

# NAEP • U.S. HISTORY FRAMEWORK



GRADE

**A-**

SCORES

Content and Rigor **7/7**  
Clarity and Specificity **2/3**

TOTAL SCORE

**9/10**

## Introduction

The principal strength of the 2006 *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) U.S. History Framework*, used once again in the 2010 assessment cycle, is that it provides an evenhanded, thoughtful, and ideologically balanced approach to U.S. history. The framework could, however, do a better job of defining what is most essential and important for U.S. history courses to cover.

## Organization of the Standards

The NAEP history framework is designed to outline:

- *what* history content and skills should be measured at grades 4, 8, and 12;
- *how* the domain of content is most appropriately measured in a large-scale assessment; and
- *how much* of the content domain, in terms of knowledge and skills, should students know and be able to do at the basic, proficient, and advanced levels.

In order to do this, the framework is divided into three sections: four “themes in U.S. history,” eight chronological “periods of U.S. history,” (shown below), and specific “ways of thinking about U.S. history.” Within each chronological period, the framework also provides thorough and specific “defining questions” (organized around the four themes) in order to structure the essential knowledge and skills that students need to succeed on the U.S. history assessment.

Themes	Chronological Periods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Change and Continuity in American Democracy: Ideas, Institutions, Events, Key Figures, and Controversies.</li> <li>◦ The Gathering and Interactions of Peoples, Cultures, and Ideas.</li> <li>◦ Economic and Technological Changes and Their Relationship to Society, Ideas, and the Environment.</li> <li>◦ The Changing Role of America in the World.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Beginnings to 1607</li> <li>◦ Colonization, Settlement, and Communities (1607–1763)</li> <li>◦ The Revolution and the New Nation (1763–1815)</li> <li>◦ Expansion and Reform (1801–1861)</li> <li>◦ Crisis of the Union: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850–1877)</li> <li>◦ The Development of Modern America (1865–1920)</li> <li>◦ Modern America and the World Wars (1914–1945)</li> <li>◦ Contemporary America (1945 to the present)</li> </ul>

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED<sup>1</sup>

**U.S. History Framework for the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress (2006)**

**Accessed from:**

[http://www.nagb.org/publications/frameworks/history\\_o6.pdf](http://www.nagb.org/publications/frameworks/history_o6.pdf)

<sup>1</sup> The 2010 NAEP U.S. History Framework (<http://www.nagb.org/publications/frameworks/historyframework.pdf>) appears to be substantively identical to the 2006 version. The introductions to the 2006 and 2010 versions both state that the most recent revision took place in 2003.

The NAEP Framework, it must be emphasized, is offered as just that: a framework on which to plan and draft assessment testing. It is not a set of standards for classroom instruction. However, as Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Amber Winkler have observed, assessment frameworks are widely used “in standards setting and benchmarking particularly” because, ultimately, “what gets tested is what gets taught.” It is “therefore important to appraise their content” and “their likely impact at the classroom level”—even though state officials must remain aware of frameworks’ “limitations and... appreciate what else may be needed to generate complete standards and curricula.”<sup>2</sup>

## Evaluation

The Framework begins with some basic assumptions about the nature of U.S. history in order to “establish a context that includes the political, social, cultural, economic, technological, philosophical, and religious dimensions of human activities.” These assumptions include:

- Analyzing change and continuity over time by exploring “the range of choices that have been available to people” and “have been the most significant in our nation’s development”;
- Including the perspective of both “*famous people and ordinary individuals* and events on the grand scale and in everyday life to convey the ideas and experiences that have shaped U.S. history” (emphasis added);
- Studying the nation’s political ideals of individual dignity, individual rights, civic virtue, democracy, the rule of law, equal justice, and the right to dissent;
- Recognizing that students “must know the specific facts of American history” in order to “judge evidence responsibly” and understand “*how complex and sometimes ambiguous the explanation of historical events can be*” (emphasis added); and
- Addressing the conflict between the founding proposition that “all men are created equal” and the reality “*that enormous inequalities...were common and accepted practice throughout the world at the outset of the American experiment*” (emphasis added).

As indicated above, particularly by the italicized phrases, the Framework specifically and admirably avoids both presentism—the tendency to view past events through

today’s norms and values—and simplistic, politically correct judgmentalism. For example, it asserts at the outset that Western Europeans “principally” shaped colonial American settlements, but acknowledges that Native Americans and Africans also helped to create “a new and uniquely American culture in the 17th and 18th centuries.” This overall tone is extremely important. It suggests a retreat from the most tendentious flaw in the “multicultural” history of the 1990s—namely, that including the story of those previously excluded (minorities, women, etc.) often resulted in largely excluding the story of those previously included (famous dead white males). The NAEP Framework reflects a more judicious approach in which teachers and students are expected to know the stories of minorities and women *in addition* to those of Washington, Lincoln, and other luminaries.

By emphasizing context and complexity rather than judgments based on modern-day perspectives, the Framework should not only clarify what students actually know, but, at the same time, help students develop genuine historical understanding. The NAEP basic assumptions stress that students must understand the ambiguity and uncertainty of events in their full historical context. This, in turn, requires understanding the futility of criticizing people in the past for the absence of ideas, beliefs, and values which were embryonic or even nonexistent in *their* time—such as racial equality. The NAEP basic assumptions make clear that it is a waste of precious classroom time to self-righteously judge the past from the perspective of the early twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, while many history and social studies standards eschew chronology in favor of organizing historical content primarily by theme, the NAEP history framework asserts clearly that “because history is concerned with the experiences of people over time, it is critical to establish a basic chronological structure to organize it.” The eight chronological periods shown on page 17 unify the assessment and its historical content. By organizing essential content chronologically, the NAEP framework underscores the importance of understanding how historical events unfolded and impacted one another without trying to force sometimes unrelated events into arbitrary boxes defined by narrow and ahistorical themes.

Within each of the eight chronological periods, content is presented via a series of defining questions organized

<sup>2</sup> Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Amber M. Winkler, “Introduction,” in Shiela Byrd Carmichael et al., *Stars by Which to Navigate? Scanning National and International Education Standards in 2009: An Interim Report on Common Core, NAEP, TIMSS, and PISA* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> A Boston historical site, beginning in the 1990s, featured an exhibit on Phyllis Wheatley, the late eighteenth-century African American poet. The exhibit noted that Wheatley was excluded from the Boston Town Meeting both because she was a woman and because she was black. Students were asked to post replies to the following question, “Who would you exclude from these meetings?” The students, of course, all proclaimed proudly, if not smugly, that they would not exclude anyone. Sadly, these young people had missed out on a potentially excellent opportunity to learn how to think historically.

around the four historical themes. These questions are clear, thoughtful, substantive, and balanced. For example:

- “How did various European colonists reshape their political, legal, and philosophical traditions to fit their circumstances in North America? In the English colonies, what practices of self-government and laws developed?”
- “What were the political debates regarding independence and the creation of new state governments and a national government?”
- “What were the major conflicts between big business and labor? What was the role of the federal government in resolving such disputes?”
- “How did the Depression change assumptions about the nature of federalism and the role of the government?”
- “What combination of ideology, economics, historical circumstances, individual viewpoints, and other factors shaped the history of the Cold War? What factors led to its end?”

Unfortunately, the questions relating to the periods of U.S. history do not explicitly address grade-level differentiation. The sample questions just cited would surely be inappropriate at the fourth-grade level and in most cases at the eighth-grade level as well. In short, it would be helpful if the framework made clearer what level of knowledge and analytic prowess it is reasonable to expect at various grade levels, since the assessment questions will be administered and scored in grade-specific ways. However, the much smaller number of U.S. history questions included in the *NAEP Sample Questions* for assessment, published separately, do differentiate between levels of complexity in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades.<sup>4</sup>

## Content and Rigor Conclusion

The NAEP Framework emphasizes “knowing and understanding people, events...contexts, and historical sources” as well as the importance of “multiple perspectives and seeing an era or movement through the eyes of different groups.” The document also stresses “establishing cause-and-effect relationships,” “weighing evidence to draw sound conclusions,” and “making defensible generalizations.” The historical material, covered in only eighteen pages, is a strikingly rich and comprehensive body of U.S. history content that can usefully guide both test developers and those who opt to align their academic standards or curricula with the NAEP. Viewed as a whole, the NAEP Framework succeeds admirably in defining a core of literacy in U.S. history and earns a seven

out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

## Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The content in the NAEP Framework is presented as a set of questions; these questions, nonetheless, lay out a general but clear and remarkably specific description of the important historical knowledge and appropriate achievement-level expectations for students in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. The framework could, arguably, delineate this historical content somewhat more consistently (with fewer gaps), but it nonetheless succeeds in “delineating the *knowledge* and skills to be tested at each grade” (emphasis added). The framework earns a two out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

4 National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Sample Questions: General Information about the Nation's Report Card, 2006: Grades 4, 8, and 12* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2006).