

ARKANSAS • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

D

SCORES

Content and Rigor **3/7**
Clarity and Specificity **1/3**

TOTAL SCORE

4/10

Overview

Arkansas's standards outline some essential U.S. history content, but significant gaps and a confusing thematic arrangement undermine any sense of chronological coherence or historical development.

Goals and Organization

Arkansas's K–8 social studies framework is divided into four overarching strands: geography, civics, history, and economics. Each strand is then broken into “standards.” The K–8 history strand's single standard (also labeled “history”) is broken into thematic sub-units—continuity and change; conflict and consensus; movement; cultural diversity and uniformity; and regionalism and nationalism—each of which is then provided with broad grade-level content expectations.

A single document, titled *American History (United States History) Social Studies Curriculum Framework*, follows and is evidently meant for the high school level (though the document does not specify this). This course is divided into a series of chronological strands, as opposed to the K–8 subject strands. Each such chronological strand is then sub-divided into thematic standards, which provide course-specific content expectations.

From Kindergarten through third grade, the content expectations introduce national/state holidays and symbols—but these are repeated nearly verbatim in several grades, making year-by-year development unclear. Arkansas history is introduced in fourth grade. The fifth-grade materials are intended as an introduction to U.S. history though the American Revolution, with sixth grade picking up from there and continuing to the present. The content outline is, however, split among the purely thematic sub-headings described above, making it difficult to discern the chronological scope of each grade-level course.

The American History (United States History) course runs from pre-settlement to the present.

Evaluation

Little coherent development or causal understanding of history is possible in the confused, thematically organized morass of Arkansas's social studies standards.

Although generalities repeat from Kindergarten through third grade, specific historical references begin to appear in the fourth-grade Arkansas history course. The content expectations for fifth and sixth grades mention various issues, persons, and events in U.S. history—but teachers and students are given only decontextualized fragments rather than a coherent outline or overview. The content expectations are usually just brief

✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Social Studies Curriculum Framework, Grades K–8, U.S. history segments (2006)

Accessed from:

http://arkansased.org/educators/pdf/soc_studies_k-8_051308.pdf

American History (United States History) Social Studies Curriculum Framework (2006)

Accessed from:

http://arkansased.org/educators/pdf/amer_hist_2006.pdf

lists of events or issues with no context or explanation, or unhelpful directives to “understand” whole eras (e.g., “Explain the political viewpoints of *Patriots* and *Loyalists* during the Revolutionary period” [fifth grade]).

The fifth-grade history strand opens with the “continuity and change” sub-theme: This briefly mentions European exploration and colonization, the role of colonial legislatures and town meetings, important people and events in early Arkansas, the Industrial Revolution, and a string of random nineteenth-century names. (These start with Frederick Douglass—which is misspelled “Douglas”; elsewhere, *Plessy v. Ferguson* is misspelled “Plessey,” even as it is thrust together with *Brown v. Board of Education* in total disregard for chronology.) The next sub-theme, “conflict and consensus,” jumps back to European/Native American interaction, colonial settlement and leaders (with another list of scattered names), and the impact of slavery, before suddenly moving to the American Revolution. The “movement” section then skips back to the early colonies before abruptly leapfrogging to nineteenth-century expansion.

The same pattern holds for the other sub-themes, and also for the sixth-grade U.S. history course—which opens with Reconstruction, moves to twentieth-century technology, then to the Great Depression, back to the women’s suffrage movement, then on to the Allied/Axis powers, late twentieth-century technology, and the space program. After all of this, the next sub-theme jumps back to the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the Spanish American War, and so forth.

To make matters worse, the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, and Bill of Rights appear only under civics, not history.

Much is omitted altogether. Andrew Jackson and Jacksonian democracy are nowhere to be found. (The Trail of Tears does make it in under “movement,” though without any reference to Jackson or his era.) The Missouri Compromise is mentioned, but not the nullification crisis or the Compromise of 1850. Robert E. Lee appears, but not Jefferson Davis. The *Dred Scott* decision is covered, but not *Marbury v. Madison*.

The final U.S. history course—clearly, though not explicitly, aimed at the high school level—seems more promising at first glance. The introduction states that “American History (United States History) examines time periods from the first European explorations of the Americas to present day,” covering “political, military, scientific, economic, and social developments,” allowing students to “analyze and interpret a variety of historical resources and use primary and secondary sources, maps, and pictorial and graphic evidence of historical events.”

In reality, however, the framework’s historical outline is so basic—pushing quickly through what it terms the “Early United States” to Reconstruction, Industrialization, Populism, Imperialism, Progressivism, World in Conflict, and the Contemporary United States—that one could drive an eighteen-wheeler through its substantive gaps.

And, despite an overall chronological arrangement, the thematic sub-headings undermine chronological and historical logic. The Early United States strand is split into standards on migration patterns, government, and war. Thus early exploration and settlement are grouped with Manifest Destiny and nineteenth-century western expansion. Likewise, the American Revolution, Mexican War, and Civil War are thrust together into a single unit. This is historical nonsense; these wars were the products of vastly different issues and contexts and cannot be understood together simply because they were all wars. No details are provided about any of them. Students are simply told to evaluate the “political, social, geographic and economic... causes and effects” of each. The War of 1812 is not even included in the section, but instead appears in a short list of the consequences of Manifest Destiny under “migration patterns.”

Sadly, this chaotic disarray permeates the entire document. The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* segregation decision (now spelled correctly) is placed in the Reconstruction section rather than the segment on the late nineteenth century—indeed, it appears *before* the 1876 election and the Compromise of 1877. In the section on Progressivism, reform efforts are divorced from Populism and the workers’ movement—which are mentioned earlier in a section on industrialism. Incredibly, the women’s movement of the 1840s suddenly pops up amidst the Progressive reforms—lumped together with other women’s efforts leading up to the nineteenth amendment.

And again, much history is omitted. Andrew Jackson is still missing, as are any details about the Civil War—even Lincoln fails to appear. Later periods are better, but still full of holes. The section on World War II discusses domestic racial conflicts, yet fascism and Hitler are never mentioned. Indeed, *Europe* is never mentioned—nor is any specific event save Japanese internment and the release of the atomic bomb. McCarthyism is raised without discussing Communism. The civil rights movement is reduced to a mere list of minority groups. An item on “global conflicts” lumps together the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War.

The document’s fragmented coverage is highlighted by its glossary, a list of random terms that happen to be mentioned in the standards. Why “nativism,” but not “sectionalism”? Why Watergate, but not Teapot Dome? Why “Exodusters,” but

not “Carpetbaggers”? Why “Big Stick Diplomacy,” but not the Monroe Doctrine? Why the “Roosevelt Corollary,” but not the “Good Neighbor Policy”?

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Arkansas’s social studies standards are not entirely lacking in content; despite egregious gaps, a fair amount of historical material is at least mentioned. But its zealously thematic social studies methodology is inevitably scattershot and fragmented, ripping content out of context. Teachers and students are given scant guidance on historical development or the connections among events; there is neither helpful explanation, nor a coherent outline on which to structure a course. In light of its disorganization, Arkansas earns a three out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The same organizational failings that undermine the standards’ content and rigor weaken its clarity and specificity. The scope and coverage of content knowledge are inadequate, listing decontextualized shards of material without meaningful detail, connection, context, or explanation. Course sequence and final expectations, likewise, cannot be clear when the content is so randomly “organized”: The actual grade-by-grade sequence is barely spelled out. Arkansas therefore earns only a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)