

AP United States History Themes

I. Identity

This theme focuses on the formation of both American national identity and group identities in U.S. history. Students should be able to explain how various identities, cultures, and values have been preserved or changed in different contexts of U.S. history, with special attention given to the formation of gender, class, racial, and ethnic identities. Students should be able to explain how these subidentities have interacted with each other and with larger conceptions of American national identity.

Overarching questions:

1. How and why have debates over American national identity changed over time?
2. How have gender, class, ethnic, religious, regional, and other group identities changed in different eras?

II. Work, Exchange, and Technology

This theme focuses on the development of American economies based on agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing. Students should examine ways that different economic and labor systems, technological innovations and government policies have shaped American society. Students should explore the lives of working people and the relationships among social classes, racial and ethnic groups, and men and women, including the availability of land and labor, national and international economic developments, and the role of government support and regulation.

Overarching questions:

1. How have changes in markets, transportation, and technology affected American society from colonial times to the present day?
2. Why have different labor systems developed in British North America and the United States, and how have they affected U.S. society.
3. How have debates over economic values and the role of the government in the U.S. economy affected politics, society, the economy, and the environment?

III. Peopling

This theme focuses on why and how the various people who moved to, from, and within the United States adapted to their new social and physical environments. Students examine migration across borders and long distances, including the slave trade and internal migration, and how both newcomers and indigenous inhabitants transformed North America. The theme also illustrates how people responded when “borders crossed them.” Students explore the idea, beliefs, traditions, technologies, religions, and gender roles that migrants/immigrants and annexed peoples brought with them and the impact these factors had on both these peoples and on U.S. society.

Overarching questions:

1. Why have people migrated to, from, and within North America?
2. How have changes in migration and population patterns affected American life?

IV. Politics and Power

Students should examine ongoing debates over the role of the states in society and its potential as an active agent for change. This includes mechanisms for creating, implementing, or limiting participation in the political process and the resulting social effects, as well as the changing relationships among the branches of the federal governments and among national, state, and local governments. Students should trace efforts to define or gain access to individual rights and citizenship and survey the evolutions of tensions between liberty and authority in different period of U. S. history.

Overarching questions:

1. How and why have different political and social groups competed for influence over society and government in what would become the United States?
2. How have Americans agreed on or argued over the values that guide the political system as well as who is a part of the political process?

V. America in the World

In this theme, students should focus on the global context in which the United States originated and developed as well as the influence of the United States on world affairs. Students should examine how various world actors (such as people, states, organizations, and companies) have competed for the territory and resources of the North American continent, influencing the development of both American and world societies and economies. Students should also investigate how American foreign policies and military actions have affected the rest of the world as well as social issues within the United States itself.

Overarching questions:

1. How have events in North America and the United States related to contemporary developments in the rest of the world?
2. How have different factors influenced U.S. military, diplomatic, and economic involvement in international affairs and foreign conflicts, both in North American and overseas?

VI. Environment and Geography- Physical and Human

This theme examines the role of environment, geography, and climate in both constraining and shaping human actions. Students should analyze the interaction between the environment and Americans in their efforts to survive and thrive. Students should also explore efforts to interpret, preserve, manage, or exploit natural and man-made environments, as well as the historical contexts within which interactions with the environment have taken place.

Overarching questions:

1. How did interactions with the natural environment shape the institutions and values of various groups living on the North American continent?
2. How did economic and demographic changes affect the environment and lead to debates over use and control of the environment and natural resources?

VII. Ideas, Beliefs, and Culture

This theme explores the roles that ideas, beliefs, social mores, and creative expression have played in shaping the United States. Students should examine the development of aesthetic, moral, religious, scientific, and philosophical principles and consider how these principles have affected individual and group actions. Students should analyze the interactions between beliefs and communities, economic values, and political movements, including attempts to change American society to align it with specific ideals.

Overarching questions:

1. How and why have moral, philosophical, and cultural values changes in what would become the United States?
2. How and why have changes in moral, philosophical, and cultural values affected U.S. history?