

The Ultimate List of AP US History Tips

Tackling the AP US History exam is a tough undertaking. There is a ton of information to be learned, many skills to master, and not a lot of time to do it all. But you absolutely can do it! And we want to help you through these easy to use study tips!

AP US History DBQ and Free Response Tips

1. Answer the question. If I could only give you one piece of advice for your essay questions, it would be just to answer it. You will probably have this said to you over and over again, and you are probably already tired of hearing it. But the reason people say it so much is because students tend not to do it! It doesn't matter if you have the best-written paper of all time, or include a ton of history facts, if you don't answer the question; you aren't going to get all the points. Before you start outlining your answer or reading through documents, make sure you know what the question is really asking you.

2. Pay attention to the rubric. The number one priority of a DBQ or FRQ is answering the question. Aside from that, you need to know what the AP test is looking for in your answer. For a starting point, [check out our breakdown of the DBQ rubric here](#). Understanding this rubric gives you a mental checklist to work through as you write your response.

Writing an outline of your essay will result in a better answer. When you just write without planning ahead much, you might get to the last paragraph and realize that you have nothing left to say, or that none of your ideas flow together. If you just do a rough outline of your main points and supporting details, you will write a much more fluid paper that is easy to follow and stays on track.

3. Understand the documents. As you read through the documents, don't waste too much time analyzing every single detail and sentence. Instead of picking out every detail, read the documents for understanding. Highlight or underline important parts. At the end of the document, write a sentence or two explaining the main idea of the document and which side of the argument it supports. This will be handy for outlining your essay and seeing how the documents can be used as evidence.

4. Group the documents. This is something you want to do while reading the documents initially, when you are outlining your essay and when actually writing your essay. The test grader is going to be looking for your ability to do this. Most good essays will contain at least three main points, and you want to be sure that you have sources or evidence to support each of those points. For example, you might group documents based on whether they are related to the political, social, or economic side of a question.

5. Use the documents. You want to make sure you use a lot of the documents, but don't force it. You can get the highest score possible by using most of the available evidence. Just use the sources in a way that naturally supports your argument. Don't simply throw the documents in randomly just to check it off the list.

6. Don't "data dump." One of the key parts of the rubric is that you need to bring in outside information and evidence to support your answer. However, don't overload the reader with unnecessary information that doesn't really fit the context. Just because you know the date of Abraham Lincoln's assassination does not mean you need to throw that into an essay about the first Great Awakening.

7. Go specific. For your free response question choices, choose the topic that is most specific instead of something broad. The broadest topic seems appealing because you think you know a lot about it, but it can actually be really tough to formulate a good thesis because it is so broad. The specific question is more likely to

create a solid detailed answer. It makes it easier to **answer the question**, which we already know is incredibly important.

8. Find the right voice. Your voice. This can be tricky, because it is all about finding a balance between too formal and too personal. You don't want to write like a robot, stating only facts and not expressing any hints of personality, but you also don't want it to be like a letter to a friend. Avoid "I" and "you" statements. Basically, don't be afraid to be yourself in your answer; it just needs to be a very well-spoken version of yourself.

9. Take a stand. Writing for historical purposes is about making an argument and supporting that argument well. When you are writing, it can be easy to just explain both sides of an argument and nothing else. All that does is show your ability to reword information. The essay section of the test wants to know how well you can synthesize lots of information into one cohesive argument. In order to do that, you have to actually take a side. Don't be biased or make unreasonable claims. Just use the evidence to support a specific claim that is rooted in facts. Got it?

AP US History Multiple Choice Tips

1. Read the question and answers all the way through. This is a super basic test-taking tip, but it's still worth mentioning here. Don't fall into the trap of reading the question partially and jumping to conclusions, or picking the first question that seems right. There are 55 source-based multiple choice questions and 55 minutes to do them, so you have a minute per question. This is enough time to carefully read the question and each answer choice, and consider the best option.

2. Cross out obviously wrong answers. No matter what, you should know that Theodore Roosevelt did not sign the Declaration of Independence. Immediately cross his name off the list of answer choices. This is beneficial because it brings you one step closer to the right answer, and it tells your brain that you are doing something. It is a good way to build confidence, which is going to help you score much higher.

3. Use context clues. If you are unsure of an answer, just try to approach it from a logical perspective. You may not know the exact date of a certain event, but when you put that event in context of other events that you do know the dates for, it can definitely help you narrow down your choices. When you think of history as a giant puzzle that you are trying to put together, you can use all the pieces you do know to try and figure out the piece that you don't know.

4. Use questions to give you answers. You can learn a lot just from reading the questions. You may not directly get the answer to a question from other questions, but it can certainly give you more information and put you one step closer to the correct answer. You will almost always be able to walk away from the test knowing more than you did before. Also, keep the multiple-choice questions in mind as you write your free response and DBQ essays. You can also just try to think logically about it. Sometimes it works out that if the answer to question 3 is C, then the answer to question 6 has to be D.

5. Take a guess. Losing points for incorrect answers is a thing of the past so you might as well take a stab at the ones you don't know. Obviously, you want to take your best guess and use all of the skills and techniques you can to narrow down the possible correct answers. But if you get to the point where you really just don't know, just give it your best shot. As Wayne Gretzky said, "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take."

6. Pace yourself. Definitely read the question and answers carefully, but don't spend too much time getting hung up on one particular question. If you read it, don't know it, and can't figure it out, move on. It is much better to finish the test and answer all of the questions that you do know than to get stuck on a question early on and not have time to answer all the latter questions. Like I mentioned earlier, you have less than a minute per question, so use your time wisely.

7. Answer the right question. It might seem silly, but when you are answering 80 questions at a time it can be really easy to get mixed up on your answer sheet. Don't accidentally skip a question and get to the end wondering what you did wrong. Sometimes you just get into a flow and stop paying attention to which bubble you are filling in.

8. Pay attention to wording. Skimming over a question can sometimes cause you to totally misinterpret said question. Don't do that. Make sure that you know if the question is asking "Which of the following IS..." or "Which of the following IS NOT..." That is a huge difference and is going to make for two very different answers. This is such a common and easy mistake to make.

9. Practice! Practice makes perfect, right? But seriously, there are a ton of resources out there for you to practice your AP test taking skills. This will give you a much better idea of what to look for in multiple-choice questions and can guide you in your studying.

10. Use flash cards. Using flash cards is a great way to consistently study and practice. Lucky for you, we even have a [guide to making great AP US History flash cards](#). This is especially helpful for studying for the multiple choice section because you can write the information on flash cards in a question form, or use old questions to make your flash cards. They are also really great for last minute or speedy study sessions, because you can cover a large amount of material in a short amount of time.

General AP US History Study Tips

1. Start early. We aren't your parents, and we aren't going to nag you about doing your homework. But it is absolutely so important that you get an early start on your APUSH review. There is a lot of information to learn, but it is only daunting if you are trying to learn it all in one night. Get out ahead of the game and start chipping away at it. You will be able to spend more time on each idea and will actually learn and remember the things you are studying. When you frantically cram for an exam, you usually only remember the stuff for that day.

2. Outline the course. The wonderful people over at AP CollegeBoard have provided a [breakdown of the entire AP US History course](#). This is such a good place to start, because it breaks the course into nine different periods, ranging from 1491-present. These pre-set periods make it super easy for you to study chunks of history at a time. A really helpful thing when outlining the course is to write a paragraph summary of each section and then explain how each time period transitioned into the next. This helps you establish some continuity in your thinking.

3. Use a giant whiteboard. This is one of my favorite study tips for almost any type of course. Whiteboards allow you to think about things on a big picture scale. Flow charts outlining the transitions between time periods are super helpful. Also, when you use a whiteboard to diagram historical ideas, those ideas become ingrained in your visual, as well as auditory memory. It's crazy how much having a visual representation of something can help it stick in your mind.

4. Study with friends. This is a pretty dangerous game, because friends can sometimes be the biggest distraction from studying. But if you do it right, they can also be a huge help! Being able to talk about ideas helps you better understand them. And if there is a part of history that you are just really struggling with, chances are you have a friend who is pretty knowledgeable about it. Using the whiteboard technique or a course outline can be very effective when studying with friends. Just be sure to pick your friends wisely and don't waste your time together watching funny cat videos on YouTube.

5. Get a review book. A review book is one of the most helpful study tools out there. They usually have a pretty comprehensive overview of course material and break down the information in an understandable way. Most are broken into chapters with summaries and review questions at the end of each one. Another great

feature of review books is that they usually include test taking strategies or techniques to help you succeed. They also, typically, have practice tests included to put those techniques to good use.

6. Create a study game. No matter how interesting (or boring) you may think APUSH is, studying any type of material for a long time can grow very tiresome. Sometimes, you just need to mix things up and making a game out of it is a good way to do so. A lot of people do Jeopardy style review for history. I prefer to do some kind of weird punishment or wager with friends. For example, we will go through asking each other various questions and for every question one of us gets wrong we have to do three push ups. Or we win a couple of skittles for each correct answer. Whatever it takes to mix things up.

7. Ask your teacher for help! Once again, probably not a piece of advice that you really want to hear, but it is a good thing to do. Your teacher is teaching the class for a reason, and they are probably not only super knowledgeable, but also passionate. Most teachers would be thrilled to give you an extra hand or piece of advice. They are such an untapped resource that students generally don't take advantage of. If they offer any kind of after school help or study hours, take the opportunity! It certainly isn't going to hurt, and if anything else, it's always great to be in good graces with your teacher.

8. Watch extra review videos. Crash Course, a YouTube channel, has a series of [47 videos dedicated to helping you understand US History](#). They are each anywhere between 10-15 minutes long and are great ways to learn. They are quick and entertaining, but also incredibly informative. They can serve as a great introduction to a topic or a good summary after you have finished reviewing it. And there are many more videos like these out there. Aside from helping you learn actual information from the course, there are also a lot of videos to help with test taking strategies. Tom Richey has created a great AP US History review page [here](#).

9. Look at practice questions. Seriously, there are so many resources out there to help you succeed. One of those is a [compilation of AP US History sample questions](#). This 16-page document features not only realistic AP test questions, but also answers and explanations for each one. They even tell you which "Historical Thinking Skills" and key concepts are being tested. This is really an efficient way to become familiar with AP style questions and to see which material you are struggling with. You can also simply do a Google search for APUSH test questions and find a ton to work with.

10. Make a timeline. This kind of goes along with making a course outline, but this is more about testing yourself than using the course description. Take key events, without looking at their dates, and try to put them in order. Some people use a whiteboard for this or just try to organize flash cards. Basically this is just a good way of seeing how things fit together. As you make the timeline, try to pay attention to the sequence of events, or any cause and effect relationships that may be at play.

11. Figure out your greatest weakness. A great way to do this is through practice tests. A lot of practice tests online will show you which areas you need to learn the most in. Use these areas as a starting point and work from there. You don't want to waste a lot of time focusing on the areas that you are already familiar with. Be smart about your time management.

12. Think about things thematically. This is one of the main historical skills that you are tested on. Encompassed in the testing of themes is the analysis of change over time. These go hand in hand as you think about the way that certain themes evolve through history. For example, you need to be able to explain how the economy of the US has changed over the years, or think about America's evolving philosophy on foreign affairs.

Tips from the Pros: Teachers and Former Students

1. Pay attention in class! AP US History is a course that is usually pretty heavy on the lecture side. You won't be able to rely on worksheets or handouts to get by in class. Instead, you will have to pay attention to what the teacher says and take great notes. Even if you don't think you'll ever look at your notes again, it is still worth writing things down because the act of writing actually helps you remember.

2. Take part in class discussion. The ultimate way to know that you are fully engaged in class is to be part of a class discussion. Teachers usually mix these in with lectures, and it is so important to be involved. It shows the teacher that you care, and it shows a good study ethic. But also, when you get involved and contribute to discussion, those ideas that you discussed will stick out in your mind. The best way to learn something is by being a part of something.

3. Keep up with your assigned reading. Chances are, your teacher has a lot of reading for you to do throughout the year. There might not always be quizzes on the reading, but it is SO important that you do it. There is no way you can always catch up on an entire year's worth of AP US History reading, so it is essential to stay on top of things.

4. Do it for the college credit. Sticking with an AP class throughout the year can be pretty tough, but it is absolutely worth it when you get your passing score. It's impossible to understand how great it is to have college credit when you start; but let me tell you, it's awesome! College isn't cheap these days and any extra help you can get is worth it. AP US History can usually get you out of at least one General Education History requirement. That's one less class you have to take, and one step closer to graduation. Let that be your motivation!

5. Show up to everything extra. Teachers are usually willing to take time out of their busy schedules to do some extra review or give you some more tips. Take them all up! It might not seem like the most fun to spend your free time learning about AP US History, but I promise, it is worth it. It is a great way to consistently study and stay up to speed.

6. You can never practice writing too much. The DBQ and FRQ are pretty consistent topics of concern among APUSH students, and for a good reason. They can be pretty tough, and are usually obstacles between students and the grade they want. One of the hardest parts about this section is that, it just takes a really long time to be writing. Your hand will start to get tired, and you will slowly feel your brain turn to mush as you go. You have to build up a certain kind of stamina for writing long essays, and you can only do that by practicing. There is no shortage of practice questions, and classmates or teachers are usually willing to grade them for you.

7. Start reading your review books early. Lots of students have nightmarish tales of rushing through their review books in the last couple of weeks leading up to the exam. It's doable, but it sure isn't fun. Review books are crucial to passing the test, so make sure you actually have enough time to dedicate to actually reading it. This will make your studies a lot less overwhelming. If you need help choosing one, make sure you check out our guide to the [best AP US History review books of 2015](#).

8. Try to have some fun. It may not sound like the most fun, but APUSH really can be. Or at least you can try to make it be fun. Chances are, you don't plan on dropping the class, and so if you are going to stick it out, you might as well try to make it an enjoyable experience. It can actually be pretty fun learning about the historical events that made America what it is today. If anything else, think of it as a chance to make some new friends while learning some new skills. Oh, and if you pay attention, AP US History might even make you a little better at Trivia Crack and show off for your friends.

9. Always ask, "Why do we care?" Students are conditioned to focus on names and dates as opposed to causes and results; "Why" gets them to start thinking in depth.

10. Support every claim with evidence. My favorite “catch phrase” is... “Evidence please....” Everyone has a theory in APUSH... Who has the evidence to back up their theory?

11. Think like a test maker and not a test taker. Think about what the AP question writer might have been looking to test you on when answering each question. Understanding this is key to knowing how to answer the question.

The Send Off

If you made it to this point in the article, good job. You are already on your way to being ready for your APUSH exam. Work hard, use some of our helpful tips and ideas, and you are going to crush it.