

MASSACHUSETTS • U.S. HISTORY



GRADE

A-

SCORES

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

TOTAL SCORE

9/10

Overview

The Massachusetts U.S. history standards offer clear, comprehensible outlines, rigorously focused on historical substance and comprehension. Despite occasional omissions and weak spots, the content is detailed and sophisticated, offering explanation and context as well as lists—a model of how history standards should be organized.

Goals and Organization

The Massachusetts history and social science standards present—in a single, straightforward document—grade-by-grade standards for grades K–7, and subject-specific course outlines for grades 8–12. Each grade (K–7) begins with a short “concepts and skills” section which lays out broad skills and concepts (use of maps, defining constitutional government or market economies, etc.) for history and geography, civics and government, and economics. This is followed by “learning standards” which are divided into chronological/thematic historical headings supplied with specific content standards. The learning standards are arranged purely by subject matter, with no division into fixed strands. For the upper-level (8–12) courses, the concepts and skills section is dropped, and only learning standards are provided. An “overview of scope and sequence” provides capsule summaries of the content of each grade or course, and each has its own introduction summarizing grade or course goals.

Famous Americans are introduced from Kindergarten through second grade, along with national symbols, democracy and citizenship, American diversity, and civic responsibility. Third grade introduces Massachusetts history, and fourth grade presents the geography and demographics of the Americas.

The U.S. history sequence begins in fifth grade and runs from pre-settlement through the Civil War. A two-year U.S. history course follows and is placed, at the discretion of individual school districts, between eighth and eleventh grades (with placement of both halves of the course in high school recommended, but not required). The U.S. History I course runs from 1763 to 1877, and U.S. History II from 1877 to the present.

Evaluation

The Massachusetts framework begins with a refreshingly candid assertion, rejecting the trendy cultural and historical relativism so often found in American education: “Democracy is the worthiest form of human governance ever conceived.” However, this statement entails no smug triumphalism or entitlement. The state believes the chief values of democracy “must be taught and learned and practiced. They cannot be taken for

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED¹

Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework, U.S. history segments (2003)

Accessed from:

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/hss/final.pdf>

¹ The Massachusetts social studies standards have not changed since our last evaluation, *Effective State Standards for U.S. History: A 2003 Report Card*. The state received the same score (roughly 90%) in each review. However, for this review, we changed our grading scale. In the 2003 review, a 90/100 yielded an A. In this review, a 9/10 yields an A-. For complete discussion of our 2011 grading metric, see Appendix A. For complete discussion of the 2003 grading metric, see: <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/effectivestatehistory.html>.

granted or regarded as merely one set of options against which any other may be accepted as equally worthy.”

The focus of the Massachusetts framework is on history in context: a substantive curriculum based on historical knowledge. While there are civics, geography, and economics units in the concepts and skills segments, these are short, introducing specific and limited concepts from those disciplines. The learning standards keep history together as history. Each grade or course is given a textual introduction, laying out its key issues and objectives.

A rejection of presentism—whereby students might judge the past through the lens of today’s values, standards, and norms—is evident from the earliest grades. Diversity, though emphasized, is framed by *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one—emphasizing common American heritage, democracy, and citizenship. The third grade local history course highlights connections to local museums and historical societies, an excellent way to engage younger students’ interest.

There are, however, several problems with Massachusetts’s approach. One appears immediately in the introduction to the fifth grade U.S. history standards: While U.S. history from the American Revolution onward is covered again in later grades, the pre-1763 colonial period is *only* covered in fifth grade, a serious flaw given the limited sophistication of eleven-year-old students. It is also odd that the fifth grade course covers only the period before the Civil War. It would be better if the two-year advanced curriculum were explicitly placed in high school (as the standards recommend) and a second introductory year were placed in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade.

The fifth-grade standards are notably substantive and detailed—arguably too much so for the age level. Yet their frequent inclusion of *explanatory* statements—explicating the meaning and importance of the outlined events—makes it far more likely that the material will be effectively taught and understood. Context and balance are consistently emphasized: European exploration and settlement is comprehensively examined and England’s predominant influence in North America is clearly explained; the rise of slavery is treated alongside colonial assemblies, town meetings, and the founding of colonial colleges.

The Revolutionary crisis is traced to the French and Indian War—a key issue frequently neglected in many state standards—and the key British acts that followed are carefully enumerated. The ideas of the Declaration of Independence are explained, and the important 1780 Massachusetts Constitution is specifically discussed. Students are introduced to the Articles of Confederation, Shays’ Rebellion, significant issues of the Constitutional

Convention, the Bill of Rights, and the basic principles of American democracy. The outline (running to the Civil War) tapers off dramatically in the 1790s and thereafter, but many key points are still touched upon—and, of course, the period from the American Revolution onward will be covered again in later grades.

The U.S. History I course (the first part of the two-year middle/high school course) continues to provide high-quality guidance, integrating relevant primary source documents. Massachusetts’s role in the American Revolution is emphasized, as are the “major debates” at the Constitutional Convention (“the distribution of political power; the rights of individuals; the rights of states; [and] slavery”)—a further effort to encourage understanding as well as factual knowledge. Students read “Federalist 10” when studying the ratification debates; the reasons for the Bill of Rights are discussed. A unit on the nature of American government—which many states separate into a civics strand—is sensibly placed here.

Regrettably, from this point on, the standards become increasingly rushed. Some crucial events of the 1790s, omitted in fifth grade, do appear here: the rise of parties, the Jefferson/Hamilton schism, and the Alien and Sedition Acts. But coverage of the 1790s and early nineteenth century is spotty. The election of 1800 is missing; likewise Lewis and Clark, who are mentioned in fourth grade. The expansion of suffrage is commendably bolstered by readings from Tocqueville. But political history tends to be the weakest link; for instance, events running from the War of 1812 to the 1853–54 Gadsden Purchase are merely listed in a catch-all unit on westward expansion and “growing diplomatic assertiveness.”

Stronger units follow on economic, social, and religious change. The coming of the Civil War receives less explanatory effort than some earlier periods, although pivotal events are carefully listed (including such oft-overlooked items as the Wilmot Proviso and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). Students read Lincoln’s speeches to understand his ideas and leadership, yet coverage of the war itself is brief. Reconstruction is outlined comprehensively, including Andrew Johnson’s impeachment, the Compromise of 1877, and the rise of Jim Crow.

In U.S. History II, with a huge volume of material to cover, the trend toward lists and away from explanation continues. The lists, however, are fairly complete, and still include some explanatory description; primary documents continue to be integrated. Solid coverage of Progressivism includes an unusual discussion of early civil rights struggles. Unfortunately, political history remains skimpy; few individuals are mentioned and political issues are treated very broadly.

Coverage of the Great Depression’s roots and consequences (including ideas of major economists) is more solid. The origins of World War II are well handled and, while the conduct of the war is hardly mentioned, the home front is described in detail. After the start of the Cold War, events seem more rushed than ever—most of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry is dealt with via a simple list of hot-spots from Korea to Vietnam; the end of the Cold War appears *before* a somewhat disorganized section on domestic affairs, running from the baby boom to Watergate. The Reagan and Clinton eras are covered in unusual detail, as is the 2000 election.

The standards conclude with very useful appendices, including a comprehensive bibliography—a welcome feature, encouraging teachers to expand their own knowledge—lists of key primary documents, and lists of local museums, archives, and historical societies.

Content and Rigor Conclusion

Despite some gaps and weaknesses—particularly in content beyond the mid-nineteenth century—the Massachusetts U.S. history standards maintain an impressive level of substantive rigor, free from thematic strands, and include laudable use of primary source readings. Much of the framework is outstanding, providing historical *explanation* as well as a robust factual outline. The fifth grade course may be too advanced for the age level, but the ample provision of such explanatory and expository content items makes the curriculum far more useable. The failure to recap pre-Revolutionary America in later grades is more problematic. Still, despite its handful of flaws, Massachusetts unquestionably sets a high bar for history education, laying out material with a depth and substance rarely seen in school standards. It comfortably earns a six out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The Massachusetts framework is refreshingly straightforward, supplying clear and simple outlines on which to structure actual classes. The scope of each course is plainly defined, with ample detail and clear expectations. Content is laid out comprehensively, with an almost total absence of jargon. The content of each grade or course is neatly summarized in the introductory material, and the outline for each is logical, coherent, and visually clean. Throughout, the manifest purpose is not to expound educational theory, but to provide an easy-to-use guide for real historical education. The state deserves a three out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)