an individual teacher devotes to review naturally varies. About a month of intensive review is fairly typical, however.

Q. What about cramming?

A. If spending a year in an AP U.S. history class hasn't prepared you, then staying up until two in the morning the night before the test won't help much. Get a good night's sleep.

Q. When are the scores reported and who receives the scores?

A. The exam is graded in June, and the scores are reported by mail to students, their high schools, and any colleges students have designated by mid-July. If you want to get your scores early (July 1) by phone, you can call toll free (888) 308-0013. There is a fee for this service and you will need a valid credit card.

If you don't designate a college at the time you apply to take the exam or want to have your grade report sent to an additional college, you can still have the scores sent. To do this, contact

AP Services
P.O. Box 6671
Princeton, NJ 08541-6671
Phone (609) 771-7300
Fax (609) 530-0482
E-mail apexams@info.collegeboard.org

Q. Can I withhold from colleges or cancel my scores completely?

A. The answer to both questions is yes, but think about it. Keep in mind, that it is very unlikely for schools to penalize you for not doing well on the AP exam. The fact that you have taken an AP class is a strong indication of your willingness to challenge yourself and to take on added academic responsibilities. These are attributes that interest college admissions officers. If you still want to withhold or cancel your scores, contact the College Board's AP Services. There is a fee for withholding scores but no charge for canceling them. In both cases, requests must be received by AP Services by June 15 of the year you take the exam.

