

AP Reasoning Processes

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

1. **Comparison**
2. **Causation**
3. **Continuity and Change**

Reasoning Process 1: Comparison

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

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

Reasoning Process 2: Causation

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

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

Reasoning Process 3: Continuity and Change

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

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

You will also be asked to craft historical Arguments from historical evidence

1. Argumentation

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

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

2. Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence

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

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