

## Criteria for Standards in History/Social Studies/Social Sciences

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Over the past four decades, every state, federal district, and US territory has adopted some form of academic standards for history and social studies instruction in public schools, establishing expectations for classrooms from kindergarten to twelfth grade (K–12). As part of its mission to promote historical thinking in public life and professional integrity in history education, the American Historical Association offers guidance on state-level academic frameworks.

State standards serve a critical role in education policy. Depending on the quality of their content and efficacy of their application, they can either encourage or impede learning. Well-designed academic guidelines and benchmarks encourage practices that improve educational outcomes for all students; poorly designed standards stifle creativity, create unrealistic metrics for assessment, and may even make it difficult for students to grasp the foundations of history and historical thinking.

In form, content, and tone, standards in history and social studies vary significantly from state to state. Standards articulate broad goals, with much of the “how” and “why” left to teachers and districts. Some states prioritize skills, guiding questions, and/or learning outcomes. Others structure the curriculum around specific events, individuals, developments, and sources. Participants in debates about state standards sometimes frame the issue as a choice between skills and content. The AHA rejects this dichotomy. Core disciplinary concepts—beginning with context, continuity, chronology, and change over time—cannot be categorized as either content or skill. Historical thinking requires and integrates both.

Historical thinking also prepares us for an uncertain future, equipping students to ask questions, consider evidence, and think analytically. The ability to distinguish between primary and secondary sources enables readers to evaluate claims before accepting them as truth. Our society benefits when high school graduates can access, interpret, and apply evidence from historical documents and other sources, recognizing that there may be multiple ways of understanding the significance of a pivotal event.

The past provides raw materials. History begins when we start making connections. Our students learn to organize individual details—names and dates—into an understanding of what happened and why it matters. There is no value in memorizing a list of ancient emperors if a student can neither define empire nor apply this concept to Roman, Chinese, Aztec, Songhai, and Ottoman rulers. Exploring categories of analysis such as race, class, and gender allows historians to recognize social, cultural, and political change.

The AHA’s approach to state standards and related assessments starts from the premise that every student has the right to a history-rich education. Standards lay the groundwork for achieving this goal when they:

- Prioritize **student learning**
- Outline **achievable expectations** for teachers
- Emphasize the importance of dedicated **instructional time** for history

- Cultivate **historical awareness**
- Foreground **disciplinary concepts** that encompass both analysis and content knowledge

History-rich standards provide the strongest possible foundation for a system of public education that cultivates deep historical knowledge as well as the skills necessary to navigate our world and participate responsibly in shaping its future. We cannot expect students to achieve these goals without class time specifically devoted to history instruction organized coherently throughout the full course of the social studies curriculum.

## I. Context: What are state standards and who uses them?

State academic standards provide benchmarks for student achievement in public elementary and secondary schools. They are divided into individual standard criteria, each of which establishes expectations for content and/or skills that must be included in K–12 instruction.

Standards shape decisions at every level of education policy:

- In some **states**, academic standards structure standardized tests designed to assess individual students, schools, and districts.
- By providing **school districts** with frameworks for teacher training, professional development, curriculum assembly, and lesson planning, standards establish criteria for teacher evaluations and influence decisions about the adoption of textbooks and other instructional materials.
- Sixty percent of US history **teachers** surveyed by the AHA report using standards directly in their teaching. State and local variations in the data indicate that teachers use standards with greater frequency when they sketch out the scope and sequence of course content covered in actual classrooms. New teachers are especially appreciative of standards that clarify the order and emphasis of instruction.

Standards guide expectations for **parents, students, and the wider public**. While legible to professionals in the education sector, language used in academic standards is often inaccessible to those outside it. But standards need not be opaque. Historians and educators can help develop benchmarks that are clear, concise, and comprehensible.

## II. History-rich education

The following criteria outline foundational elements for history-rich education that can be adapted to account for local priorities. These criteria emphasize educational outcomes over particular details of form, content, and pedagogical methodology. History-rich education provides the time and resources necessary for students to develop a robust understanding of history. The AHA recommends that academic standards for history do the following:

- Center **student learning**. Standards must prioritize the developmental and educational needs of students, embracing proven pathways to facilitate learning. Clearly stated learning outcomes articulate the knowledge, concepts, and habits of mind students should develop over the course of their education.
- Provide **useful guidance to teachers**. If standards are to affect the quality of instruction, they must be written plainly and have clear application for classroom teaching. Standards should not prescribe curriculum or script instruction, but offer guidance on the order and emphasis of what ought to be

taught. Teachers should be able to look at a standards document and recognize its relevance to the course of study offered in their school and the scope of content covered in a typical academic year.

- Accentuate **disciplinary concepts** that draw on content knowledge and analytical skills. Sophisticated historical thinking requires a base knowledge of when things happened (chronology) and their sequence (cause and effect). Standards should situate historical examples (individuals, events, ideas, artifacts, etc.) within conceptual frameworks that highlight specific social, cultural, economic, technological, and political components and their mutual relationships.
- Emphasize **specific skills of historical analysis** adapted to appropriate grade levels rather than generic appeals to “critical thinking.” Skills specific to history include developing student capacities for the reading and analysis of primary documents, historical empathy, and evaluating the validity of various historical interpretations. Standards should clearly distinguish historical interpretation from mere opinion. History is a complex process grounded in ongoing debate about how to weigh evidence and narrate relationships between cause and consequence, structure and agency, change and continuity, contingency and context.
- Give clear guidance on **periodization and context**. Because historical developments occur in time, the ability to understand the sequence of events is crucial to historical coherence and developing the capacity to understand connections between past and present. Students should explore developments within historical periods (context) and how change distinguishes one period from another (periodization).
- Introduce **focused questions** that drive narrative and analysis. Framed at different scales, good historical questions organize the instructional objectives of a course unit, serve as the prompt for a student research project, or invite connections between the unique details of a historical episode and broader concepts in the humanities and social sciences. Exposure to good historical questions builds student capacity to develop, ask, and answer their own questions. Historical inquiry can be both open-ended and bounded by time and place. Its component questions allow for complexity, curiosity, ambiguity, multiple perspectives, meaningful analysis, evidence-based interpretations of change over time, and student ownership of learning.
- Be explicit regarding the **purpose and benefits of studying the past**. Doing so supports teachers in their classrooms as well as their department’s communication with parents and the school community. Historical awareness is crucial to the development of informed civic participation.
- Acknowledge, enable, and encourage the responsible **application of historical awareness to contemporary issues**. Everything has a history. The fruits of historical thinking anchor discussions of civic engagement and human connection—locally, nationally, and globally. Studying history unlocks tools for understanding the present, while instilling a productive mix of hope and humility about our efforts to shape an unscripted future. History courses that connect past and present provide collective and humanistic benefits, complementing the rest of the social studies curriculum.
- Stipulate the importance of **instructional time**. Students are far less likely to learn history if they are not given the opportunity to engage with it in the classroom. Given the current focus of assessment regimes, as well as state and federal funding, there are comparatively few requirements about the amount of instructional time given over to history education, especially in lower grades.
- Incorporate **global perspectives** throughout the social studies curriculum. The AHA’s extensive work on career preparedness in the classroom reveals that employers value the ability to understand and communicate with people from different backgrounds. History education that goes beyond elite actors

and familiar geographies develops the empathetic and analytical disposition to navigate the complexities of human interaction.

- Anchor history in **local, state, and regional contexts** to afford students a deep knowledge of their communities and the physical, social, cultural, economic, and political worlds that surround them. Connecting national and global developments with local or regional histories is a powerful tool for engaging students and their families, with the added value of fostering collaboration with institutions (libraries, museums, archives, and heritage groups) in the community. This knowledge is essential to the function of our political system.
- Outline an evolving **course of study** in social studies and history from the early grades through the high school years. Students experience K–12 education over thirteen years of social and intellectual development. A coherent course of study revisits subject matter in an ascending spiral of complexity across grade levels, culminating with the knowledge and skills expected of high school graduates.

### III. The Revision Process

State departments of education periodically review and revise academic standards in history, social studies, and related disciplines. In some cases, this process has erupted in controversy.

Many Americans care deeply about the past. How we understand history shapes how we understand ourselves and our communities. Public memories of the past can inspire passionate emotions in the present. The discipline of history demands that students grapple with multiple perspectives, analyzing evidence to form an interpretation that is subject to change as new sources emerge or new questions arise. Historians will never agree about every aspect of the past and its significance for the present. Learning to recognize where evidence supports multiple, competing interpretations and understanding how to engage in civil disagreement are some of the core lessons that students learn in the history classroom.

Students must learn how to think, not what to think—grounding their claims in verifiable evidence and using this same standard to evaluate the claims of others. Though history is always political, the politics of historical interpretation do not authorize state officials to transform academic standards into a vehicle for partisan indoctrination. Instead, standards should foreground knowledge and skills that historians and educators deem essential. Americans benefit from debating, discussing, and grappling with lessons of the past. Our students can and should learn to disagree with one another; history provides methods and ways of knowing that help us cut through spin, distortion, or indoctrination to form an interpretation grounded in available evidence. These qualities encourage compromise, patience, tolerance, and other qualities necessary for rising above our differences. They will also help us adapt to a changing world.

Most states have developed a process for standards revision that makes allowances for debate and discussion. By privileging intellectual compromise over efficiency, the process can seem slow and frustrating. State standards revision can balance attention to public concern with respect for professional experience. The best academic standards convey something approaching professional consensus about the foundational elements of history and related disciplines.

The AHA recognizes that there is more than one approach to revising curriculum and standards, but we have learned from experience that departure from any of the following broad principles will threaten the quality of instruction and endanger student success.

- **Transparency.** Public education is a communal process. Openness, honesty, and transparency build faith and trust, both of which are foundational elements in public education. All stakeholders deserve access to information about who is making decisions, how those decisions were made, and what factors influenced the outcome.
- **Collaboration.** No single educational consultant will possess the full range of developmental, pedagogical, and disciplinary knowledge to structure student learning across thirteen grade levels. Effective standards include input from historians alongside an array of other professional educators. Historians can help attune standards to current research findings and emerging consensus, effective teaching practices, and realities of the discipline. Including different areas of expertise and encouraging collaboration across those areas is integral to the articulation of history as a valued discipline and the ability of state education agencies to provide a strong foundation for student success.
- **Public participation.** To complement professional expertise and classroom experience, standards revision processes should also provide a mechanism for public participation, a crucial ingredient for the success of state standards. Stakeholders must be defined broadly during the standards revision process, involving parents and students, teachers and administrators, taxpayers and community leaders. Excluding any one of these groups invalidates the standards revision process.

Social studies standards in many states largely meet these criteria. Through its Teaching Division and through members of the Association in each state, the American Historical Association stands ready to collaborate in the development of future standards.

#### IV. Further Reading

The AHA has expanded its investment in academic standards and curriculum support, providing general guidelines and specific feedback to state education agencies, school districts, educators, and the public. Where political motivations have interfered in the standards revision process, the AHA has worked to promote the integrity of history education within public school curricula. Though our expectations of primary, secondary, and university students differ, the foundational elements of historical thinking remain the same.

- In 2013, the AHA joined a coalition of fifteen professional organizations to create the [College, Career, and Civic Life \(C3\) Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#). As of 2024, 38 states use academic standards that quote, reference, or are modeled after C3 and its inquiry-based approach.
- In 2016, after years of collaborative research on student learning, the AHA issued [Core Learning Outcomes in History](#), which describes what students trained in undergraduate history courses should be able to do.
- In 2024, the AHA published [American Lesson Plan: Teaching US History in Secondary Schools](#), a comprehensive study of state academic standards and their use in the classroom.