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U.S. History

Course Description and Syllabus

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Description

Imagine an angry teacher storming into a classroom and slamming her books down on the desk. “I’m sorry,” she explains, “but I just had a disagreement with the principal and I’m upset. Have any of you ever experienced something at school you thought was unfair?” After the students respond with a volley of complaints about the injustices (real or imagined) that they have suffered, the teacher guides them in compiling a list of their grievances. Soon, the class has created a wide-ranging list of injustices and may even have identified a common enemy. At this point, the teacher leads the students through a comparison of their issues with those that led to the American Revolution. Does not the common enemy they identified, for example, remind them of King George III? Do they not feel a sense of injustice at the hands of an unfair authority? By the end of this exercise, students should have a heightened appreciation for some of the issues and emotions that drove the American colonists to rebel against England. The people of the past will become “real” to students, and the study of U.S. History will become an exploration of individuals who shared and acted upon emotions, drives, and desires similar to their own.

The principles behind this exercise—a focus on relevance, along with instructional practices that motivate students to become involved in the learning process and internalize knowledge on a deep level—are essential to a rigorous U.S. History course. As students engage demanding content, such as the impact of technological innovations on American society and the efforts to achieve women’s rights prior to the Civil War, they encounter a wide range of sources, engage in collaborative learning, learn how to frame meaningful questions, practice research methods, and develop the ability to read and think critically, to evaluate evidence, and to articulate their findings. Whether they plan to continue their education or immediately join the workforce, students will benefit from these skills.

A rigorous U.S. History course challenges students with a variety of instructional materials. Students are introduced to primary sources such as memoirs, diaries, letters, speeches—the raw materials of history—along with secondary works (e.g., novels, historical studies) and graphic images (e.g., cartoons, charts, films, photographs) that document the past. The diversity of sources presented might include the musings of the founding fathers in *The Federalist Papers*, Alexis de Toqueville’s account of *Democracy in America*, first-person reports from anthologies such as Lillian Schlissel’s *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*, a description of Japanese immigrant life from a popular history like Walter McDougall’s *Let the Sea Make a Noise*, short stories that comment on culture and society such as Mark Twain’s “Poor Little Stephen Girard,” memoirs in the vein of Jane Addams’s *Twenty Years at Hull House*, poems like Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus,” immigrants’ letters home to their families accessed on websites such as History Matters, and nonfiction works on contemporary issues like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*.

Students reading and analyzing these varied texts develop close reading skills and begin to see the past from more than one viewpoint. They might read and compare the depictions of slavery in the autobiographical *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave* with those in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s classic novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Or, in a study of the Gilded Age, students could consider the differing views of industrialization in Andrew Carnegie’s “The Gospel of Wealth” and Samuel Gompers’s “Letter on Labor in Industrial Society.”

The use of audio-visual materials in a rigorous course helps to capture the interest of students who absorb information more readily through nontextual means while emphasizing that understanding the past requires a critical approach to a wide range of materials. Students might discuss their reactions to the photographic depiction of poverty in Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, the political cartoons of the Mexican War era, documentary films such as Ken Burns's *The West*, and television shows like Henry Louis Gates's *African American Lives*. *The Wizard of Oz* could be explored as an allegory for populism, and the songs of Woody Guthrie might provide insight into the political issues of the Depression. Students could write, perform, and videotape their own historical drama to serve as an allegory for the cultural devastation experienced by Native Americans during the late nineteenth century. Multimedia material possesses a visceral appeal that is sometimes lacking in written documents and is an effective way to engage students. Moreover, in an age when they are deluged with information—some of it reliable, some not—the ability to view print and electronic media with a critical eye is an invaluable skill.

In addition to stimulating student interest through challenging and intriguing sources, a rigorous U.S. History course engages them in collaborative learning. A Socratic seminar in which students discuss their views on the Vietnam conflict in the context of the Cold War introduces them to different ways of approaching and analyzing a topic. Working together is a skill students need for their future careers and is crucial to developing a sophisticated approach to history that recognizes that studying the past involves the formulation and articulation of judgments regarding human behavior.

Group work and discussions might be directed by an essential question, a guiding concept that ensures that instruction does not become the mere presentation of assorted facts. When viewing the photographs of Jacob Riis, students might respond to the essential question "What was the impact of rapid urbanization on major urban areas of the United States?" They might then begin to frame their own questions in relation to that larger one: "Why were urban areas marked by such dramatic contrasts between wealth and poverty?" Students could then divide into pairs or small groups to discuss the questions. Students might take on the roles of wealthy or poor individuals and engage in a dialogue and subsequently present the results of their discussion to the class. Through such collaborative techniques, students effectively teach one another. And in the process, students learn that formulating good questions is an essential part of studying the past.

While students search for answers to their questions about immigration or other selected topics, they could be introduced to the methods of conducting research. Students might, for example, read letters written by recent immigrants, or they might view photographs depicting the experience of Japanese "picture brides" at Angel Island. Alternatively, they could read psychological profiles from the early twentieth century that deemed immigrants from southern Europe to be intellectually inferior to northern Europeans. Or, students of any cultural background could interview family members about their family's experience as immigrants and even explore the family "archives" (e.g., photographs, letters). Students could then use this research to prepare oral or written reports on various aspects of the immigrant experience to share with the class.

A rigorous U.S. History course also emphasizes learning that is personally relevant; it allows teacher and students to learn about each other and the world around them. After conducting research on immigration, students should have both an enhanced awareness of their own backgrounds and an increased appreciation for the challenges faced by modern immigrants to the United States. Additional activities can further reinforce relevance. For example, students

might research the struggles of nineteenth-century immigrant workers—many of whom were the same age as the students—and draw parallels to the challenges that confront the labor force in today’s global economy. A quick survey of the students’ shirt labels to see where they were made might trigger a discussion of job outsourcing and declining wages in the United States. Students might also share personal experiences of family members or friends whose jobs have been outsourced or whose wages have declined. Content that is relevant thus gives students the opportunity to realize that history is more than memorized facts about dead people and long-ago events; rather, it is understanding the events that have shaped, and will continue to shape, their lives.

As students come to appreciate the past in a new way, they practice skills that allow them to articulate their understanding. Students write throughout the course, developing their interpretive skills and marshaling their research into sophisticated essays. For example, students take notes during lectures or research and write informally in journals. In a “Quick-Write,” the students might spend 3–5 minutes writing an analysis of perceptions of Irish immigrants as depicted in cartoons. They might write collaboratively to describe ethnic stereotyping in popular literature and art. Students are instructed in the construction of a thesis and learn how to develop an argument with evidence derived from their research. In the process, students come to understand that the study of history involves the analysis and interpretation of source materials. As they progress through the course, students learn to write sophisticated essays that analyze, evaluate, and synthesize evidence into coherent and reasonable arguments.

A challenging U.S. History course also stresses activities that enhance students’ oral communication skills. For example, students participate in debates where they assume the role of historical actors or present the results of their research to the class. These presentations, along with written work, play a part in the assessment of student learning. Oral presentations and debates should be graded with a rubric, and student notes taken during the presentations might serve as the basis for quizzes or unit exams. Journals might be graded for content and style or serve as a resource during exams. Or, as part of a unit exam, students might provide their analysis of visual images they have discussed and written about earlier in the semester, such as cartoons depicting Chinese miners in 1850s California.

In a rigorous U.S. History course, then, students learn to work alone and with others, to evaluate a wide range of source materials, to analyze evidence and assess conflicting interpretations, to construct their own interpretations of the past, and to communicate their views to others. In the process, students discover that the study of history is about problem-solving, gathering evidence, and piecing together evidence to create a picture of the past. Ultimately, students learn that historical “truth” is an elusive goal and that “what happened” depends on who is telling the story. A rigorous U.S. History course seeks to imbue students with an investigative spirit, a critical approach to evidence, and an appreciation for the relevance of the past. These habits of mind, which are the fruits of a rigorous course, will remain with students throughout their lives and provide the foundation for a deeper appreciation of themselves and the world they live in.

Model Course Syllabus—U.S. History

Part of any carefully designed course should include a course syllabus. Not only does a syllabus describe the course and identify the content it will cover, but it also outlines policies to which teachers and students will be held accountable. This model syllabus is a composite

drawn from the syllabi studied in *On Course for Success* (2004). It is addressed to students and should be used as a general guideline, adapted according to the policies of a particular district, school, or teacher.

Course Overview

To prepare you to learn in and contribute to an information-oriented world, this yearlong course will provide a detailed overview of United States history from the country's beginnings to the post–World War II era. You will gain insight into the forging of the new nation, the sectional conflicts that nearly tore it apart, and the Civil War and Reconstruction. You will learn about nineteenth-century industrialization and urbanization, the growth of the West and the “New South,” and political efforts to reform capitalism. You will also analyze the effects of the Great Depression and the New Deal, the Cold War and the United States' role as a world power, and more recent challenges such as movements for equality, environmental issues, and global terrorism. As a class, we will investigate and interpret past events, learn collaboratively, encourage personal ownership of learning, and apply what we have learned to real-world situations.

Course Content

- Process Skills
- Colonization and Forging a New Nation
- Antebellum America
- Civil War and Reconstruction
- Industrialization and Urbanization
- Increasing Influences and Challenges
- The United States in a Changing World
- America at War
- Changes at Home

Course Materials

- Pen, pencil, and lined paper
- Notebook
- Textbook (and/or essays we're reading)
- 3-ring binder to organize your class materials, so you can reference them easily and I can find what I need to grade. I expect you to divide your binder into the following sections:
 - ✓ Class Notes
 - ✓ Writing
 - ✓ Grammar and Vocabulary
 - ✓ Highlighted and Annotated Texts
 - ✓ Graded Papers, Tests, and Quizzes
 - ✓ Primary and Secondary Sources

Course Policies

Every day when you enter my classroom, I will be ready to teach you interesting and engaging lessons. If you approach this class with a positive attitude, respect for your classmates, and a sense of responsibility, you will be successful! My expectations for you are listed below. Make sure you review these expectations carefully and know that I will hold you to these standards of behavior.

Respect: Every person in this class will be given an equal opportunity to express himself or herself in class discussions, group work, writings, etc. Individuals may dress differently, have different beliefs, or communicate in different ways, but I expect you to treat each classmate with respect. In a discussion, a variety of opinions often surface. While you will not be asked to change your way of thinking, you will be expected to listen to others with respect and to express your personal opinions in a respectful manner. If you disagree with someone's viewpoint, you are free to challenge them. However, please take time to consider your classmates' opinions. The ability to weigh different perspectives and a willingness to change one's ideas based on the presentation of new evidence are essential skills in today's information age.

Behavior: I expect all students to:

- Be in class on time.
- Come prepared for class with required materials.
- Respect your teacher and classmates.
- Limit unnecessary trips out of the classroom.
- Turn off and do not use cell phones and electronic devices during class.
- Turn work in on time.
- Be a benefit to a group, not a hindrance.
- Actively participate in class discussions.
- Accept an academic challenge.

School Policies: Any rule stated in the Student Handbook is, of course, a rule in this classroom as well. *Please be very familiar with all school rules and policies.*

Absences: If you have a planned absence from school, please notify me in advance and I will give you the upcoming assignments. It's always best to make up your work before you leave. If you have an unplanned absence from school, please see me immediately upon your return to class to obtain any makeup work. You may also e-mail me to find out assignment details. When possible, I will e-mail attachments to you. Regardless of the situation, please talk to me personally when you return.

Late Work: For excused absences (i.e. illnesses, emergencies, appointments, school activities, parental notes), there will be no penalty for late work as long as the work is completed within one or two days of your return. For more extended absences due to illness (documented by a doctor's note), late work must be completed within one week of your return. For unexcused absences (skipping, no note from parents) or for work not completed on time, your score will be automatically reduced by 25 percent.

Plagiarism/Cheating: I begin the year with complete trust in each of you. Please do not abuse that trust by being dishonest. Learning cooperatively is great, and I encourage students to get together to brainstorm and discuss assignments. When you sit down to complete an individual assignment, however, let the work be yours alone. Penalties for cheating and plagiarism are stiff. If two papers resemble each other too closely, I will split the points. If a paper is obviously copied, whether from a classmate's work, a book, or an online source, it will receive no credit.

Grading Policy

Please refer to the following grading scale:

A+	100–98	B+	89–87	C+	79–77	D+	69–67
A	97–93	B	86–83	C	76–73	D	66–63
A–	92–90	B–	82–80	C–	72–70	D–	62–60

Letter grades are based upon the percentage of points accumulated over the course of a semester. While these grades will ultimately go on your transcript, I hope you will also assess your own learning for each assignment by asking the following questions:

- How would I describe my effort on this assignment (e.g., tried my hardest, didn't really try)?
- What did I learn?
- What am I still confused about?
- What would I do differently to improve my work?
- What resources, if any, did I use to aid me in completing the assignment?
- Did I spend time polishing this assignment, or was it done in a hurry?
- What can I do on my next assignment to perform at or above my current performance level?

Course Procedures

Format of Papers: I expect all papers written outside of class to be typed. Hand in the final draft along with all previous drafts stapled to the back. Please adhere to the following guidelines:

- Use white paper and black ink.
- Use a standard font (e.g., 12 pt. Times New Roman).
- Double-space all text.
- Use one-inch page margins.
- Include on the first page the title of your paper, your name, and your class period.
- Include page numbers on the upper right-hand corner of the page.

Personal Statement

It is very important that you review your notes and homework frequently! Most homework has one or more of the following aims:

- *Practice* reinforces the learning of material already presented in class and helps you to master specific skills.
- *Preparation* provides supporting information—history, skills, definitions—for what's forthcoming; it will help when new material is covered in class.
- *Extension or elaboration* involves the transfer of previously learned skills to new situations.
- *Integration* asks you to apply skills and concepts to produce a single product.

I will make every effort to communicate the purpose of homework assignments to you. If you are having difficulties with anything covered in this course, see me as soon as possible. Times when I am available for extra help are included below.

Additional Information

Questions and Help: If you have questions regarding your schoolwork or need extra help, you have a number of options. You can see me after class, by appointment before or after school, during your study hall if I am not teaching that period, and/or you may e-mail me.

Signature(s): Discuss this course syllabus with your parent(s) or guardian(s). The yellow copy is for you to keep. Please sign and return the blue copy to me by next Friday. I am looking forward to working with you this year.

I, _____ (Student), have read and understand the U.S. History course syllabus and the course expectations.

I, _____ (Parent/Guardian), have read and understand the U.S. History course syllabus and the course expectations.

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

PLEASE PLACE THIS DOCUMENT IN YOUR CLASS NOTEBOOK FOR FUTURE REFERENCE.

References

ACT, Inc., & The Education Trust. (2004). *On course for success: A close look at selected high school courses that prepare all students for college*. Iowa City, IA: Author.