“Teaching Historical & Critical Thinking Skills Using Short Answer Questions”

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John P. Irish teaches AP U.S. History, coaches UIL Social Studies, and is the UIL Academic Coordinator at Carroll Senior High School in Southlake, Texas. He is a nationally certified consultant in AP U.S. History and AP European History for the Southwestern Region of the College Board and serves as a Reader, Table and Exam Leader for the AP U.S. History Reading. He was a member of the College Board AP U.S. History Curriculum Development and Assessment Committee (CDAC) for the redesign, which oversaw the changes in the course curriculum and exam. He is currently a member of the College Board AP U.S. History Test Development Committee (TD), which is the group responsible for creating the new exam, overseeing continuing changes to the curriculum, and developing / presenting trainings for teachers across the country at state and national venues. He published the Student Guidebook for the 15/e of American Pageant and has published the Instructor Resource Guide and the Test-Bank for previous editions of that textbook. He was also on the writing team that published a four volume updated edition of the AP U.S. History Workbooks by the Center for Learning, along with a curriculum unit on Edward Bellamy’s novel “Looking Backward” also by the Center for Learning. Mr. Irish holds a B.A. in Political Science and Philosophy from Southern Methodist University and an M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Arkansas. He has also done post-graduate work in History from Rice University. He is currently finishing another M.A. from Southern Methodist University with a concentration in Humanities and American Studies. He is a member of the American Historical Association, Society for History Education, and the Organization of American Historians.

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The AP U.S. History Exam is 3 hours and 15 minutes long and includes both a 100-minute multiple-choice / short-answer section (Part I) and a 95-minute free-response section (Part II). Each section is divided into two parts, as shown in the table below. Student performance on these four parts will be compiled and weighted to determine an AP Exam score. AP Scores are 5 – 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Number of Questions</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Exam Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Part A: Multiple-choice questions</td>
<td>55 questions</td>
<td>55 minutes</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part B: Short-answer questions</td>
<td>4 questions</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td><strong>BREAK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Part A: Document-based question</td>
<td>1 question</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part B: Long essay question</td>
<td>1 question (chosen from a pair)</td>
<td>35 minutes</td>
<td>15%</td>
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</tbody>
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**Characteristics of Short Answer Questions**

- Provide opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know best
- Directly target particular historical thinking skills
- Require students to respond to general propositions about United States history
- Sometimes require students to respond to primary source texts, secondary source texts, or other stimuli such as charts, graphs, tables, maps, or images
- Require students to employ historical evidence or examples relevant to the source or question
- Always have three score points
- Do **NOT** require students to develop and support a thesis statement
- Require that responses be in complete sentences

**Questions to Consider While Examining a Short Answer Question**

- If the question is based on a stimulus, would your student find the stimulus material accessible? Why or why not?
- Which skill is the item primarily addressing? What language in the question tells you?
- What content would be viable in answering this question?
- Read the directions and prompt closely. List the elements that you would expect to see in a good response.
Observations from the Pilot Scoring at the 2014 APUSH Reading – SAQ’s

- Do NOT refer to these as essays, they are short answers
- Don’t have students quote from the documents
- NO Thesis statement
- Label the responses, (a), (b), and (c) – makes it easier to score and give credit
- Do the tasks in order (within each question), there usually is a natural progression of ideas
- Stay within the box, responses outside the box will not be read
- Be specific, NO generalizations
- Get to the point, there are no extra points for sophisticated answers
- Read the question, make sure you are clear about what task you are being asked to do
- Read the question, make sure you are clear about the parameters of the task
- Complete sentences and NO bulleted information
- Practice having them annotate and read short secondary excerpts
- Practice having them do the following with visuals: audience, point of view, purpose, or context
- Practice having them articulate a counter argument, not just verbally, but in writing
- These are perfect warm-up activities, take up for a grade or just give verbal feedback
- Do these at least once a week
“In the North the most important development was the reorientation of trade from its north-south channel along the Mississippi to an east-west axis that included the Great Lakes and the Erie Canal. Shipping along the Mississippi continued to grow. But the commerce that went east-west by lake steamers and canal boats, and after 1855 by railroads, became far greater. . . . Pressing concerns shaped the outlook of those living near the lakes. All the lake ports . . . required extensive federal funds to build piers and dredge their harbors. The Great Lakes have no natural harbors, and the job of keeping ports open . . . was endless. Those who relied on the lakes also needed assistance to open several chokepoints tying up commerce . . . Recurrent demands for federal outlays made these individuals advocates of higher tariffs because that impost was the chief source of government revenues. Lake congressmen and their allies in New England defended these requests for funds by waving the banner of nationalism. But it was a nationalism based on “What is good for the Lakes is good for the country.” . . . This self-serving nationalism, fully enunciated by mid-century, would become the ideological basis for Republican policies during the Civil War.”

Marc Egnal, Historian, 2011

“Secession was a response to a new political reality: the collapse, after many decades, of Southern slaveholders’ iron-fisted control of federal power. The voters of the United States selected a president and a party committed first to containing and, finally, ending slavery. . . . Despite notable attempts to forge a political compromise over the issue of slavery . . . successive generations of American leaders simply failed to come up with a workable permanent solution to this particular conundrum. . . . By the 1850s, when significant new lands were added to the United States as a result of the war with Mexico, compromise-minded politicians in Washington were no match for those in both sections determined to prevail completely in forcing the other to accept its vision of slavery. . . . with the rise of a Republican Party committed not just to containing slavery, but bringing it to an end, political compromises like those attempted before and after Lincoln’s election in 1860 were doomed to failure.”

Jonathan Earle, Historian, 2011

1. Using the excerpts above, answer parts (a), (b), and (c).
   a) Briefly explain the major difference between Egnal’s and Earle’s interpretations.
   b) Explain how ONE specific piece of historical evidence from the period 1820 to 1860, not directly mentioned in the excerpt, could be used to support Egnal’s interpretation.
   c) Explain how ONE specific piece of historical evidence from the period 1820 to 1860, not directly mentioned in the excerpt, could be used to support Earle’s interpretation.

2. Using your knowledge of United States history, answer parts (a), (b), and (c).
   a) Explain ONE specific historical event which marks the beginning of the Cold War.
   b) Explain ONE specific historical event which marks the ending of the Cold War.
   c) Explain ONE reaction by Americans in response to the domestic fears of the Cold War.

3. Using your knowledge of United States history, answer parts (a), (b), and (c).
   a) Explain ONE important cause of the American Revolution.
   b) Explain a SECOND important cause of the American Revolution.
   c) Explain ONE important effect of the American Revolution.
4. Use the images above to answer parts (a), (b), and (c).
   a) Briefly explain the differences in point of view expressed about the Spanish between the two images above.
   b) Explain ONE piece of specific historical evidence, from 1500 to 1700, which could be used to support the point of view in image #1.
   c) Explain ONE piece of specific historical evidence, from 1500 to 1700, which could be used to support the point of view in image #2.
Sample Answers to the Short Answer Questions

Students will be given essentially an entire page for their responses; it will be in boxes, so no thinking outside the box! However, they do not need the entire box, they simply need to answer and respond to the tasks asked of them. Remember these are being graded on an all or nothing basis, they either did the task or they didn’t, there is no extra credit for a more sophisticated answer.

Sample Answer to #1:

(a) Egnal’s interpretation relies on an economic view as the main cause of the Civil War as the alliance between the east and west alienated southerners as resentment grew over tariffs. Earle’s interpretation relies on a political view as the main cause of the Civil War as the breakdown of compromises and the failure of the political parties to craft a permanent solution to slavery continued the growth of sectionalism.

(b) The Nullification Crisis of 1832 brought Americans close to secession as Southerners spoke out against tariffs designed to support Northern industry at the expense of Southern agriculture.

(c) The Compromise of 1820, also known as the Missouri Compromise, was a piecemeal solution, which failed to solve the slave issue, as it did not account for future territorial acquisitions; thus continuing the discussion in political discourse.

Sample Answer to #2:

(a) The dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ending WWII, ushered in a period of tense relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union, as both sides feared the others potential nuclear weapons arsenal.

(b) The fall of the Berlin Wall, signifying the collapse of the division between East and West Berlin.

(c) The reaction to the Red Scare, sent shock waves throughout the country, leading to things like the McCarthy trials accusing individuals with ties to the Soviet Union, creating a state of paranoia throughout the country.

Sample Answer to #3:

(a) The Stamp Act was the first time in American History in which the British tried to raise money and not simply regulate commerce. While the act was small in comparison to the amount of taxes the British were paying, years of salutary neglect caused the Americans to react with contempt.

(b) Beefed up presence of the British army, especially leading up to the Boston Massacre, caused additional fears on the part of the Americans.

(c) The new found freedom that Americans experienced after the Revolutionary War gave rise to a wave of increased democracy. Many state constitutions were rewritten to include more democratic ideals, like New York, eventually leading to the democratic revolution with the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828.

Sample Answer to #4:

(a) The first image presents the interpretation of the Spanish as the saviors of the Indian population by working with them, but the second image presents the interpretation of the Spanish as the murderers and tyrants over the Indian population.

(b) As early as 1514 the Spanish government approved marriages between Spanish and Indian peoples, partly as a way of bringing Christianity to the native population.

(c) In 1680 the Pueblo Indians staged an uprising in order to drive out the Spanish, protesting their brutal mistreatment and restore the Indians’ traditional autonomy.
Sample Templates for Short Answer Questions – Focused Around the HTS

Skill Type I: Chronological Reasoning

1. Historical Causation

(a) Explain one specific cause of X (e.g., a historical event)
(b) Explain another specific cause of X
(c) Explain one specific result of X

(a) Explain one specific cause of Y
(b) Explain one specific result of Y
(c) Explain another specific result of Y

(a) Explain one specific cause of X (e.g., a historical event)
(b) Explain one specific cause of Y (e.g., a different historical event)
(c) Account for a similarity or difference between (a) and (b)

(a) Explain one specific cause of X
(b) Explain one specific short term effect of X (e.g., specify a short time period)
(c) Explain one specific long term effect of X (e.g., specify a long time period)

(a) Explain why change took place from X to Y (e.g., time periods – also comparison or change over time)
(b) Explain one specific piece of evidence which explains the existence of X
(c) Explain one specific piece of evidence which explains the existence of Y

2. Patterns of Continuity and Change over Time

(a) Explain one specific historical continuity from _____ to _____ (e.g., a date range)
(b) Explain one specific historical change from _____ to _____
(c) Make an argument that there was more continuity or change from ______ to ______

(a) Explain a specific event which led to the continuity of X from ______ to ______
(b) Explain another specific event which led to the continuity of X from ______ to ______
(c) Explain a specific event which led to a change of X from ______ to ______

(a) Explain a specific event from the period X (e.g., a traditional historical period)
(b) Explain a specific event from the period Y
(c) Make an argument for how the event identified in (a) and (b) exemplify either a continuity or change
3. Periodization

(a) Explain a specific piece of evidence which illustrates X (e.g., a traditional historical period)
(b) Explain another specific piece of evidence which illustrates X
(c) Explain a specific piece of evidence which disproves X

(a) Select one of the following events and argue for why it best illustrates the beginning of X (e.g., a traditional historical time period or event)
   a. A
   b. B
   c. C
(b) Explain a specific piece of evidence which illustrates your choice in (a)
(c) Make an argument for why one of the other options is not the better choice

(a) Select one of the following events and argue for why it represents a turning point in U.S. History
   a. A
   b. B
   c. C
(b) Explain a specific piece of evidence which illustrates your choice in (a)
(c) Explain a specific piece of evidence which would disprove your point in (a) and (b)

Skill Type II: Comparison and Contextualization

4. Comparison

(a) Explain one specific similarity between X and Y (e.g., two different historical periods)
(b) Explain another specific similarity between X and Y
(c) Explain one specific difference between X and Y

(a) Explain one specific characteristic of X (e.g., historical period, group, or characteristic)
(b) Explain a contradictory characteristic of X
(c) Account for the differences between (a) and (b) within X

(a) Explain one specific similarity between X and Y (e.g., two different historical periods)
(b) Explain one specific difference between X and Y
(c) Account for the difference or similarity between (a) and (b)

5. Contextualization

(a) Explain the point of view of the stimulus
(b) Explain one specific historical event or concept which supports (a)
(c) Explain one specific historical event or concept which contradicts (a)
Contextualization, cont.

(a) Account for the historical trend in the stimulus (Map, Chart, or Graph)
(b) Explain one specific piece of evidence which reacted to the trend in the stimulus
(c) Explain one specific piece of evidence which resulted from the trend in the stimulus

**Skill Type III: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence**

6. Historical Argument

(a) Account for the differences between the two authors (e.g., two pieces of historical argumentation)
(b) Explain a specific piece of historical evidence which supports the first author
(c) Explain a specific piece of historical evidence which supports the second author

(a) Explain a specific piece of evidence which contradicts the first author
(b) Explain a specific piece of evidence which contradicts the second author
(c) Account for the differences between the two authors

7. Appropriate Use of Relevant Historical Evidence

**Skill Type IV: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis**

8. Interpretation

9. Synthesis