

# NEBRASKA • U.S. HISTORY

GRADE

C

SCORES

Content and Rigor 4/7  
Clarity and Specificity 1/3

TOTAL SCORE

5/10

## Overview

Nebraska's U.S. history standards outline, in broad strokes, many key issues in American history. Unfortunately, spotty coverage and chronically inadequate detail undermine the result. The state's decision to define course sequence only in terms of broad grade blocks further undercuts the standards' usefulness.

## Goals and Organization

Nebraska's social studies standards are divided into four grade bands: K–1, 2–4, 5–8, and 9–12. For each grade band, the standards are divided into strands, which vary from grade band to grade band. Grades K–1 encompass four strands: United States history, geography, civics/government, and economics; grades 2–4 add Nebraska history to this list. Grades 5–8 are divided into four strands: United States history, world history to 1000 A.D., civics and economics, and skills. Grades 9–12 are divided into four as well: United States history, world history 1000 C.E. to the present, the governments and economies of the United States and Nebraska, and world geography.

For each strand, a numbered series of thematic or chronological headings is provided, laying out the content that students should master by the end of the given grade block. "Example indicators"—specific content standards—are then provided for each such heading.

Basic historical concepts are briefly introduced in Kindergarten and first grade, with general references to historical change, famous persons, citizenship, patriotic symbols, and holidays. Grades two through four introduce Nebraska history.

American history first appears in fifth through eighth grade, covering pre-settlement to the post-World War II period. American history is covered again in the high school block, running from pre-settlement to the present. It is not detailed in which specific grades the material will be presented, nor how many semesters (or years) are to be devoted to any given content.

## Evaluation

Nebraska's U.S. history standards have some value: They briefly sketch many key themes and issues in American history. Yet from the start they suffer from serious gaps and from a near-total lack of supporting detail.

Further, the decision to assign all material to grade blocks, rather than to specific grades, leaves it unclear when and how content is to be taught. There is an enormous difference, for instance, between fifth and eighth graders in terms of sophistication and retention—at

### ✓ DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

Nebraska Social Studies/History Standards, U.S. history segments (2003)

Accessed from:

[http://www.education.ne.gov/ss/pdf/Social\\_Studies\\_Standards.pdf](http://www.education.ne.gov/ss/pdf/Social_Studies_Standards.pdf)

what ages is the material for grades five through eight to be offered? The standards only tell us that this content is to be mastered “by the end of eighth grade.”

In Kindergarten and first grade, there is brief discussion of holidays, national symbols, and so forth. But when a broad directive asks students to “identify past events and people in legends, historical fiction, and biographies,” the only examples given are “Johnny Appleseed, Betsy Ross, etc.” It is difficult to imagine how this chronologically reversed pair could be thought to best exemplify the American past. Second through fourth grade focus solely on Nebraska history.

Broader U.S. history enters in grades five through eight. The outline is largely chronological, beginning with pre-contact Native cultures (listed with reasonable specificity), the motives and sponsors of European explorers, and then the colonies and their regional settlement. But problems quickly mount. We encounter unwelcome suggestions of political bias, as well as the tendency toward presentism—that is, judgments of the past through the lens of today’s values, standards, and norms. For example, an item on the colonial era, “perspectives of Native Americans, large landowners, farmers, artisans, women, and slaves,” seemingly invites students to pit victim groups against the large landowners.

What’s more, while some important content is mentioned, the treatment of essential historical events and issues is rushed, leading to serious omissions, lack of specifics, and inadequate explanatory detail. For example, “sources of dissatisfaction that led to the American Revolution” are mentioned, but none is specified. Students are to “explain” the Constitution and Bill of Rights, “describe major issues facing Congress and the first four presidents,” and “explain” the Hamilton-Jefferson schism—all without specifics or explanation.

Some key issues are skipped entirely. The period from the early 1790s to the Civil War is pushed under a single heading, listing little more than the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark, geographical expansion, the Monroe Doctrine, the cotton gin, and the McCormick reaper. The sole items dealing with the sectional crisis simply tell students to “describe economic and philosophical differences between the North and South” and to “identify key events leading to secession and war.” Some important Civil War individuals, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth through Fifteenth Amendments are mentioned. But the next heading pushes all the way to World War I, culminating with a slapdash reference to “the Spanish American War, World War I, etc.” Post-World War II America is touched upon, but the war itself is curiously missing.

The thematically organized civics strand for grades five through eight adds brief material on the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, though with no attention to chronology or context. This strand also highlights the standards’ political leanings. In a short discussion of the historical and intellectual roots of the Constitution, “the Native American heritage, e.g., Iroquois Five Nations Confederacy [and the] ‘Great Binding Law’” is prominently listed *before* “the British and American heritage,” such as “the Magna Carta, the English Bill of Rights, the Mayflower Compact, [and] the Articles of Confederation.” Such mythical claims of Iroquois roots for American constitutional thought have long been discredited. Yet the single greatest influence on the Constitution—the drafting of state constitutions after 1776—is omitted entirely.

The full span of U.S. history is covered again in high school. But the outline, though somewhat more detailed, remains brief, general, and shallow. A single heading covers the entire colonial era, with a handful of nebulous examples that include such directives as “describe the political developments” of the period. Later, students are to “relate changes in British policies that provoked the American colonists,” “discuss the debate within America concerning separation from Britain,” “explain the major domestic and foreign affairs issues facing the first presidents and Congress,” and “summarize the development of political parties”—all, again, without specifics or explanation. In the separate civics strand, we find a few additional content items on the political background of the founding era, but they, too, are brief and divorced from context.

There are occasional flashes of specificity and rigor. One reasonably specific item directs students to “compare the Declaration of Independence and ‘Common Sense.’” Madison and Washington are named in connection with the Constitutional Convention, and students are to discuss how “Supreme Court cases, e.g., *Marbury v. Madison* and *McCulloch v. Maryland*, affected the interpretation of the Constitution.” But even these directives are mostly lacking in explanation or context—and they are, in any case, the exception. More typical nineteenth-century items—passing references to “the War of 1812 and the Monroe Doctrine” or to “economic development, trade, tariffs, taxation, and trends in the national debt”—provide only a basic checklist for the era. And the crucial Jacksonian period is skipped entirely.

As the outline turns to the Civil War, students are asked to explain “the causes and effects of slavery,” along with states’ rights, tariffs, trade, western settlement, and secession. But slavery has scarcely been mentioned prior to this entry, and the abolitionist movement is never mentioned at all. Indeed, nothing is said about any specific event or person of the antebellum period—not even the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which one might expect to find in Nebraska’s standards.

Similarly broad items touch on the Civil War and Reconstruction, mentioning, for instance, “the economic and political impact of the war,” and “the roles played by the individual leaders”—none of whom is named. Students are to “relate the impact of Reconstruction on the South” without any specifics; even the Thirteenth through Fifteenth Amendments, mentioned in grades five through eight, are missing here. Labor movements and Progressivism are mentioned in general terms (“summarize political changes at the local, state, and national levels”), but Populism and Nebraska’s own William Jennings Bryan never appear. The pattern holds through the Great Depression, World War II, and beyond (even the Japanese American internment is skipped). Key points are briefly listed, but detail is skimpy and explanation virtually absent.

## Content and Rigor Conclusion

Nebraska does offer a basic outline of U.S. history which amounts to a checklist of important themes and issues. But the content is often hopelessly broad, with little detail or explanation. Too many items are little more than directives to “explain” an entire period without further information or explication. And, while many important themes are at least listed, serious gaps remain. Nebraska’s outline—mentioning much, but doing so far too briefly—earns a marginal four out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

## Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

The Nebraska standards are fairly clear and straightforward, using a simple outline format and relatively little jargon. Yet the use of age ranges rather than specific grade levels undermines the document’s usefulness. Erratic specificity and consistently inadequate detail further undermine the standards. Teachers are not clearly told what to teach when, and are given insufficiently substantive outlines on which to structure their courses. Nebraska’s structurally flawed standards earn a one out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)