

Historical Thinking, Reading, and Writing Skills for AP U.S. History

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Students and adults alike often grumble that history is just a bunch of facts to memorize. While it's true that studying history requires data, information, and yes, facts, that's not the essence of what history is. History is a way of thinking about the world by looking at the past. It is a reconstruction of the past, drawing on both imagination and interpretation. In this effort historians use a number of skills. This skills primer will help you develop the Historical Thinking Skills you need to succeed in any Advanced Placement history course and on the exams. It will also enable you to improve critical-thinking, reading, and writing skills that will be useful in college or whatever endeavor you pursue after high school.

Historical Thinking Skills

Historical thinking requires understanding and evaluating change and continuity over time. It also involves making appropriate use of historical evidence in answering questions and developing arguments about the past. Each historian would describe the various skills needed for this complex task slightly differently, but for AP history courses, they have been organized into four major skills that represent the ways historians study the past. These skills have been described as "habits of mind." This useful phrase should remind you that a skill needs to be practiced repeatedly until it becomes second nature. Because practice is an integral part of learning to think historically, the sections below include exercises to help you develop these "habits of mind." Like shooting free throws, rehearsing dance moves, or playing scales, Historical Thinking Skills need to be exercised regularly until you can use them easily and almost effortlessly.

As we discuss each skill separately below, keep in mind that these skills overlap in many ways. For example, you can't make a historical argument without also evaluating evidence. So as you develop one Historical Thinking Skill, you will also be practicing other skills. The first three skills are all necessary to move on

to the fourth—interpretation and synthesis—in which you will bring what you have learned together.

Chronological Reasoning

"Chronological reasoning" means thinking logically about how and why the world changes—or, sometimes, stays the same—over time. While all fields of knowledge offer arguments based on evidence or make comparisons, historians are uniquely concerned about the past and its relationship to the present. How is the world different now than it was 50 years ago, 500 years ago, or 5,000 years ago? Why did the world change? How have some aspects of the world remained relatively the same over long periods of time? On what basis do historians simplify the long and complicated past by breaking it into smaller eras?

Historical Causation Causation has to do with explanations about how or why changes take place in history. Sometimes there is an obvious connection between an event and its consequence, like a cue ball striking the eight ball and making it move. And some events *are* fairly straightforward: the attack on Pearl Harbor prompted President Roosevelt to ask Congress for a declaration of war against Japan. But even this seemingly simple example soon becomes more complicated. *Why* did Japan attack the United States? What role did the American embargo on the sale of oil have on Japan's decision? Why did the United States enact this embargo? All of these other events took place just a few years before the Pearl Harbor attack. If we go even further back, we'll gain additional insight about the larger context of the Japanese government's decision. A longer-term analysis might lead, for example, to an understanding of Japanese imperial aggression as an outgrowth of their rapid industrialization during the Meiji Restoration of the late nineteenth century.

Just as there were many factors behind the attack on Pearl Harbor, most examples of historical causation involve multiple causes and effects. Events and processes often result from developments in many realms of life, including social, political, economic, and cultural

Historical Causation involves:

Large processes

Many changes take place through major processes that are larger than any one person and occur over a long period of time. Urbanization, for example, is a complex set of changes resulting from the actions of countless different individuals that became an underlying cause of many other developments.

Multiple causes

Most events or developments occur from a combination of factors, not just one. The protests of the late 1960s, for example, had multiple causes, including movements for civil rights and decolonization, the rise of the New Left, the Vietnam War, and the postwar baby boom that produced a new youth culture.

Unintended consequences

Many changes take place accidentally, like the large-scale deaths of Native Americans during the Columbian Exchange due to diseases Europeans weren't aware they were carrying.

Contingency

Events are not preordained, and history could have turned out differently. This is known as contingency. Because we read major events in history already knowing their outcome, we have a tendency to think they were bound to happen, but that is not the case. For example, the initial Spanish conquest of the Incas was very precarious, and early on they might have been defeated.

Historians cannot test these in laboratories the way scientists can, but they can use historical evidence and reasoning to determine which of these are probable causes and effects. Historical causation also involves large processes, complex causes, unintended consequences, and contingencies, as the chart above describes.

You can begin to develop the skill of determining causation by asking yourself, whenever some significant change in history is described, what reasons explain the development. If the answer seems simple, keep digging, because there's bound to be a more complicated (and longer-term) explanation.

EXERCISE: One major controversy in U.S. history (and in European and world history as well) regarding causation has to do with why the Great Depression of the 1930s became so severe and lasted so long. How do the authors explain the causes of the Great Depression on pages 726–729 in Chapter 22? Which of the types of explanations from the box above do they use in their explanation about why this particular economic depression became so bad that it is still known as the “Great Depression”?

Patterns of Continuity and Change over Time

Historians are interested in both historical changes and persisting patterns, or “continuities.” Change is easier to see: when one country conquers another one, that event often becomes part of the historical record. But some things stay relatively the same for long periods of

time. Because continuity (such as a network of trade that remains in existence for hundreds of years) is less dramatic than change, it can be harder to spot.

What counts as continuity depends on the scale of time you're working with. The Soviet Union was continuous throughout most of the twentieth century. However, in the time frame of Russia's history since the formation of Kievan Rus in the ninth century, the Soviet era looks more like a short-lived exception to tsarist rule.

When historians talk about continuity, they're not implying that a particular pattern applied to everyone in the world or even in a particular country or region. Nor are they claiming that absolutely nothing changed in the pattern they're describing. For example, agricultural production has been continuous for thousands of years. But there are exceptions to this broad statement: on the one hand, some people have continued to be foragers; on the other hand, methods of farming have changed substantially with technology. So the continuity of agriculture is a generalization but not a completely unchanging pattern or a pattern that applies to everyone on the planet.

To work on developing this skill, look for places in your text where the authors directly indicate that a historical pattern persisted over time and explain *why* that pattern persisted. But even when an author focuses on change in history, you can still find continuity by inference, since few things ever change completely. When the text describes a new development, ask yourself what *didn't* change. For example, employing the ideas

of the European Enlightenment, Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence proclaimed “that all men are created equal.” But many of the thinkers of the early republic used custom and biology to justify limiting suffrage to white men only. In this way, they continued to defend traditional stereotypes about the inferiority of women and non-Europeans that had existed for centuries.

EXERCISE: Look at the authors’ discussion of “Neo-European Colonies” on pages 56–66 in Chapter 2. How did the different colonies of the North American Atlantic coast seek to replicate European patterns of economic and social organization?

Periodization Periodization refers to the ways that historians break the past into separate periods of time. Historians look for major turning points in history—places where the world looked very different *before* some event than it did *after*—to decide how to break the past into chunks. They then give a label to each period to convey the key characteristics and developments of that era.

Because the past is complex, any attempt to create eras and give those eras labels can provoke disagreement. For example, the word *Renaissance*, which means “rebirth,” was first used in the later sixteenth century by the Italian art historian Giorgio Vasari to describe artists such as his contemporary Michelangelo whom Vasari regarded as geniuses even greater than those of the ancient world. Over time, the word’s meaning was broadened to include many aspects of life, expanded geographically to include developments in many countries, and extended chronologically to include several centuries. But scholars do not agree about when exactly the Renaissance began and when it ended, and they debate whether certain artists and writers should be considered “Renaissance” figures. Many note that along with significant changes during the Renaissance, there were also striking continuities with the medieval period that preceded it. Others have questioned whether the word *Renaissance* should be used at all to describe an era in which many social groups saw decline rather than advance. These debates remind us that all periodization is done by people after the fact, and it all involves value judgments. No Delaware or Shawnee soldier in the Ohio Valley in the mid-eighteenth century, for example, knew he was fighting what would later be called “The French and Indian War,” or that he was living in a period of time that would later be referred to as “colonial America.”

As you develop this skill, pay attention to the labels for various periods that are used in the chapter you’re reading. Sometimes chapter titles themselves contain a period label, which can give you an idea of what the authors have decided is the main story for that era. Chapter 3, for example, is titled “The British Atlantic World,” and Chapter 25 is titled “Cold War America.”

EXERCISE: Chapter 26, which discusses society and culture in the postwar period, is titled “Triumph of the Middle Class.” Read the chapter introduction and Big Idea question on page 838. What words do the authors use to convey their judgment that this was a period of triumph? From other history courses you have had, or from history you have learned on your own, you might know that this era occurred in the midst of other periods to which labels have also been given, including the “Red Scare” and the “Cold War.” Consider why these labels were given to their respective periods. How do they complicate the idea that this was an era of “triumph”?

Comparison and Contextualization

People don’t learn things in isolation, but in relationship. Historians are no different. The third category of Historical Thinking Skills reflects the ways historians make sense of the past by placing particulars in some larger framework. For example, they understand historical events and processes by comparing them to related events and processes to see how they’re similar and different. Second, historians recognize that historical evidence, including artifacts, photographs, and speeches, can only be adequately understood by knowing something about their context, that is, the time and place when they came into existence.

Comparison Comparisons help historians understand how a development in the past was similar to or different from another development and in this way determine what was distinctive. For example, some scholars have concluded that the reform spanning the Progressive and New Deal eras shared key features that led to the development of a welfare state. Other scholars have argued that the New Deal represented a radical break from the progressive policies of the past. Through the tool of comparison we can see how leaders and ordinary people handled common problems in unique ways.

As you develop this skill, practice comparing two social justice movements, such as the African American

and women's suffrage movements — and also compare the same movement at two different points in time. For example, how was the women's suffrage movement of the nineteenth century similar to that of the women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century? How was it different? What had happened to lead to these differences?

EXERCISE: Look at the authors' comparison of slavery in the Chesapeake, South Carolina, and the West Indies in the eighteenth century in Chapter 3. How was the institution of slavery similar from place to place? Why? What key features do the authors say are different? Why are they different?

Contextualization Just as historical events make more sense when they're studied alongside similar events, historians know that any event can only be understood in "context." Context refers to the historical circumstances surrounding a particular event. Historians look for major developments in any era to help determine context. They typically think in terms of two levels of context: an *immediate* (or short-term) context and a *broad* (or long-term) context.

The easiest way to begin thinking about context is to figure out when a particular event took place or when a document was created. Then brainstorm the major developments of the era. Ask yourself, "How might these larger events have shaped this event (or document)?"

For example, European Enlightenment ideas — among them John Locke's revolutionary idea that political authority was not given by God to monarchs and that the people should have the power to change government policies, or even their form of government — had been carried over to the Americas by European colonists. These ideas added a secular dimension to colonial cultural life, but it wouldn't be until the Revolutionary era that these ideas would be embraced by American intellectuals such as John Adams, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson in their formulation of republican political theory.

To understand why these ideas had such dramatic effects, you need to consider the larger context. That context, as Chapter 4 indicates, includes both the immediate context of the political and social situation in the colonies in the eighteenth century and the long-term context of the print revolution. The context sometimes includes things that might at first seem unrelated. In this case, after 1700 improved transportation networks facilitated the spread of people, goods, and

information in the colonies. Around the same time, in 1695 the British government let the Licensing Act lapse, which had given it the right to censor all printed materials, further opening the floodgates for the spread of books, newspapers, letters, and pamphlets. In 1704, the first colonial newspaper was founded. By 1776, the thirteen colonies that united in declaring independence had thirty-seven newspapers among them. The transportation and print revolution thus allowed revolutionary ideas to be communicated far more widely and quickly than they would have without it.

EXERCISE: Look at the "kitchen debate" between U.S. vice president Richard Nixon and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev on page 838 in Chapter 26. Note that it occurred in 1959, in a model kitchen the Americans set up in Moscow as part of the American National Exhibition. What immediate developments (including the location) might have shaped the arguments presented by the two leaders for the merits of their political systems? How do the broad context of the Cold War and the even broader context of U.S.-Soviet relations in the twentieth century help you understand the debate?

Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence

This Historical Thinking Skill focuses our attention on using evidence to make historical arguments. The word *argument* reminds us that any attempt to explain the past requires interpretation, since our understanding of the past is limited. Arguing means making a logical — rather than an emotional — case for your interpretation of a particular historical question or controversy. To be convincing, your interpretation has to present supporting evidence. This evidence consists of information you have gathered from primary sources, which are materials produced during the period being studied, as well as from existing historical studies, which are called secondary sources.

Historical Argumentation Historians make arguments about what life was like in the past, how or why things changed, and why those changes matter. Their arguments are informed by their deep knowledge about the subject and careful reading of primary and secondary sources. But because evidence from the past is often incomplete or difficult to understand, historians inevitably make inferences to fill the gaps in their knowledge. Not all historians make the same inferences,

so there are often a variety of interpretations about most historical events.

For example, all scholars agree that the growth of industry first in England and then in America and elsewhere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a major historical development. It was so important, in fact, that we call it a revolution: the Industrial Revolution. But historians disagree about the most significant causes for the way industry developed. Some highlight the coal deposits located near English rivers, which provided a source of power far greater than human or animal power. Others point to a culture of innovation that developed in England, in which artisans and inventors read scientific works and looked for solutions to practical problems. Still others emphasize the role of England's overseas colonies, which provided raw materials and markets for manufactured products.

To develop this Historical Thinking Skill, ask yourself how historians think they know what they know about a particular event. What evidence do they provide? Does their language suggest hesitancy or uncertainty about their interpretation? Do they offer alternative explanations?

EXERCISE: On page 11 of Chapter 1 of this text, how do the authors explain the decline of the Mississippian settlement of Cahokia? What inferences do they make?

Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence

Historians make arguments about the past based on primary-source evidence. As mentioned earlier, a primary source is something produced *in* the era under investigation. In contrast, a secondary source, also called a secondary interpretation or a secondary work, is something *about* the era under investigation made after the fact. It is usually the result of scholarly research of primary sources, or a distillation of such research. The narrative sections of this textbook, for example, are secondary sources, as are most published works of history, biographies, and encyclopedias. Sometimes a source can be both primary and secondary. Former British prime minister Winston Churchill's history of World War II is a primary source, because he was directly involved in some of the events he describes, and also a secondary source, because he uses a variety of historical sources to tell the story of events during the war in which he was not directly involved.

Traditionally, primary sources have consisted overwhelmingly of written sources. In fact, some historians referred to any time before writing as "pre-historic." In

the last few decades, however, historians have increasingly moved beyond relying exclusively on written primary sources by turning to visual sources — paintings, photographs, architecture, artifacts, etc. — and evidence from other fields of knowledge. They even use evidence contained within the human body, such as DNA. For example, using scientific and medical information, historians have come to see the role that disease has played in history, such as the Black Death, which killed about one-third of the European population over just a few years in the middle of the fourteenth century. Since no historian can be an expert in every field, historians increasingly make use of the secondary sources produced by scholars in other fields, including archaeology, art history, biology, and chemistry.

In assessing primary sources, you need to begin with a careful examination of the source itself. But understanding evidence requires more. Primary sources are creations from a particular time and place, so you also have to consider the information that you know or can find out about the broader conditions in which the source was created — that is, the *context* of the source. Primary sources are created by a specific individual or group, called the *maker*, or in the case of written sources, the *author*. Even if they are eyewitnesses, people construct different accounts of the same event, which are shaped by their ideas, attitudes, and beliefs — what is often termed their *perspective* or *point of view*. Primary sources are also often created for someone else, so determining the purpose and intended audience of a source is essential to your understanding of it.

EXERCISE: Take a look at the American Voices feature in Chapter 12, "The Debate over Free and Slave Labor," on page 384. Then review the headnotes and the chapter narrative to determine the context for these documents.

Historical Interpretation and Synthesis

You first learned about how historians make arguments; now you'll practice evaluating those arguments and making your own. Since history requires making inferences about the past, it's inevitable that scholars will come to different conclusions. It can be very helpful, then, to study different historical interpretations about a particular event or movement over time, as interpretations often change. The final skill component, synthesis, is also related to argumentation. It is the culminating skill because it requires you to integrate all the other skills in creating your own argument.

Interpretation Historians interpret both primary and secondary sources, evaluating points of view and considering context to create their own interpretations. Through analyzing different historical interpretations, you will see how historical interpretations change over time. We have already established that formulating a historical argument requires making inferences from evidence. The background of a particular historian (age, gender, nationality, political philosophy, time of writing, etc.) often shapes the way he or she understands or interprets the past. In many cases, knowing something about the context of a historian can help you understand his or her argument better—in the same way that understanding the context of the author of a primary source helps you understand the primary source. Sometimes this information can help you identify the prejudices or limitations of a particular interpretation.

For example, in the early 1960s the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper claimed that Africa had no history until Europeans took over the continent, an argument that built on the ideas of many earlier European thinkers, especially those of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Georg Hegel. Subsequent scholarship has shown this conclusion to be faulty, and we can assume that several aspects of Trevor-Roper's situation influenced his point of view. For one, he was a historian of early modern and modern Europe who thought, as did many historians of his generation, that history could only be based on written documents. Because there were fewer of these for Africa before colonization than for Europe at the same time, he jumped to the conclusion that Africa had no history. Historians since Trevor-Roper have broadened the source base that they use in their research to incorporate many other types of sources, and they have also demonstrated that there are, in fact, many written documents relating to Africa that Trevor-Roper did not know about or chose to ignore with his comment. His choice to ignore these may have been influenced by the fact that he was a citizen of an imperial nation writing during decolonization.

Be careful when analyzing historical interpretations. You can't simply assume that because a scholar has *x* background he or she will make *y* argument. There are far too many exceptions for such a rule. Instead, begin by finding out what you can about a scholar's background and then make a hunch about how his or her background might shape his or her views. Then, as you read the arguments carefully, look for evidence that the author actually makes the kinds of

arguments you anticipated. If you don't find such evidence, discard your hunch.

Synthesis Synthesis is a culminating skill that reflects your ability to make persuasive arguments of your own from evidence. It draws on all of the other Historical Thinking Skills—historical argumentation, appropriate use of relevant historical evidence, causation, continuity and change, periodization, comparison, contextualization, and interpretation—along with two other elements. First, you may need to draw on evidence outside the field of history. This might come from the social sciences, such as archaeology, anthropology, economics, or sociology; it might come from the humanities, such as art history or literary studies; or it might even come from the natural sciences, such as biology or chemistry. The other element is the ability to apply insights from historical evidence to a new setting. This is a creative form of comparison. You might link some moment in the past to a more recent issue, for example, the African civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s to Reconstruction, or compare how the United States has tended to underestimate the strength of nationalism in other people, as evidenced by the Iraq and Vietnam wars. In so doing, you will be using the past to shed light on the present. You will have taken a major step in historical thinking, as making connections is a key part of what historians do.

Getting the Most Out of Reading History

Active reading means reading for meaning. The big challenges of reading are length and detail. If you understand the “big picture,” you can read much more quickly and effectively, because you can “see the forest for the trees.” That is, you can see the main ideas and recognize how specific information is provided to illustrate those big ideas. The three stages of reading described below will help you understand the “big picture” when reading this text and others.

Before Reading (Prereading)

When approaching a text such as this one, it is helpful to spend a few minutes prereading the material of a chapter. During this stage, you are simply getting prepared for what you will be reading. This involves several steps. First, determine the chronology and major

theme(s) by looking at the chapter title and dates. The title often gives you a clue as to what the authors see as the main point, theme, or development of that chapter. Second, read the chapter headings and any focus questions, such as the Identify the Big Idea questions in this book, at the beginning of the chapter. The headings and questions provide a sense of the major topics addressed in the chapter, and the questions may also point toward the Historical Thinking Skills that are especially emphasized in the chapter. Third, page through the chapter, scanning the titles of the subsections and looking at the maps, timelines, illustrations, and primary sources. This will provide you with information about the major events, individuals, comparisons, and connections discussed in the chapter.

EXERCISE: Let's practice by prereading Chapter 1, "Colliding Worlds, 1450–1600." Scan the chapter and answer the following questions without writing anything down.

Step One: Look at the chapter title. What is the chronology of this chapter? What is the central theme?

Step Two: Look at the headings and Big Idea question in the chapter introduction on page 6. What are the four major topics in this chapter? What Historical Thinking Skills does the Big Idea question focus on?

Step Three: Page through each section, looking at the subheadings, maps, and illustrations and keeping the following questions in mind:

In the first section, "The Native American Experience," what were the important empires, chiefdoms, and confederacies prior to 1492? What connections existed between these diverse groups? In the second section, "Western Europe: The Edge of the Old World," what characterized European society? How did the growth of the Christian Church affect events in Europe? In the third section, "West and Central Africa: Origins of the Atlantic Slave Trade," how did trade connect Africa to the wider world? What does Map 1.4 tell you about the types of goods that were exchanged? In the fourth section, "Exploration and Conquest," what countries were especially important in exploration? From the order in which these countries appear in the subheadings, can you get clues about the chronology of the voyages? Which individuals are mentioned in

subheadings? (You might not always recognize an individual named in a subheading, but you can always count on his or her historical importance.) What commodities are mentioned in subheadings or shown in illustrations?

Remember, there's no need to write this down. The point right now is just to get a clear idea of the "big picture" developments covered in the chapter. You haven't read the chapter yet—and you haven't taken a single note. But by spending 5 to 10 minutes prereading the chapter, you already have a good idea of what the chapter's all about. You have recognized what parts of the story you may have heard about before, and what parts are completely new. By taking this time, you'll be able to read with a clear focus, saving yourself a lot of time later on. Now that you have a good idea of the "big picture," you're ready to begin actually reading the text.

During Reading

As you read chapters of this text, remember that reading is an active process—so stay focused. The meaning will only become clear as you work at it. The authors have intentionally written an organized textbook and want you to be able to follow along, so take advantage of the clues they have provided, especially the main questions, section titles, and subheadings.

Active readers use four skills to understand texts: *questioning*, *clarifying*, *summarizing*, and *predicting*. These steps don't have to happen in a particular order. In fact, once you become comfortable with them, they'll pop up on their own without you trying in whatever order they choose, perhaps several at the same time—that's when you know that they've truly become habits of mind. Use these skills along with note-taking to get the most out of your reading.

Questioning Historians look at the world in a particular way, and they usually organize their writing around the Historical Thinking Skills discussed above: cause and effect, comparison, interpretation, and so on. Many of the questions in each chapter involve one or more of these thinking skills. For example, the marginal question on page 15 of Chapter 1, "How did landscape, climate, and resources influence the development of Native American societies?" is a question about change over time and about causation. As the authors answer that question in the chapter section on pages 8–18, they utilize every other Historical Thinking Skill as well. They *craft a historical argument* using many types

of relevant historical evidence, including evidence gathered by scholars in other fields, such as archaeologists and anthropologists who study the remains of early native peoples; present a *periodization* of the thousands of years before European contact, when the peoples of the Western Hemisphere were largely isolated from the rest of the world; *compare* the trade networks and religious practices of Native American groups; *contextualize* the different ways that societies developed within the processes of climate and geography; and develop an *interpretation* about the development of diverse groups across the Americas that *synthesizes* information from different sources and fields of inquiry.

Asking questions is thus an essential way to develop Historical Thinking Skills. For every section you read, you might begin with the very basic “reporter questions”: Who? What? Where? When? Why?

1. *Who* is the section about? History texts are almost always about people. Is the focus an individual? A social group? A political entity?
2. *What* does the section say about this person or group? Texts usually describe some major event or pattern. Did they do something important? Did something happen to them?
3. *Where* did the subject being described take place? Physical location is often crucial in history. Does this location help make sense of the subject in some way?
4. *When* did the events take place? Like physical location, chronology forms part of the historical context that makes events understandable. Does the text describe something unfolding over a very short period — or a longer one? Are there crucial events that came before that make the description understandable?
5. *Why* did the event or pattern being described take place — and why does it matter? Whether talking about a dramatic development or a continuity that endured for a long period of time, historians always attempt to understand what led to it. What reasons does the text provide for the event or pattern? How is the significance of the development explained?

Clarifying As you read, ask yourself if there are any words you don’t understand. Some of these will be included as key terms defined in the margins, but not all will. When it comes to vocabulary, use good judgment. Is the word crucial for understanding the passage? If not, read right past it, as the meaning may become clearer as you read further in the text. If it is a crucial word, you may need to look it up in a dictionary.

When a longer passage throws you off, usually clearing up difficult vocabulary will help make the passage clearer. If it doesn’t, simply reread the sentence a few times (slowly!). If you’re still unclear, back up — usually to the beginning of the paragraph — and try again. The most common way skilled readers get clarification is simply by rereading.

Summarizing A summary is a brief review of the “big picture” of a particular section or chapter. After reading, briefly explain what each section is about in one sentence — being sure your summary considers all five of the “reporter questions” from the *Questioning* section above. If you are summarizing a section, you might think of this as answering the main question posed in the section. For example, a summary of the first section in Chapter 1, “How did landscape, climate, and resources influence the development of Native American societies?” might be: Native Americans (*who*) in present-day Mexico and Peru (*where*) began raising domesticated crops (*what*) around 6000 B.C. (*when*), and as agriculture spread northward across much of North America, agricultural surpluses led to population growth and facilitated the growth of diverse urban societies (*why*).

Predicting Based on your reading of an entire section or chapter, what do you think will come next in the text? How do you know? You may think predicting what’s coming next is a waste of time, but it’s a really good test of how well you understand the flow of the text. If you’re in a car with your family going to visit your grandmother, you probably know the route to get there. If your mother takes an unanticipated turn, it alerts you that something is different from what you were expecting — and prompts you to ask why. So if your prediction based on reading is wildly off, it may alert you to the fact that your previous idea of the “big picture” of the section was off for some reason. You may need to back up and reread a section, or at least move forward more alert to where the author is going. Again using the first section of Chapter 1 as an example, what do you imagine will happen to native peoples after European contact?

Note-Taking Of course, simply reading the text is not sufficient. You’ll never remember everything that’s important unless you take notes. Students experience many pitfalls when taking notes. You should only write notes *after* you understand what you have read. Actively *question*, *clarify*, *summarize*, and *predict* in your head (or out loud) as you read each chapter, and then go

back through the subsections and take brief notes representing the key ideas of that section.

Brief is generally better — don't wear yourself out in the notes themselves. Find some consistent abbreviations for frequent words, and use symbols: an up arrow to indicate growth, a flat arrow to indicate cause/effect, an "=" to indicate a definition, and so on. Don't write everything; ask yourself if a particular point is a main idea or just an example. If you own your textbook, make annotations in the margins. If not, get a stack of sticky notes and place them in the margins for your comments.

EXERCISE: Let's practice these four skills with the section called "Sixteenth-Century Incursions" on pages 30–35 in Chapter 1, "Colliding Worlds, 1450–1600."

- **Questioning:** What were the sixteenth-century incursions? Whom did they affect? Where did they happen? When did they happen? Why and how did they happen? How did people respond? What were their effects and consequences?
- **Clarifying:** Important words like *reconquista* are defined in the text itself, but are there any words that you do not understand? If there were any sentences you didn't understand, did they become clearer as you reread them or as you read on in the text?
- **Summarizing:** Briefly explain what this section is about in one sentence.
- **Predicting:** Based on the section you've just read, what do you think will come next in the text? How do you know?

Now that you know what this section is about, what brief comments are worth writing down in your notes?

After Reading

Reflecting on what you've read places information you've just learned into long-term memory. This involves doing the same kind of summarizing you've done section by section, but now for the entire chapter. In essence, it is a summary of your summaries. While it might seem enough to summarize the chapter verbally, writing down key ideas helps place them into long-term memory. Read through the notes that you've taken for the chapter, particularly the summary of each section. Then try to write a master summary of the

entire chapter using no more than fifty words that captures the key point of each section of the chapter as well as the chapter as a whole.

EXERCISE: Write a master summary of Chapter 1 now.

Writing About History

This skills primer began by introducing you to the patterns of thinking you need to really understand history. The next section pointed out ways to be smart about reading your textbook. This third and final section turns to the writing skills you need to develop for AP history courses and exams. Our focus shifts away from you *receiving* input toward you *providing* output: sharing your understanding of Historical Thinking Skills through writing.

There are different types of essays on AP history exams, but two essential skills apply to all of the essays you'll encounter. First, to successfully demonstrate what you know, you have to answer the question that has been asked. Sounds simple, but many students get in trouble on the exam by failing to address the question in front of them, which is called the "prompt."

Every prompt contains three elements, and you need to pay attention to all of them as you plan your response. First, each prompt deals with a subject, expressed in two important types of nouns. A *proper noun* refers to a specific historical entity — Puritanism, the Confederacy, the New Deal. A *common noun* typically refers to a historical concept: a key historical idea (republicanism, liberalism) or process (industrialization, western expansion). Sometimes this process is limited in time, but often it is a pattern that occurs over a relatively long period. Your answer must deal with all of the subjects of the prompt, not just some of them. Second, the prompt specifies a periodization or date range expressed in years. Obviously, you need to be sure your response addresses this era. One of the most common problems in student essays is providing historical information from the wrong era. Third, and most importantly, the prompt contains a task expressed as its main verb: *compare*, *describe*, *explain*, *analyze*, and so forth. Pay attention to this task verb, as these tasks are not the same, and your answer must do what the prompt asks you to do.

It doesn't matter how strong your content knowledge and historical skills are if you can't communicate clearly what you know. Every essay needs to have a specific, focused *thesis* in the introductory paragraph that

makes an argument addressing the prompt. Your thesis should be as brief as possible while still addressing the complexity of the topic. If your thesis explicitly responds to each of the three prompt elements clearly and accurately—if it includes the subjects, the time period, and the task—you will have a strong thesis. And you'll be on your way to a persuasive essay.

Every essay needs to be organized into distinct *paragraphs*. The number of paragraphs depends on the complexity of the prompt. Typically, however, two body paragraphs won't be sufficient to address the topic thoroughly. What's most important is that you clearly announce the point you're going to make in each paragraph through a *topic sentence* that effectively covers the subject of the paragraph. Any content in the paragraph that doesn't support the topic sentence doesn't belong there.

Finally, every essay requires you to make use of *evidence* to support your claims. The type of evidence also differs depending on the type of essay. The document-based question (DBQ) requires you to reference the documents included with the question, while the other essays require you to draw on information that you know. In every case, however, you need to both discuss relevant historical information you've learned during the course and then *explain how that information supports your claim*.

While many of these writing suggestions would apply equally to essays in other academic subjects, the essay types on AP history exams are all geared to the concerns of historians. Each type of essay requires the use of the Historical Thinking Skills discussed earlier, often in combination with one another. For example, every essay type requires you to discuss the *historical context* of the subject you're writing about and to *appropriately use relevant evidence* to develop an *interpretation and argument* about the past. Every essay requires you to go beyond simply listing factual information to *analyze* that information. In fact, "analyze" is commonly used as a question prompt in all types of essays.

Document-Based Questions

The document-based question, or DBQ, is a defining feature of all AP history exams. Of all the essays, this one tends to make students the most anxious. But much of this anxiety is misplaced. Once you understand the DBQ, you will feel less worried about it—and may even come to find it your favorite essay type. Unlike the other essays, for which you have to call on your memory to provide all the evidence, the documents in the DBQ form the basic evidence you need to use.

To do well on a DBQ, you need to go beyond the content of the documents in order to set the context, make a clear argument, and analyze the documents properly. Using documents as evidence requires the sophisticated analysis skills we discussed in the section "Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence." That means that you have to consider the perspective or point of view of the documents. Every primary source—textual, visual, or statistical—was created for a specific purpose. Even if the author is an eyewitness or participant, people construct different accounts of the same event, which are shaped by their perspective. That doesn't necessarily mean the author intentionally wrote it to mislead or provide only part of the story, but every document is limited and imperfect in the information it provides.

As with all essay questions, be sure your introductory paragraph includes a clear and focused thesis statement that encapsulates your argument. Use the "reporter questions"—Who? What? When? Where? Why?—to interrogate each document, and then consider the limitations of each document before writing your DBQ. Then be sure to incorporate these insights about document limitations into the essay itself to make your essay more analytical—and therefore stronger.

Consider the photo of men from the Kansas Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War on page 454 in Chapter 14. Students tend to view a document like that as a straightforward factual record. After all, we often hear that "pictures don't lie." But the picture was taken for a particular purpose by someone who decided to arrange the shot so that the soldiers would appear in uniform posed with their rifles. So it's worth asking *why* the photographer took the picture in this way. What purpose might this picture serve? What message might it convey to someone who saw it at the time it was taken? How might it misrepresent—or represent in a limited way—the realities of the soldier experience?

Purposes can be stated explicitly by the maker of a source, or they can be determined later by those analyzing the source, including you as you write your answer to a DBQ. Sometimes the purposes given by the maker and by later historians are different from one another. For example, during the Renaissance, European city governments issued laws limiting what people could spend on clothing or family celebrations such as weddings. The governments stated that the purpose of these laws was to restrict wasteful spending, but later historians studying these laws have determined that their purpose was also to sharpen distinctions between social classes. For many of the documents you will be using to answer a DBQ, you will need to

make your best judgment about the purpose, just as historians do.

You also need to corroborate your documents. That means bringing the documents into “conversation” with each other. Since the documents in a DBQ don’t directly refer to each other, you have to use your intuition to see connections. This relates to a distinctive task about the DBQ: you need to organize the evidence from the documents into several categories or groups—usually at least three. The categories are sometimes stated or implied in the prompt, but you’ll often have to call on your knowledge of history and the content of the documents themselves to determine what categories (and how many) make sense. Please note that because you can use the same document multiple times, you often have flexibility in coming up with categories. You might choose to group the documents according to geography, or the social status of their authors, or the type of document, or what they say about the issue discussed in the question, or according to any number of other lines of connection.

In all of the American Voices and Thinking Like a Historian features in this book, the authors have included multiple primary sources that address the same or related topics, along with questions that allow you to bring the documents in conversation with each other just as you will for a DBQ. For example, in Chapter 5, the feature Thinking Like a Historian, “Beyond the Proclamation Line” includes six brief primary sources of the types that you might encounter on a DBQ that speak to life in “Indian country” between 1763 and 1776. Voices range from the crown’s superintendent for Indian affairs in the northern colonies, to a Baptist minister’s description of the trading communities of the Ohio Valley, to a list of grievances by a Delaware headman. Comparison is one of the Historical Thinking Skills identified for AP history exams, and it is often a task word in essay questions, so use the document features and questions in this book to practice the skills needed for the DBQ.

Finally, you have to draw on your outside knowledge. To do well, you need to position the DBQ documents within the broader context of the period, drawing on what you’ve learned from your textbook, from your teacher, and from any outside reading or research that you’ve done. Feel free to mention other sources that you may have encountered previously, especially if they offer a perspective that is missing or if the addition of outside sources helps to support your argument. In the “Beyond the Proclamation Line” feature, for example, if these were the sources provided for a DBQ, you would use the information in the textbook,

especially that in the section “The Problem of the West” on pages 163–166, to provide broader context for your answer.

Long-Essay Questions

Along with the DBQ, AP history exams contain other essay questions, called “thematic essays,” “free response questions,” or simply “long essays.” This type of essay question tests your ability to use information that you already know to answer a specific question that draws on one or more Historical Thinking Skills. Like the DBQ, essay questions have different task verbs that correspond to different Historical Thinking Skills. Three of the most common of these involve change and continuity, causation, and comparison.

Change and Continuity Questions For questions that focus on change over time, you will have to identify major changes and explain the significance of those changes—that is, why the changes matter—for the topic described in the prompt. You will also have to analyze *why* something changed. If the question prompt asks about both change and continuity, your thesis statement and the essay itself must clearly address both elements. A strong argument must do more than simply *identify* some continuities and changes. It has to *analyze* why both the continuities and changes existed and why they mattered. (The Making Connections questions that appear at the end of each chapter often ask you to analyze continuity and change over time, so they are good practice for this type of essay.) It’s a good idea to weigh the relative value of continuities and changes. In other words, do you perceive continuities to have been more powerful than changes on the topic addressed in the prompt, or vice versa? Why do you think so?

In terms of structure, avoid the temptation to organize your essay into two large paragraphs, one for continuities and one for changes. Instead, identify important topics or categories of comparison—governmental structure, immigration patterns, or gender relations—and use those topics as the body paragraphs. Then, in each body paragraph, address *both* continuities *and* changes, being clear to signal your transition from one to the other.

In the same way that identifying change is an easier Historical Thinking Skill than identifying continuity, change is also easier to write about than continuity. U.S. history narratives devote a lot of time to, say, how American Christianity changed as a result of the Great Awakening. So if you’re writing an essay about eighteenth-century religion, that information will

come to mind more quickly. After brief reflection, however, you'll realize that certain aspects of American Christianity did *not* change with the Great Awakening. Therefore, along with changes, you will want to identify several major continuities, such as Martin Luther's belief in the priesthood of all Christians or the influence of clergy. Then you will need to discuss why these were significant and suggest some reasons why they did not change.

Question prompts about change and continuity may not always be phrased in exactly those words. Often they might ask you to assess the impact of something (or someone) on something else, analyze the influence of something on something else, or analyze the extent to which something shaped something else. Thinking a bit about such questions, you can recognize that they are actually about change and continuity. To assess the impact or influence of A on B, you will need to decide what changed in B as a result of A. To write a good essay about this, you will also need to discuss what did *not* change, and why — in other words, continuities. For example, a question might ask you to assess the impact of World War I on U.S. culture and society in the 1920s and 1930s. You can see that this question is about change and continuity: what changed as a result of the war, and what did not change. As in the example of the Great Awakening, it is often easier to remember what changed than to recall what stayed the same, but a strong essay will consider both. A strong essay might also go beyond the direct impact of World War I to include broader cultural changes that relate more indirectly to the war. If you do this, however, be sure to relate everything you include to the prompt, and do not use the question as an opportunity for a "data dump" of everything you can think of about the 1920s and 1930s. Throwing in a lot of extraneous information to pad your answer will not improve it.

Causation Questions Questions about change, or about impact or influence, are also about causation, for any good answer will go beyond *what* happened to *why*. Asking *why* is at the heart of what historians — including the AP history text makers — mean by *analysis*. A quick way to see whether you have provided analysis in your answer is to see whether it includes the word *because*. There are many other ways to analyze, but most sentences containing the word *because* at least attempt to analyze something.

Some question prompts might also address causation directly, asking you to explain the reasons for something or analyze the causes for something. The historical causation chart on page xxxix will provide

you with a good way to structure your answer. Take a question about the causes of Columbus's voyages of exploration, for example. After your thesis statement that directly addresses the prompt of the question, you could begin with *large-scale processes* that developed over centuries. These might include trading networks through which Europeans became familiar with the products of Asia and Africa, such as spices, silk, and ivory; conflicts between Christianity and Islam, which had especially shaped Spanish culture in the many centuries when Christians fought Muslims for control of the Iberian peninsula; and improvements in ship design and navigational instruments. Then you could move to complex causes that were more immediate: the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, which disrupted old trade routes and lessened the direct access of Western Europeans to exotic luxuries; the aims of the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella to compete with Portugal in the race for direct access to spices and to continue the expansion of Christianity; the invention of the printing press, which allowed work by earlier geographers and travelers to be cheap and accessible to ship captains and merchants; and Columbus's personal ambition, desire for glory, and religious fervor.

If the question prompt is about consequences as well as causes, you can continue using the chart to discuss the many consequences of Columbus's voyages. Among these were *unintended consequences*, which begin with one that seems almost too obvious: Columbus's voyages made Europeans aware that there were large landmasses in the world other than the ones they already knew about. (This is what we mean by "discovering" — becoming aware of something that is already there.) As you probably know, at first Columbus did not recognize what he had discovered, and even after he did, he spent most of his efforts trying to get around these new lands to reach Asia, his intended destination. Although Columbus claimed the lands that he explored for Spain, he (and the Spanish monarchs who backed him) was primarily looking for trade connections, not lands to conquer. So you might even choose to argue that colonization was an unintended consequence. Beyond this are a range of changes that were truly unintended, such as the widespread exchange of animals, plants, human populations, and diseases across the Atlantic in both directions, later called the "Columbian Exchange."

Again depending on the exact question prompt, you might also want to discuss *contingency*, the fact that things might have turned out differently. One of the most common problems in analyzing cause and effect in the past is that we know the outcome, or at

least the outcome up to now. It is thus very tempting to view developments *teleologically*, that is, as leading inevitably to the outcome that we know happened. Immediately after a game is over, for example, commentators often explain why the team that won was destined to win, although if the other team had won, they would have a ready explanation for that as well. Immediately after an election, the loser's strategy is analyzed as faulty and misguided, although if the results had been different, the same strategy would have been praised as brilliant. In this example, all large-scale processes and long- and short-term causes seem to lead to Columbus. It is easy to imagine the story turning out differently, however. An Aztec conquest of Europe would not have been a possibility, but Columbus's ships could have easily sunk on the first voyage. Or Ferdinand and Isabella could have said no. Or John Cabot—like Columbus, an Italian trying to get backing for voyages from a Western European monarch—could have moved to England slightly earlier than he did and convinced Henry VII of England to support him in 1490 instead of 1496. Not every question about causation will lend itself to thinking about possible alternate scenarios so easily, but in every one there are some lines of causation that are coincidental.

Comparison Questions Another Historical Thinking Skill often involved in essay questions is comparison, with questions that might be phrased “compare and contrast . . .” or “analyze similarities and differences . . .” Your thesis statement should focus on major similarities and differences, but it cannot simply be “there were similarities and differences in A and B.” Instead it must include some information about *how* A and B were similar or different. When you place two presidents, two ways of thinking, or two revolutions side by side, what do you notice? How are they similar? How are they different? One good way to structure the thesis for a comparative question is: Although A and B were different in C, they were similar in D.

Once you move beyond the most basic level of identifying broad similarities and differences, you need to be more precise. You should begin by teasing out both categories in more detail, providing specific evidence to support your broad generalizations. For example, in broad terms the American, French, and Haitian revolutions all included demands for liberty and equality, and all of them significantly expanded citizenship rights. In all three these rights were limited to men, another similarity among them. But only in the Haitian Revolution, when a massive revolt ended slavery and won Haiti's independence from France,

were those rights extended to men of African descent. Just as with change and continuity, it's often worthwhile to indicate whether you think similarities are more significant than differences, or vice versa, and why.

You need to be careful about the structure of this essay. Many students fall into the trap of simply describing topic 1 in a body paragraph and topic 2 in a separate body paragraph. They assume that readers will be able to recognize the similarities and differences between the two topics on their own. But you'll never earn a high score that way.

After your introductory paragraph and thesis statement, always begin each body paragraph with a topic sentence that introduces the category or topic you want to compare. Your comparisons need to be explicit and concrete. Be sure to use clear signal words that identify that you are shifting from similarity to difference (“Despite these similarities during times of financial crisis, the two presidents differed dramatically.”) In the contrast portion of your essay, be clear about the particular difference, making use of contrast words such as *conversely*, *unlike*, and *however* to signal your point to the reader.

In brainstorming similarities, try to step back and think in more abstract conceptual terms so you don't miss deep similarities that seem different on the surface. For example, students sometimes say that a king is different from an emperor, because they focus on the different titles. But both are hereditary monarchs typically viewed as having divine authority to rule. That makes them very similar in deep ways, despite the different labels. They are much more similar to each other than they are to, say, a democracy or a communist regime.

Students sometimes wonder whether the first body paragraph should focus on similarities or differences. One approach is to deal with the less significant topic first, get it out of the way, and then move on to the more significant topic. But that is really a matter of taste. What *is* important is that you provide a clear transition when you move from the compare to the contrast portion of your essay (or vice versa): “These similarities [that you've just discussed], however, were much less crucial than differences in *x*, *y*, and *z*.” If this sounds like a repeat of your thesis statement, that's because it is. In the body of your essay, you want to echo the road map, your thesis, to help your reader know that you are now making the transition that your introductory paragraph said you would be making.

You might be thinking that the suggestions here about answering comparative questions sound similar to those about answering change-over-time questions,

and you would be absolutely right. Embedded (and not very deeply) in change-over-time questions are comparisons, for the only way that you can identify something as a change or continuity, or assess the impact of something on something else, is to compare them. To transform these comparisons into analysis, you will need to provide relevant historical evidence, contextualize the developments you are discussing, and evaluate causes and effects. As we have said all along, all of the Historical Thinking Skills are related, which is why the final thinking skill is synthesis: “the ability to arrive at meaningful and persuasive understandings of the past by applying all of the other Historical Thinking Skills.”*

Many students feel anxious about having to write the AP history essays. But once you become familiar with the elements of each prompt and know how to address them effectively, you’ll realize that there’s no reason to be stressed. In fact, you should feel confident as you approach the writing portion of the test. Unlike the multiple-choice portion of the AP exam, the essay section gives you a lot of freedom to demonstrate what you know in an open-ended way. And if you’ve been thinking historically, reading the text with that lens, and sharing your ideas in class, you may begin to look forward to an opportunity to show just how developed your Historical Thinking Skills are.

*<http://advancesinap.collegeboard.org/historical-thinking>