**THEMES-Tutorial**

Themes are ongoing patterns that persist over time and place. The nice folks in AP Land have identified 7 major themes that they see in American history:

American and National Identity

Work, Exchange, and Technology

Migration and Settlement

Politics and Power

America in the World

Geography and the Environment

Culture and Society

Yes, we know these words are so big and vague as to make them almost useless to you. Fear not --we will explore each one below and help you understand it in language that makes sense to. The best way to make sense of the themes is to figure out what questions they enable you to answer. It is also logical that the same entity might have more than one theme. Consider President Lincoln. Certainly Politics and Power (he was our 16th President and saved the Union), but also Culture and Society (his articulation of what it meant to be America, what liberty was and could be still resonates for us).

For each of the seven themes, we are going to help you understand it a bit more fully by starting with your own life and then seeing how it works in history.

1. So, let’s begin with one of the themes, American and National Identity. According to AP Speak:

This theme focuses on the formation of both American national identity and group identities in U.S. history. Students should be able to explain how various identities, cultures, and values have been preserved or changed in different contexts of U.S. history, with special attention given to the formation of gender, class, racial, and ethnic identities. Students should be able to explain how these sub-identities have interacted with each other and with larger conceptions of American national identity.

**huh????**

**Identity is a way to answer the question: Who Am I?**

This question may be asked by individuals or groups. Sometimes other people answer it for us.

So if someone asked you who you are, how might you answer that question?

Think about all the different things you do in your life, relationships you have, groups you belong to. All of those affect your identity. Are you the same in every situation and setting? How does our identity change based on whom we are with and over time?

All of these questions could be asked of individuals and people throughout American history.

Think about the word REBEL. How can it generate both positive and negative impressions? Like most things, it depends on when and how it is being used. During the American Revolution, the Colonists used it to praise and the British to condemn. Fast forward another 90 years and during the Civil War--in the North-- bad, in the South --good. You get the idea. Identity is fluid, not fixed.

How can themes help you prepare for the test (which is why you are here in the first place)?

All historic events illustrate at one least one theme.

Let’s listen to Martin Luther King’s, *I Have a Dream Speech* [insert link to audio]

In 1963 national Civil Rights leader, Dr. King gave a speech at the Washington Mall proclaiming his dream of a better America where race would not limit the ability to achieving one’s goals. How does this event speak to the theme of identity?

Dr. King was speaking about a group that had been long oppressed, both officially during slavery but also in the century which followed, but he saw hope for it to change and improve and overcome its long history of discrimination. Certainly the inauguration 50 years later of the nation’s first black president at the other end of the mall marked the realization of some of Dr. King’s dream.

**Identity is the consideration of who we are, as individuals and as part of a larger group, understanding that it is not a fixed thing but changes based on circumstances.**

2. Work, Exchange, and Technology

According to AP, students should focus on the development of American economies, with emphasis on agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing. Students should examine the ways that different economic and labor systems, technological innovations, and government policies have shaped American society. Students should explore the lives of working people and the relationships among social classes, racial and ethnic groups, and men and women, including the availability of land and labor, national and international economic developments, and the role of government support and regulation.

**huh???**

What makes you, or something you do, valuable? What kinds of products or services do you need? Want? Why do you choose certain products or services over others? Where do those products come from? How do they get to you? What factors affect something’s value?

This one’s got a lot of moving parts. But so do economies. For this theme, we have to ask ourselves how our economic decisions impact one another. How are economies established and how/why do they change over time? What role does technology play? You’ll need to think as much about why things have value to an individual, as you think about how much our economic perspectives are shaped by our social, ethnic, racial, and gender-based experiences. What are the social impacts of all of these economic moving parts? The economic choices available to an Ohio woman in 1830 were incredibly limited compared to the early 1940’s during World War II, and even with great strides in economic freedom and equality in the seventy years since, a thriving feminist movement still agitates for change in the early 21st century.

Let’s look at an example:

**Granger Laws**

These state laws regulating railroad rates at the insistence of local farmers’ organizations are a great illustration of the way the American economy can impact and be affected by people from incredibly varying regions and walks of life. Railroad shareholders in New York City or Pennsylvania began to see resistance to what midwestern farmers saw as unpredictable and detrimental shipping rate changes. Because the farmers depended on the railroads to move their products to distant markets, they felt manipulated by distant forces beyond their control. In response, state legislatures in places like Indiana began to pass regulation in order to relieve their loud and discontented constituents. These laws led to questions about just who held the authority over railroads, and how much they had. Eventually, railroads would fall under the umbrella of interstate commerce and federal authority.

Additionally, what was daily life like for the average person in any one of these groups? Did that experience reflect the experience of the majority of Americans at the time? How did that experience shape a working person’s life and the larger economy? Decisions of slaves and landowners affected the decisions of New England merchants and textile workers. This theme might seem like a huge, nebulous cloud of economic possibilities, but think of it as an open-ended theme that gives you the opportunity to see economic impact on any group at any time in American history.

**In sum, who/what made up the American economy and how did individuals and groups within the economy affect each other?**

3. Migration and Settlement

According to AP, students should focus on why and how the various people who moved to, from, and within the United States adapted to their new social and physical environments. Students should examine migration across borders and long distances, including the slave trade and internal migration, and how both newcomers and indigenous inhabitants transformed North America. The theme also illustrates how people responded when “borders crossed them.” Students should explore the ideas, beliefs, traditions, technologies, religions, and gender roles that migrants/immigrants and annexed peoples brought with them and the impact these factors had on both these peoples and on U.S. society.

**huh???**

This one is as critical as it is simple. If you’ve ever moved, why did it happen? What challenges did it present you with? How did it shape you, and what did you or those who came with you interact with those who were already there?

Why does movement of people happen? How does it happen? Is it sudden? Organized? Impeded? This theme is pivotal in understanding the experience of the 17th century Jamestown settler as it is an African slave (whose journey alone is a tale in itself). It helps us see patterns of motivation, human behavior, and social attitudes.

For example:

**Chicago Riots, 1919**

African Americans who moved north during WWI were motivated by the sharp increase in the availability of manufacturing jobs, but the violence they encountered in Chicago in 1919 at the hands of their new white northern neighbors flashed a familiar pattern of racially-charged behavior. This, in turn, helps us to draw conclusions about the social attitudes in response to the influx of African Americans in northern industrial cities.

We can also think about the impact of what we bring with us when we move. Ideas, food, art, culture, language, religion, principles, and disease are but a few of the things that are exchanged when we move. How did each of these exchanges impact Native Americans as they came in more and more contact with Europeans? Various native peoples make important historical examples of what happens when “borders cross you.” In the 1850’s, both Mexican nationals and people like the Apache found themselves being crossed by the border as a result of the Mexican War. The decades long resistance by Cochise, Geronimo, and other Apache in the southwest is just one consequence of the long Western march of American borders.

**In sum, why do we move, how does it affect us, and those we encounter? Rinse and repeat.**

4. Politics and Power

Students should examine ongoing debates over the role of the state in society and its potential as an active agent for change. This includes mechanisms for creating, implementing, or limiting participation in the political process and the resulting social effects, as well as the changing relationships among the branches of the federal government and among national, state, and local governments. Students should trace efforts to define or gain access to individual rights and citizenship and survey the evolutions of tensions between liberty and authority in different periods of U.S. history.

**huh???**

Do you have power? How do you define it? What authority do you have or hope to have? Who should make decisions that impact your life and your choices?

Who holds power? How is it exercised? At the minimum, a sense of self-determination and self-ownership have been at the heart of disputes over liberty and authority. Who should make decisions that impact your life and your choices? The ways in which individuals and groups have sought to limit or extend liberty for themselves or others provide most of our story. How free have Americans of any race, gender, ethnicity, or belief system been at various times in our history? What consolidated power for those that governed, and how did systems and values of government change over time? What power have different groups of Americans held, and how did they exercise that power? How did those without power attempt to obtain it? What choices were available to oppressed groups at various times? What could most slaves do to resist the dehumanization they faced in slavery?

For example:

**Stono Rebellion (South Carolina,** [**9/9/1739**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgJMyU8kbLw)**)**

This armed rebellion was overpowered by the South Carolina militia, but showed the lengths some were willing to go to in order to obtain freedom and agency in their own lives. Ironically, legislation was passed afterward to punish slaveholders who were too hard on their slaves and the colony also banned importation of African slaves for a decade, but slaves lost even more; rights to assembly and education.

**In sum: Who had power? Who wanted it? And how did those struggles impact American society?**

5. America in the World

According to the AP, students should focus on the global context in which the United States originated and developed as well as the influence of the United States on world affairs. Students should examine how various world actors (such as people, states, organizations, and companies)

have competed for the territory and resources of the North American continent, influencing the development of both American and world societies and economies. Students should also investigate how American foreign policies and military actions have affected the rest of the world as well as social issues within the United States itself.

**HUH???**

How do you interact with the things that come into your space, your orbit? What things do you control and what things shape you? How have these changed over time? What constants are there? And how do these interactions affect how you see yourself and how you present yourself to others?

This interplay between image, action, and identity exists for nations as well as individuals. You need to think about how the idea of America became the physical power and influence in global affairs that is America. What can we control? How did we gain this control, through what means? How do we protect our interests at home and abroad?

Concepts like Manifest Destiny in the 1840s that justified Westward Expansion are as much a part of this as is fighting Communism in the Cold War in the 1940s but so is the final scene of *Mad Men* when buying the world a Coke was a way to spread consumerism to the far reaches of the globe. How did we conquer our own territory and then spread to other places through trade, ideas, religious missionary work, and military might? What are and have been the limits to our ability to shape the world in our own image based on our desires and the eagerness of others to embrace what we have to offer? We might want to buy the world a Coke but do they even want to drink it? And do we even agree as a nation what this America is? As time has passed, who decides what America even stands for as foreign policy reflect and propel domestic politics. We might have a “lamp besides our golden door” but far too often many within our nation have wanted to dim it.

Consider, for example, the Smoot-Hawley Tariff of 1930.

This protectionist tariff was passed during the first months of the Great Depression as a way to protect American industry from rapidly falling prices. The result was that it hurt the ability of other nations to buy our products and limited foreign trade and further damaged our economy, extending the financial crisis both at home and abroad, deepening the world wide financial problems for years to come and allowing for the rise of extremist politicians.

**In sum, how did the idea of America develop here and how did we spread it throughout the world?**

6. Geography and the Environment

This theme examines the role of environment, geography, and climate in both constraining and shaping human actions. Students should analyze the interaction between the environment and Americans in their efforts to survive and thrive. Students should also explore efforts to interpret, preserve, manage, or exploit natural and man-made environments, as well as the historical contexts within which interactions with the environment have taken place.

**HUH???**

This theme is pretty concrete. How does where you live affect what happens to you and in turn, how does what you do to your environment further influence your life? Again, what is true for individuals is true for groups and nations. The key is here to to consider who makes these choices. A small group of men decided to commit the antebellum South to an agricultural economy based on the growth of cotton. An awful lot of results stemmed from the decision of that relatively small group of individuals. How much does the land determine what transpires and how has technology enabled us to alter what nature initially provided. How do our continued actions squander or save what we have? And again, who is making those choices?

Consider the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

Despite great concerns over the Constitutional authority to do so, President Jefferson authorized the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in in 1803 from France. This bargain of $15 million doubled the size of the country and enabled his vision of a nation of small farmers to grow and prosper and resulted in the increase of democracy for white males as universal suffrage pervaded the area within two decades. That it also allowed for the expansion of a slave culture and encroachment on native Americans to accomplish the fulfillment of this vision was the great paradox of this expansion.

**In sum, how does where we live affect what happens to us and in turn, how does what we do to our environment further influence our lives?**

 7. Culture and Society

This theme explores the roles that ideas, beliefs, social mores, and creative expression have played in shaping the United States. Students should examine the development of aesthetic, moral, religious, scientific, and philosophical principles and consider how these principles have affected individual and group actions. Students should analyze the interactions between beliefs and communities, economic values, and political movements, including attempts to change American society to align it with specific ideals.

**HUH???**

What do you believe? Where did these ideals and values come from? Are they consistent with one another or do they sometimes represent conflicting positions? If they do, you are in good company. The story of America is the story of paradox. Proclamations of freedom, the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness as it was routinely denied to vast majorities of its residents.

America is a big country and over 500 years have allowed for the inclusion of countless ideas, tenets, creeds, and values. Wave after wave of immigrants have brought their own value systems, morality, and behaviors. There has been harmony and conflict among individuals and groups

There is often as much diversity within groups as between them. Generational divides, to say nothing of race, class and gender continue to divide as well as propel us forward as a nation. So what is it, if anything that unites us? And how can different individuals and groups use the same ideas, e.g. liberty, in very different ways. How can blanket ideas mask more diversity than they reveal? Do we have any common points of view as a people?

Frankly, these are enormous questions and at this point, it is simply enough to notice that they exist and are organizing principles. How they came to our shores, and how they give meaning to our lives, now and in the past is sufficient for you to understand.

Consider this political cartoon related to the Immigration Quota Act of 1921

<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/05/e5/57/05e557f53e5a6fcde7499e88f34caeab.jpg>

The result of years of intensive lobbying by nativists, unions and others led to the first of two major pieces of legislation in the 1920s which set the number of immigrants who were allowed to enter the nation based on a quota system. Efforts to restrict immigration had existed for decades and had covered the Chinese, illiterates, those deemed immoral and otherwise unfit. The irony that at one point, every group had itself been new to our nation, seemed lost on those calling to restrict the next wave, as they proclaimed the danger and impurity of the latest group to arrive on our shores. In this post war period, xenophobia predominated rather than the openness and appreciation for newcomers which often characterized our public discourse and the private encouragement of business leaders who valued the cheap labor that successive waves of immigrants provided.

**In sum, How do common identified values, such as liberty and freedom, often mask deeper conflicts which drive policy and fuel negative rhetoric?**