

How to succeed in US History: A Guide for Students and Parents

The following is designed for students who wish to know how the course is structured, but also for parents who might want to monitor their student's progress in the course or help if they feel their student is not achieving the kind of grades they would like. It describes the kinds of course materials we are using and the kind of record-keeping and study patterns their student is supposed to be engaged in to succeed in the course.

US History is a two-semester course which introduces and follows key events in the gradual development of the contemporary world. The course is structured around the framework provided by our textbook, *The American Vision*, which is consistent with the state of California history and social science standards, but the course is designed to exceed those somewhat limited standards so that a student who does well in the course should be able to do well on the AP US History exams.

- *The American Vision* divides into six units, and twenty-one chapters (with a varying number of sections in each chapter); you can see how these divisions are distributed by looking at the table of contents of *The American Vision*.
 - Each of the course's two semesters consists of three units of *The American Vision* with their concomitant chapters and sections: both semesters of the course are structured around these divisions. The entire two-semester course, then, consists of six units of *The American Vision* (three per semester) with two final exams.
 - Graded testing for the course consists of quizzes on the textbook's chapters and more detailed tests on its units along with the cumulative final exam. That means that there are ten chapter quizzes and three unit tests in the first semester and eleven chapter quizzes and three unit tests in the second semester as well as a semester-comprehensive final exam each semester.
 - Students receive a set of two documents for every section: a self-correcting quiz and a homework assignment called "guided readings." The self-correcting quizzes are supplied with answer sheets so students can test themselves, and I grade the guided reading assignments which are due on an almost daily basis and return them in time for students to use them to study for the quizzes and tests. When answers are marked wrong on the guided readings, students are supposed to correct them so they can use them for accurate study guides.
- Students are given a course-binder at the beginning of the semester, and they are required to keep each of the documents mentioned above, including the graded tests, the homework sheets, the self-correcting quizzes and any other handouts, in the binder and to present the complete binder on the day of each unit test. The binder is meant to function as a practical study-guide for chapter quizzes, unit tests and ultimately for the final exam, but also as an organizational exercise valuable in itself as a model for how to organize class materials for any course.

- The course-binder is supposed to contain all self-correcting quizzes, guided reading assignments, chapter quizzes, and unit tests and is supposed to be accompanied by the spiral notebook on the day of each of the three unit tests.
 - The course-binder and the spiral notebook are graded at the time of the unit tests and this grade is added into the unit test score. The grade reflects the completeness of the collection, and the notes, and also assesses whether or not the student appears to be making use of the material they have collected. This practice gives students a chance to receive up to 20 test points on the unit test if they have organized their work.
 - Students can compare the material in the binder to the list of chapter sections to determine if any material is missing from the binder.
- Vocabulary lists, important to student success on quizzes and tests, occur at the beginning and end of each section in *The American Vision*: in the “Guide to Reading” box at the beginnings of sections, and in the “Section Assessment” box at the end of each section. In the “Guide to Reading” boxes, the vocabulary is divided into “content vocabulary,” “academic vocabulary,” and “people and terms to identify.” Some students find it helpful to prepare flash-cards on these vocabulary items which they turn in with their binders. Those students have uniformly achieved higher scores on tests and quizzes.
 - Students are also supposed to know a growing list of particular Constitutional Amendments which accumulate during the semesters as they occur in the timeline we are studying: By the end of the first semester students are supposed to know the first ten (the Bill of Rights), the 13th, 14th, and 15th (the ‘Civil War Amendments) the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th (the progressive era amendments); by the end of the second semester they are supposed to know the 20th and 21st (the Roosevelt era amendments) and the 22nd, 24th, and 26th Amendments. Once these are introduced, they can show up as questions on any exam. A set of flash-cards can also help students to absorb these facts.

In summary, if students can define each of the vocabulary items and master the material in the self-correcting quizzes and the guided reading assignments, they should be able to do very well on the chapter quizzes and unit tests and subsequently on the final exam, with the caveat that each exam requires careful preparation and review and in particular the final exam requires review of the entire semester’s work.