



AMERICA: THE LAST BEST HOPE

“How do you know that your students are ready for the AP US History Exam?”

First of all, learning US History and doing well on the AP US History Exam are not always one and the same. For instance, students who earned high grades and had the knowledge and skills to do well on the exam sometimes don't pass the exam. Some students struggle with taking standardized tests in general and therefore have a hard time with AP exams, SATs, etc. Others have a “bad day” on exam day and just don't perform up to their ability. Finally, some students were distracted by other situations such as competing in athletic events. As a result, these students didn't pass the exam despite having the knowledge and skills to do so. In some cases, these same students may excel later in college level US History course thanks to their work in AP US History. On the other hand, some struggling students do better on the AP exam than expected due to favorable essay topics and/or potential better answers on multiple choice questions. Thus, it is hard to measure all knowledge and skill with one test, which makes it hard to know for sure if a student is “ready for the AP US History Exam.” Nevertheless, there are some clues for teachers to know if students are headed in the right direction.

Early in the year it's important to determine whether or not our students are keeping pace with their reading and homework. Despite the fact that AP US History is a “college-level” course, a good practice is for AP US History students to complete reading logs and do worksheets which are checked by the teachers on a regular basis. These formative assessments help gauge student progress and assess how “on track” they really are. If students aren't doing the assignments, teachers should take time to talk to students individually about their progress. In addition, it can affect their grade. Other teachers might give regular quizzes or tests. Students need to build good habits and a strong knowledge base early in the year, so teachers need to check on them and encourage them to do their work.

It is important to expose students to the various parts of the AP Exam as early as possible so that the exam structure isn't what keeps them from succeeding. Teachers can work on individual aspects of the exam with the students early in the school year. An added benefit of going through the exam early in the year is that students understand the importance of reading primary source documents on a regular basis, taking timed tests and answering multiple-multiple choice questions.

Since teachers should address a wide range of material throughout the year, it's important to give tests and assignments that determine how well they are processing and retaining the important information. For instance, giving a cumulative semester final is an effective way to determine what students learned during the first semester.



AMERICA: THE LAST BEST HOPE

Their scores on a cumulative semester final can also help determine what information needs to be reviewed during the second semester. Since there is so much information to learn in AP US History, students can get confused about dates and events. Therefore, teaching with timelines and/or assigning timeline projects helps students organize of the information they are learning.

A good way to expose students to the AP Exam and test for knowledge acquisition is to give regular AP US History Practice Exams. There are samples of these exams on the College Board AP US History website and in various AP US History review books. Since the goal is for the students to improve from test to test, it is imperative to review after as many practice exams as possible to ensure that the students are learning from the tests. If the tests are fairly uniform and are given on a regular basis, student scores on these tests could also serve as an indicator of whether or not the student is “on the right track.” Hopefully, throughout the year, the students will show an up-ward trend in their scores on the AP US History Practice Exams.

It is important for students to write essays in order to prepare for the three essays that they need to write on the AP US History Exam. Essays need a strong thesis, clear organization and solid connections between the thesis statement and the evidence. The College Board AP US History website has essay prompts and samples. As teachers assign these essays, it is important to check to see if students know the basics about how to write a thesis, how to organize the introduction and how to use evidence and analysis to support the thesis. Initially, some students might struggle with the structure (depending on their previous preparation) but you should see improvement from quarter to quarter. The improvement in essay construction and analysis (or lack thereof) is another factor to consider when determining if the students are making progress toward being ready for the AP US History Exam.

As it gets closer to the AP exam, teachers can consider the following to gauge student preparedness for the AP US History Exam.

- How are they doing with their regular reading and homework?
- Are their AP US History Practice Exam scores improving?
- How organized and informative are their essays?

In addition, basic information like quiz scores, discussion results and general student confidence can serve to inform our conclusion about student progress.

Finally, even if students are not making enough progress, there are things that can remedy the situation. Teachers can do more review sessions both during class and after school, vary instruction to emphasize need areas, and encourage students to work with one another to help prepare for the exam.



AMERICA: THE LAST BEST HOPE

Ultimately, teaching an AP class isn't that much different than teaching a regular class. There are some specific facts and information that we have to learn in order to understand the AP US History Exam and there is a great deal of content to address but successful teaching techniques and constant monitoring will help determine how students are progressing and what is needed to help them improve.