Social Studies at the AP Level: A Veteran Teacher's Perspective

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The samples and suggestions that follow are based on experiences gathered during 15 years of teaching AP U.S. Government and AP Macroeconomics as semester courses, five years of work as a Reader for the AP U.S. Government Exam, five years as a regional consultant in economics, and one year as a workshop consultant trainer in economics. As campus department chairperson, I have also had ample opportunities to observe and assist teachers of AP and Pre-AP courses in history, psychology, and geography. I hope that these samples are a useful guide to the styles of materials that help in all of the social studies courses.

What Kinds of Skills Will Students Learn in Social Studies at the AP Level?

Analytical Reading

Since one goal of these courses is earning university credit by exam, teachers should consider the requirements of typical college classes. Lectures aim to provide summaries and insights, with much of the course curriculum to be completed by student readings and research. Typical high school classes have more class hours than in university semesters, yet most high school students are not able to tackle college reading requirements. That being stated, probably the biggest goal of AP social studies classes is to build reading skills. The AP curriculum is thorough, and students must be willing to read critically in order to flourish. University-level texts are used for the most part, and an emphasis on steady reading progress is a must. In history courses, the ability of students to understand bias, source validity, and interpretation is especially keen. Many AP veterans use text readings and supplemental readers as the main form of homework. There isn't enough lecture time to cover all topics without some additional effort by the students.

Potential reading sources are as numerous as the styles of AP teachers. The most difficult decisions are in finding works that are scholarly but readable, relevant to the curriculum, and not overly biased to only one political viewpoint. For government and U.S. history courses, the book *Founding Brothers* is a superior summary of the

early years of the Constitution and the founding of the two-party system. Having classes study this work by Joseph Ellis gives a full background of this critical era and saves class time in covering the themes. Be aware of the documentary video that was made from the book. Another fine reader for government is *In Our Defense* by Alderman and Kennedy. This includes readable descriptions of court disputes involving all of the 10 amendments and is easily broken into sections that can spread across the semester.

The summary *New Ideas from Dead Economists* by Todd Buchholtz is one of the most readable books ever written about this science and allows the teacher to cover all necessary data concerning the historic background of philosophers from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman. Any of these kinds of books can be used for summer assignments that some districts encourage before an AP class is started or as homework readings during the span of the class. Tests and daily grades are simple to create as well.

Supplemental readers can be accumulated in several ways. Some teachers collect class sets, order class sets from departmental funds, or build sets using campus AP funds. AP students often want their own copies, and it is usually easy to make bulk orders through local warehouse suppliers or large bookstores. Large discounts are usually offered for teacher orders.

In middle school, practice and progress is established with shorter assignments that utilize articles or essays. Often readings are pro and con arguments or primary versus secondary source comparisons. One example is the *Washington Post National Weekly Edition* and its great opinion articles and essays. In this manner, the classes are trained in the kinds of analysis that will strengthen students' work in other subjects, on statewide standardized tests, AP Exams, and university entrance exams. The benefits are numerous.

Writing

Every AP Exam in social studies contains a free-response section that accounts for 30 to 50 percent of the overall score. The label "free-response" is chosen with care here, instead of using the term "essay." Polished writing is a skill that benefits all students, but the form of writing for AP Exams bears a little explaining. The focus is on quality data, concise presentation of key facts, and clear demonstrations of knowledge. Many students make the mistake of emphasizing a quantity of paragraphs and forget to focus on the questions asked and the data required. Training classes in the ways AP Exams are scored will help all students improve their forms of writing, presentations of information, and abilities to draw conclusions.

The reason for using this kind of free-response writing is the structure of the grading system. When hundreds of Readers grade hundreds of thousands of free-response questions, the system must be structured to give every student an equal reading and fair score without regard to which Reader picks up their booklet. This is accomplished first in the way the questions are phrased. Specific data is requested for each subject matter.

Examine this question from the 2003 AP U.S. Government and Politics Exam:

> Presidential approval ratings fluctuate over the course of each presidential administration. Identify two factors that decrease presidential approval, and explain why each factor has that effect. Identify two factors that increase presidential approval, and explain why each factor has that effect.

Without worrying about the correct answers, note the careful format. The students must earn specific points. First they are expected to know four items that affect presidential ratings. Then they are required to go the extra analytical step and explain. When AP Readers look for explanations, they hope for the depth of understanding that marks college learning.

The 2002 AP Macroeconomics Exam had a question on international trade. Analyze how the phrasing and expectations are similar to the government question:

> Initially, the real interest rates in the U.S. and Japan are equal to 7 percent. The real interest rate in the U.S. increases to 8 percent while the real interest in Japan decreases to 6 percent. How and why will capital flows be affected by this change in real interest rates?

Again, students must answer on multiple levels, in this case discussing "how" and then explaining "why." Grading this kind of question is efficient in easily recognizing points earned and seeing the depth of the student's understanding. Veteran teachers take advantage of the numerous Released Exam samples for their own grades and soon learn to structure other questions in this format.

When students spend time writing introductions, repetitive summaries, opinion essays, and so forth, they gain no points and only waste time. A wonderfully written essay might not earn any points because the specific data requested was not given.

What is gained by the AP approach? Students in AP classes build skills of directness, accuracy of data, and presentations. These talents will serve them well in university, science, and business climates.

Logical Analysis

Multiple-choice sections make up the other portion of AP Exams. These questions are designed to challenge in at least three ways. There are usually enough questions in the limited amount of time given for the student to spend no more than one minute on each question. There are five answer choices. Finally, the correct choice usually requires the student to understand subtle turns of definitions. All of these challenges help prepare students for state exams, PSAT/NMSQT, SAT®, ACT, and university tests. Students who take AP multiple-choice exams find themselves improving steadily in other subjects and on standardized tests.

Publishers of college texts provide ample test banks of this caliber. They are available as discs or hard-copy supplements. Many teachers use the questions from AP Released Exams. At least every five years, a complete exam is published by the College Board. There are 60 multiple-choice questions per exam in economics; other social studies exams have similar resources. Answer keys and graphs showing student success patterns are also very helpful.

Math, Graphing, Charts

AP social studies courses do not ignore skills in related areas; they strengthen them. Exams contain short readings to interpret, charts to decipher, graphs to create, and basic math problems that relate to subjects like government, economics, history, and psychology. Students should improve their understanding of statistical data and possible data biases. On the economics exams, students also must create basic graphs. Again, all of these skills are linked to curricula for all age groups, building gradually to students working successfully at a university level.

The following is a sample activity that introduces the use of simple math data in economics. Topics such as real GDP, unemployment, inflation, and phases of the business cycle are combined to show the ups and downs of recent times. Students need only search for increasing or decreasing real GDP in order to find the cycles, but discussions and writing assignments about correlations to inflation and international events can broaden the use of the sheet. Students can also be asked to graph some of the trends.

Business Cycles

(Adapted from "Activity 14" in *Advanced Placement Economics: Macroeconomics, Student Activities* by John S. Morton.)

The table "The U.S. Economy, from 1970" contains information for the U.S. economy from 1970 to 2000. For each year, first identify whether the economy was in an expansion (E) or a contraction (C) phase. Then, go back and pick out the years that correspond to a business-cycle peak and mark them with a (P) and the years that correspond to a trough and mark them with a (T).

Business cycles go from trough to trough. Count complete and partially represented cycles.

Number of cycles shown = _____.

Year	Real GDP in 1996 Dollars (Billions)	% Change from the Previous Year	% Civilian Unemployment	Inflation Rate for the CPI (December to December)	Phase(s) of the Business Cycle Represented
1970	3,578	0.2	4.9	5.7	C,T
1971	3,697	3.3	5.9	4.4	
1972	3,898	5.4	5.6	3.2	
1973	4,123	5.8	4.9	6.2	
1974	4,099	–0.6	5.6	11.0	
1975	4,084	–0.4	8.5	9.1	
1976	4,311	5.6	7.7	5.8	
1977	4,411	4.6	7.1	6.5	
1978	4,761	5.5	6.1	7.6	
1979	4,912	3.2	5.8	11.3	
1980	4,900	–0.2	7.1	13.5	
1981	5,021	2.5	7.6	10.3	
1982	4,919	–2.0	9.7	6.2	
1983	5,132	4.3	9.6	3.2	
1984	5,505	7.3	7.5	4.3	
1985	5,717	3.8	7.2	3.6	
1986	5,912	3.4	7.0	1.9	

1987	6,113	3.4	6.2	3.6	
1988	6,368	4.2	5.5	4.1	
1989	6,591	3.5	5.3	4.8	
1990	6,707	1.8	5.5	5.4	
1991	6,676	–0.5	6.7	4.2	
1992	6,880	3.0	7.4	3.0	
1993	7,062	2.7	6.9	3.0	
1994	7,347	4.0	6.1	2.6	
1995	7,543	2.7	5.6	2.8	
1996	7,813	3.6	5.4	3.0	
1997	8,159	4.4	4.9	2.3	
1998	8,515	4.4	4.5	1.6	
1999	8,875	4.2	4.2	2.2	
2000	9,318	5.0	4.0	3.4	

Data Source: *Economics: Principles, Problems, and Policies*, 15th ed., by Campbell R. McConnell and Stanley L. Brue

Tips and Strategies

Timing

A universal response to the curriculum of these higher-level courses is that there is insufficient time to cover all topics. Shortcuts and hints are critical. Most teachers find that one of the best ways is to create a manageable goal of time for each of the units. This can be found in a quick and easy format: the AP course outline. These outlines provide approximate percentages of the exam that will be devoted to each of the topics. Each teacher should take their semester schedule and plan to use the appropriate percent of days for those topics. Lesson planning and scope and sequences are set quickly and easily. Middle school teachers can select the appropriate units that their subjects include and discover the amount of time that should be spent on those topics.

The sample that follows is from a recent summer institute. In this region, most schools use a seven-period day, where each period lasts about 50 minutes, or block schedules, where periods last 90 minutes. The seven-period schedule lasts an 18-week semester; the blocks last either nine weeks of daily classes or 18 weeks of every-other-day classes. Turning the AP percentage guides into teaching days sets the goals for each AP instructor. After the chart is an example of a recent syllabus created for a semester of AP Macroeconomics.

Teaching Days
Schedule Projections

Course Description Outline Topics/Percents	Traditional Schedule Approx. Number of Days =	A/B Block Schedule Approx. Number of Days =	Accelerated Block Schedule Approx. Number of Days =
I. Basic Concepts **5 to 10%**			
II. Measurement of Economic Performance **8 to 12%**			
III. National Income and Price Determinants **70 to 75%**			
A. Aggregate Supply **8 to 12%**			
B. Aggregate Demand **25 to 35%**			
C. Money and Bank **10 to 15%**			
D. Fiscal-Monetary **10 to 15%**			
E. Trade-offs **8 to 10%**			
IV. Growth **4 to 6%**			
V. International Finance, Exchange Rates **4 to 6%**			

General Scope and Sequence
AP Macroeconomics (One-Semester Course)

Text: McConnell and Brue, 15th ed.
Seven-Period Day, Six-Week Grading Periods

Week	Chapters, Topics, Notes	TEKS 118.2C
1	Chapter 1: The Nature and Method of Economics Chapter 2: The Economizing Problem	1AB, 4AB, 5AB, 12, 21C
2	Chapter 3: Individual Markets: Demand and Supply Chapter 4: The Market System (minimal coverage)	7AB
3	Chapter 5: The U.S. Economy: Private and Public Sectors (do Chapter 6 later)	2D, 9ABC, 17A
4 5	Chapter 7: Measuring Domestic Output	16AB
6	Chapter 8: Introduction to Economic Growth and Instability	16AB , 19A
7	Chapter 9: Build Aggregate Models	8C, 17B, 18B, 19C
1	Chapter 10: Aggregate Expenditures: The Multiplier ...	11B
2	Chapter 11: Aggregate Demand and Supply	AP
3 4	Chapter 12: Fiscal Policy	AP
5	Chapter 13: Money and Banking (from Chapter 14: Money Multiplier)	8AB, 11AB
6	Chapter 15: Monetary Policy	16AB
1	Chapter 16: Extending the Analysis of Aggregate Supply	AP
2	Chapter 17: Economic Growth and the New Economy (skip Chapter 18)	27A
3	Chapter 19: Disputes over Macro Theory and Policy	19A
4	Chapter 6: The U.S. in the Global Economy Chapter 37: International Trade Chapter 38: Exchange Rates, the Balance of Payments ...	13C, 14AB, 21A
	(Usually the week of AP Exams)	
5 6	Stock Markets, Taxes, IRS ...	11ABC, 17A

The notations in the TEKS column are syllabus codes required for lesson plans in Texas. They cover the required materials of any level economics class. Note the important sections that are found only in the AP class.

Homework

AP classes present a wonderful opportunity to move beyond worksheet problems. Students should learn to read for analytical purposes. They will learn to understand writers' biases, discover pro and con articles, and sharpen skills of differentiating between fact and opinion. Numerous supplemental texts, articles, and guides are available for such assignments, plus plans for follow-up discussions and grading.

The homework/reading guide listed here is an example of the way students can be shown how to prepare and what kinds of topics an assignment of this nature covers. Such a reading assignment leaves precious class time for numerous other topics of interest.

Study Guide
Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation

Essay Portion

Potential topics will be:
1. What was the localist/nationalist split that created the U.S. two-party system?
2. Why was Washington so key in establishing presidential powers?
3. What was Jefferson's role in creating presidential and federal powers?

You will answer one question for 40 points. Be ready to give examples/data from the book. The essay will be graded using a rubric system. This means that I write a list of correct responses (from the book) and compare the list to your answers.

For this test: No introductory paragraphs are needed. Do **not** start the essays by restating the question. This is a waste of time and a grading hindrance!

Multiple-Choice Portion (60 points of the total grade)

There will be 20 questions. The following terms/topics will be covered:

The amount of advanced planning done by the Founders in order to create this republic
Key and major issues facing the early republic
The heritage of the Founders versus their potential positions back in English society
Leaders of the early split into two parties
The controversy over "assumption"
The significance of Jefferson's "Dinner"
Flaws in the Constitution
The early controversies over slavery
The Whiskey Rebellion
Washington's second term and the problems
The split between Jefferson and Washington
Madison's place as a political leader
The two emerging party groups
Adams's presidency

Efficient Writing and Grading

A great starting point is to use free-response questions from a Released Exam as class assignments. Students learn how to be direct and complete in answering all parts of the questions, and teachers find that they improve test writing and grading skills. Using the rubrics employed on the AP Exam is speedy and very fair, and it offers a complete way to evaluate student strengths and understanding.

A useful training method is to have students limit their time on the writing in order to simulate the exams. Depending on the subject, the students have to learn to answer three or four separate questions and use no more than 25 minutes per question. Another tool is to have students score each other's answers using a rubric created by the teacher. A third approach is to have students work out a topic, craft questions in the AP style, and then create rubrics for each one. All of these methods reinforce effective writing.

During the Reading, the exams are scored with speed and accuracy using the rubric method. Readers can finish a free-response answer in a couple of minutes and not have to stop and mark on the answer page in any way. If a teacher is able to do this during the school year, hours of grading time are saved, and the students are still able to easily understand if they performed up to expectations. Either they gave clear examples and explanations or they didn't.

Benefits of Social Studies at the AP and Pre-AP Levels

Student Interest

Courses where students volunteer to participate have a distinct advantage. The expectations are strong and easy to support. The rewards are real, especially if they involve extra grade points. When building an AP program in a school or district, teachers should support the idea of honors grade points for such classes. It will become a magnet for motivated students. Even if the grade points don't matter or can't be used in this way, students quickly realize the benefit of taking nationally recognized courses with internationally recognized benefits. The AP Program has earned the status of quality. Motivated students show up, work diligently, and make great strides of understanding.

The College Board's expressed goals of access and equality are great ways to involve students not familiar with AP or not expecting to succeed at such courses. Helping such students can be one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching and can change the atmosphere of an entire school.

Parental Involvement

Most experienced AP teachers would report that parental support is a norm for these subjects. Parents understand the demands, encourage thorough work, and want their children challenged. They also have a great sense of pride in the successes gained, whether it be the simple idea that their child is attempting something of quality, earning an improving grade, or getting a superior exam grade. The recognition of AP grades by almost all universities in the United States stands as a key draw. Students can transfer the grades between schools, and they don't lose them if they choose to attend community colleges first. AP makes academic and financial sense.

Support for AP

Principals and counselors at most schools find Pre-AP and AP programs a sign of academic excellence, campus pride, and sometimes monetary rewards. States have granted financial assistance in helping students take the exams or improve grades. Many of these funds help campuses buy resources that further enhance the overall AP programs.

Participants in AP Vertical Teams and Pre-AP programs as well as AP teachers soon discover many international contacts. From electronic discussion groups (EDGs) to friends made at conferences, there are countless sources of materials, information, and moral support. Working with motivated educators is invigorating and provides new interests for every class and semester. The Web-based EDGs (found on AP Central) have daily updates and advice messages. Any question can be posted, and an answer is soon provided by several experts.

AP workshops are full of course-specific lectures that help with shortcuts, exam reviews, lesson plans, and guides. Summer Institutes are the most focused and intense ways to learn how to teach your subject. The instructors help create most of the topics needed to build a successful course and give wonderful examples of lessons that work. The following syllabus page shows the kind of materials given out at a typical summer institute. After attending a weekend session or two and completing a summer institute, even a novice to the field can begin to feel prepared for their first set of AP scholars.

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Lesson Planning and Teacher Prep Time

In addition to all of the materials gained from conferences, sharing with other teachers in the same building becomes a major way to improve instruction. Vertical Teams give teachers at all levels great lesson ideas for improving students' work. They give a sense of purpose for each grade level in building on one another's curriculum.

Students learn to value the steps they take in improving their levels of analysis. Curriculum is matched across subject areas. English teachers discover that assigning novels that relate to the time periods being studied in history helps give context to the readers. Social studies teachers find their work simpler when the students have a background of the times and characters. As mentioned before, the relative ease of creating and grading written work gives teachers more options in the time spent on paperwork.

From the viewpoint of a teacher who has been involved with AP for over a decade, there are benefits for everyone involved. A challenging subject helps keep the teacher's involvement and level of interest high. Teachers work with motivated students and grateful parents. Educators from around the globe are available for assistance. Goals are accessible and very rewarding. The curriculum is current and constantly updated. Students benefit in multiple ways. What more could a teacher request?

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