

CALIFORNIA • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

A-

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

9/10

Overview

California's U.S. history standards focus squarely on *history* (not on social studies theory or methodology), emphasizing context, comprehension, and chronological coherence. Unfortunately, the state's otherwise excellent guidelines are weakened by the decision to offer U.S. history as a single chronological sequence split across fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades. This means that key aspects of early American history are only addressed in elementary school and never revisited with greater depth or sophistication in high school.

Goals and Organization

Following extensive introductory explanations of the state's educational goals, California's *History-Social Science Framework* offers detailed content outlines for every grade, K–12. Each grade-level section opens with its own ample introduction, summarizing the historical content to be covered in that year's curriculum, explaining key themes and ideas, and specifying texts that should be read and discussed in class. Each introduction is followed by a detailed historical outline for that year's course content; these outlines focus purely on historical facts and development, and *do not* divide content into thematic strands—although there is a separate U.S. government course in twelfth grade. (The outlines are also published separately as the *Content Standards*.)

From Kindergarten through third grade, basic concepts of chronology, change, context, and famous people are introduced; fourth grade focuses on California history.

As in a number of other states, California offers U.S. history as a once-through chronological sequence, divided over several grades. American history begins in fifth grade, covering the pre-Columbian era to 1789, briefly summarizing events up to 1850. The sequence resumes in eighth grade, exploring the period from 1789 to the late nineteenth century (following a short review of events preceding the founding of the nation). The American history curriculum concludes in eleventh grade, covering the period from 1900 to the present (following a brief review of the nation's beginnings through the industrial transformation of the late nineteenth century).

Evaluation

California has put a great deal of time, expertise, and resources into producing its U.S. history framework, showing admirable commitment to substance and content.

The 249-page standards document (which includes both U.S. and world history) provides teachers with meaningful guidance on the specific history that should be taught and

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED¹

History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade 12, U.S. history segments (2005)

Accessed from:

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/documents/histsocsciframe.pdf>

History-Social Science Content Standards, U.S. history segments (1998)

Accessed from:

<http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/histsocscistnd.pdf>

¹ California adopted draft 2010 history/social studies standards in July 2009. Later that month, the state suspended the adoption and implementation process of these new standards until the 2013–2014 school year. This long-delayed implementation raises serious questions about whether the new standards will ever be used—and whether they will be used in their current form. Thus, the established standards were reviewed here.

learned by twelfth grade. At the same time, the framework is built on a solid foundation of organizational assumptions.

The document explicitly aims to be “centered in the chronological study of history,” emphasizing “the importance of history as a story well-told.” It stresses the importance of studying major historical events and periods in proper depth; proposes a sequential curriculum in which knowledge and understanding are systematically built up; incorporates multicultural perspectives; encourages the development of civic and democratic values and the study of the principles in the Constitution and Bill of Rights; encourages teachers to present controversial issues honestly and accurately in historical context; acknowledges the importance of religion throughout human history; and encourages students to master critical thinking based on solid historical evidence.

There is, however, one significant flaw: the state’s decision to treat the U.S. history curriculum as a once-through sequence split over three grades. The capacity for historical understanding changes dramatically between fifth and eleventh grades. The early grades should not be treated as intellectually equivalent to high school, yet early American history is taught *only* in fifth grade. Despite limited recapitulation in the later grades, much of the substance of pre-1789 U.S. history is still taught only when children are too young to consider it with genuine sophistication.

Nonetheless, the framework’s historical content is frequently impressive. Throughout, the grade-level introductions—which are remarkably clear, solid, and free of jargon—lay out key interpretive themes and strategies for teaching each period. And unlike many other states, California recognizes that thematic interpretation requires solid chronological information. Thus, the introductory overviews are followed by factual outlines, laying out the actual historical data on which interpretation may be built.

The introductory material in fifth grade, for instance, encourages a balanced approach, noting the perspectives of different groups in colonial America (Europeans, Native Americans, Africans, etc.) without being tendentious or presentistic—that is, without judging the past through the lens of today’s values, standards, and norms. The English colonies are even explicitly identified as the essential core in the development of the United States—which is somewhat unusual these days.

Still, some selective omissions leave students with an incomplete picture of the way history unfolded. Students are told, for example, that African slaves were “stolen from their families,” without explaining that they were stolen by Africans

who sold them to Europeans and Americans—a distortion by omission that is, unfortunately, rather widespread.

In addition, the rigor of the standards is sometimes inappropriate to the grade level. It is suggested, for example, that students read excerpts from legal statutes and political speeches. Though these goals are praiseworthy in the abstract, it is unrealistic to expect most fifth graders to read and comprehend such complex texts.

The framework properly emphasizes the significance of American liberty rather than slavery, explaining that the inherent contradiction created new challenges to slavery during the Revolutionary period and after. Some all-too-often neglected events, key to the development of American democracy, are thus included, such as the writing of state constitutions, which embodied many Revolutionary ideas and served as models for the federal Constitution. Yet there are still important omissions. The otherwise sound introduction to the American Revolution begins with the Stamp Act but ignores the French and Indian War, which created the context for Britain’s new imperial policy. And the Marshall Court is relegated to the separate twelfth-grade U.S. government course, not mentioned in the main U.S. history outline.

Eighth grade (after a too-brief recapitulation of material from fifth grade) covers most key issues from 1789 to the late nineteenth century (though immigration and nativism are oddly ignored). Primary documents are again introduced—far more appropriately at this level. The crucial themes of the Civil War and Reconstruction are briefly but cogently discussed (Andrew Johnson’s impeachment, curiously missing from the standards themselves, is mentioned in the grade’s textual introduction), as are the social changes and pressures of the Gilded Age.

The eleventh-grade course gives students their only opportunity to study twentieth-century America. On the whole, the material is thorough and balanced, though the thin coverage of Populism (briefly mentioned in eighth grade) seems curious. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal are not uncritically hailed, as has often been the case since the 1950s, and the opposition to and controversy about Roosevelt’s policies are discussed briefly but intelligently. The section on World War II emphasizes the threats of totalitarianism and dictatorship—Stalin’s as well as those of Nazi fascism and Japanese militarism. Unusually, the course urges balanced perspectives on the decision to use the atomic bomb in 1945. The Japanese internment is discussed somewhat more problematically; students are directed to analyze it as a human rights violation, thus blurring the distinction between understanding an event in historical context as opposed to endorsing it today. On the other hand, the discussion of the origins of the Cold War

stresses Soviet human-rights abuses and places McCarthyism in the context of the threatening “spread of international communism.”

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Despite minor gaps, the California framework identifies and rigorously covers most key issues, events, and themes in U.S. history. It is particularly important to emphasize that these are *history* standards, rejecting the model of social studies standards that arbitrarily splice and cram content into a series of ahistorical strands and topics.

The unusually high level of rigor in California’s fifth-grade study of early American history is, however, likely to have only limited impact, as this crucial material is not covered again in later grades. Recapitulation of earlier material, albeit limited, is at least required in later grades; many other states that follow a similar sequence specify no recapitulation whatever. On balance, the overall care and quality evident in the standards remain impressive despite these flaws, and earn the state a six out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

California teachers and students can rely upon these standards for solid and clear guidance on the curriculum content expected at a particular grade level. In addition, the standards include a scope and sequence that keep history coherent—despite the lamentable decision to split American history into a single, one-time-only progression running from elementary to high school levels. The prose is quite readable and free of the idiosyncratic jargon of social studies.

Inevitably—given California’s massive population, economy, and influence—this state’s standards are often regarded as models to be emulated by the rest of the nation’s public-school systems. And indeed, despite the unfortunate grade sequence, most states would be well-advised to consult the efforts of California, a state that has been at the forefront of the history-standards movement for decades. These admirably transparent and comprehensible standards earn a three out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)