

ALABAMA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

A-

SCORES

Content and Rigor **6/7**
Clarity and Specificity **3/3**

TOTAL SCORE

9/10

Overview

Despite some gaps in content or detail and occasional thematic departures from chronology, Alabama’s U.S. history standards offer a rigorous and thorough overview of American history. In addition, the state’s decision to offer a full two-year U.S. history course at both the elementary and high school levels demonstrates an impressive commitment to history education.

Goals and Organization

Alabama’s social studies standards are presented in a single, coherent document. While the state does identify four strands—economics, geography, history, and political science—grade-by-grade standards are presented in a straightforward, chronological outline. Numbered chronological and thematic headings are supplied with content expectations in bullet-point form. Related content is woven together rather than arbitrarily split into strand-based thematic blocks; checkboxes next to each numbered heading indicate which strands are relevant to that heading’s content. Local history is also integrated with American history at most grade levels: An Alabama icon indicates content expectations relevant to state history.

Kindergarten through third grade introduce basic concepts of chronology, distinctions between past and present, prominent American and Alabaman symbols and holidays, along with basic ideas of civics and government. Fourth grade focuses on Alabama history and geography.

Serious study of American history is introduced with a two-year course in fifth grade (to 1877) and sixth grade (1877 to the present). American history resumes with a second two-year course in tenth grade (again to 1877, though pre-settlement Native American cultures, covered in fifth grade, are omitted) and eleventh grade (1877 to the present). These are complemented by a twelfth-grade U.S. government course.

Evaluation

Alabama’s social studies standards stress a thorough and rigorous progression of important historical content, starting in the early grades. Historical knowledge is consistently emphasized as a crucial basis for informed citizenship.

As in many states, Kindergarten focuses on community, but content grows more specific and advanced at each grade level. Second grade introduces the lives of famous historical individuals; fourth grade offers an unusually detailed local history curriculum for this age level—one that deals directly with slavery, secession, Jim Crow, and civil rights.

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies, U.S. history segments (2004)

Accessed from:

<http://www.alsde.edu/html/sections/documents.asp?section=54&sort=5&footer=sections>

The first U.S. history course, in fifth and sixth grades, provides an admirable degree of specificity. The fifth-grade standards are particularly strong. They begin with prehistoric migrations and Native American cultures, move to European exploration—its motives, actors, and patrons—and early settlements; key colonial leaders, regions, crops, and religious differences; the rise of representative assemblies and town meetings; and the rise of slavery and the use of indentured servants. The standards also cover the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary period with commendable specificity. For instance, students are to consider “efforts to mobilize support for the American Revolution by the Minutemen, Committees of Correspondence, First Continental Congress, Sons of Liberty, boycotts, and the Second Continental Congress.” Material on the American system of government is integrated, not split into a separate “civics” segment. The early nineteenth century is, unfortunately, far more rushed—yet the decisive role of slavery in the coming of the Civil War is candidly acknowledged.

The sixth-grade course is, regrettably, somewhat patchier than the fifth-grade course, jumping from post-Civil War westward expansion to the Spanish American War and the Panama Canal, Progressivism, and then World War I; a single segment then deals with “cultural and economic developments in the society of the United States from 1877 through the 1930s.” But the roots and results of the Great Depression are dealt with thoroughly, as are the causes and effects of World War II; post-war events are summarized succinctly but intelligently, touching on most key points. Despite some gaps in detail, on balance these are solid content guidelines for primary grades.

When U.S. history resumes with the *second* two-year course, in tenth and eleventh grades, the standards commendably seek to “build upon the foundation students gained in the study of the United States in Grades 5 and 6.” All of American history is again covered, with greater sophistication and depth—although, as noted, pre-settlement cultures, covered in fifth grade, are omitted. Early sections again cover the expansionist and mercantile conflicts among European powers, the complex motives which led to the establishment of the colonies, the introduction of slavery in the early seventeenth century, and escalating tensions between local colonial governments and Great Britain. The major weakness is a lack of explanatory detail; major issues are generally pointed out, but not always explicated. For instance, students are to describe “tensions that developed between the colonists and their local governments and between the colonists and Great Britain” and “reasons for American victory in the American Revolution”—but no examples are given. Nonetheless, key issues are frequently outlined admirably—the rise of representative institutions, the evolution of chattel slavery, the Great Awakening, and the importance of the French and Indian War, to name a few. For

such issues, teachers may have to supply further details from other sources.

Chronology and specificity break down somewhat following the Articles of Confederation and Constitution. The 1790s—including the rise of the party system—and the election of 1800 are glossed over in a single sentence; Supreme Court decisions from *Marbury v. Madison* to *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* and lumped together with inadequate explanation; foreign relations “from 1781 to 1823” are compressed, hardly mentioning the War of 1812 (which received serious attention in fifth grade). But focus returns with abolitionism, sectionalism, the coming of the Civil War, and Reconstruction—again, slavery and its aftermath are dealt with openly and honestly. The course makes no effort to either glorify or conceal the role of Alabama in the antebellum period.

The eleventh-grade course discusses the post-Civil War shift away from agrarianism. Progressivism is treated in particular detail, followed by American imperialism, World War I, and the 1920s. Detail remains uneven, though; for example, coverage of the Spanish American War is better than in most states, yet a directive to explain “major events of World War I” is decidedly thin. The roots of the 1929 economic collapse are well covered, yet the section on New Deal programs oddly omits the WPA—which *did* appear in the sixth-grade materials. The roots of World War II, apart from isolationism, are given short shrift, though the war’s impact is better handled. The post-war period is again somewhat rushed and disorganized. The roots of the Cold War are briefly but reasonably summarized, and linked to the rise of McCarthyism. Most post-war subjects are covered quickly and generally but the civil rights movement receives admirably detailed coverage. An exceedingly short final unit covers the entire period from Nixon to the present, though it cites a fair number of specifics (Watergate, Reagan’s Berlin Wall speech, Clinton’s impeachment, NAFTA, and the September 11 attacks).

Teachers should be wary of the emphasis in the standards’ introductory material on “current technology such as interactive digital video software and Internet sources that allow students to explore historical topics and interpretations more extensively than in the past.” Much of the historical material on the Internet is not accurate, reliable, or impartial.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Despite some substantive gaps and breaks in chronological presentation, Alabama’s standards provide solid content and guidance for teachers and students. The standards prioritize important content, and rigor increases appropriately throughout the grade levels. In addition, Alabama’s decision to “weave” the various social studies “strands” together, rather than split

related content into arbitrary thematic units, appropriately elevates historical content over social studies theory.

Finally, Alabama's decision to require *two* two-year courses on American history—including a full course in high school, when students have achieved considerable sophistication—shows an unusual and admirable commitment to American history education. Taken together, these standards give teachers and students substantial tools with which to build solid history education, and earn a six out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Alabama's standards document is admirably clear and straightforward. Despite some shortcomings, the level of detail increases appropriately as students move from the elementary to high school courses, providing teachers and students with clear guidance as to what is expected at each successive grade level. The introductory materials contain some social studies jargon and theory, but they generally do not dilute substance. Any problem is more than offset by the specifics and coherence of the historical material and the clarity with which it is presented. Teachers, parents, and students can read this document and understand what is expected of school-aged children. As such, the standards earn a perfect three out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)