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AP[®] Themes

Humans are storytellers. And all good stories have themes. Themes are broad ideas that run through a story and give it meaning beyond the words. Many of humanity's greatest stories share themes in common: love, revenge, coming of age, the battle between good and evil.



0:01

*Photos representing
themes over the speaker's
shoulder.*

*Photos of a spell book and
comic book behind the
speaker*

0:47

*Bennett takes notes as
Maheen speaks*

1:30

*List of AP World History's
six themes and their
mnemonic devices*

*Timeline of important
dates and events in history*

2:14

Red stamp "FAIL"

*Big History timeline with
thresholds*

2:49

*Table representing how
themes stretch across time
periods and units within
the course*

Humans are storytellers. And all good stories have themes. Themes are broad ideas that run through a story and give it meaning beyond the words. Many of humanity's greatest stories share themes in common: love, revenge, coming of age, the battle between good and evil. Storytellers use themes to make their stories more meaningful to their audience.

Oh I get it, like how Harry Potter is about wizard school or how the Marvel's Cinematic Universe is about superheroes smashing bad guys, right?

Well, not really. Harry Potter isn't about wands, wizards, and dark lords. It's about friendship. And the Marvel movies aren't just flashing fight scenes, Black Panther is about the tension between tradition and change, and how we sometimes need to challenge authority. Themes of fatherhood and sacrifice run through many of the Marvel movies. In a similar way, themes help historians make sense of the past so it's not just one darn thing after another. Themes help historians tie a bunch of different people and events together into big historical narratives that tell us more about the world than smaller disconnected narratives ever could.

Alright, I think I get it. So why are Maheen and I here talking to you today about Harry Potter and superheroes. Well, the people who made the AP World History course structured it around six themes, which we'll get to in a minute. Some teachers use these three letter acronyms to refer to each theme. But, your teacher might use a different set of words or a mnemonic device like SPICE TEA or PIECES. But really it's all talking about the same six themes. Maheen, I'm sorry, I've got to say, this seems way too complicated. Why do we need a bunch of buzz words and acronyms to learn history?

Can't we just have the students memorize a bunch of dates and events? What happens if I just ignore the themes?

For starters, you fail Bennett. You fail the exam. But more to the point, without the themes history becomes a list of different dates and names. The themes help us to understand not only what happened, but also how these events affected the way people lived and created the society we live in today.

Okay. I think I get it. Organizing past events into themes helps us group different events together so we can tell what changed. And that helps us make comparisons and connections between different regions and time periods, right?

That's right. These six themes stretch across all time periods and regions. Each unit prioritizes a different combination of themes, helping you to evaluate how much human societies have changed or how much they've stayed the same over the last 800 years.

Cool, cool, cool. But guess what. Understanding the themes is going to help you ace the exam. Because I've heard that lots of the AP questions on the exam are actually about the themes. Some questions are really obvious about it, but some are downright sneaky. So you need to learn the themes. And you need to practice decoding exam questions to figure out which theme or themes they're asking about. Because like Maheen said, the exam is going to ask you to compare events across time, to make connections among different regions, and to analyze how all that stuff changed. The themes will help you do all that.

3:45

*Woman weaving together
colorful threads*

Think of the themes as six different threads that run through the course, connecting different parts of human history. As you read articles and watch videos in this course, you should keep pulling on these threads, uncovering new linkages. Let's take a tour of the six themes and get a sense of what they're all about.

Great, great. But once we're done with that we're going to get back to how the themes help them with exam questions right?

4:17

*Theme 1: Humans and the
Environment (ENV)"*

*Painting of hell; photos of
icebergs and an oasis*

Let's start with humans and the environment. The environments in which we live have always shaped how we live, contributing to the great diversity and surprising commonalities among human groups in different places. For example, natural resources and climate shape human culture.

There's a reason why religions like Christianity, that arose in the Middle East, believe hell is super hot, while the Vikings, who came from frosty Scandinavia, imagined it must be terribly cold. In the Islamic holy book the Quran, paradise is described as an oasis filled with flowing rivers and verdant greens—a welcome sight for the peoples who lived in the arid lands of the Arabian Peninsula, where Islam was first developed. This theme is about stuff like our methods of agriculture, the places that people choose to settle, how factors like geography and climate impact society. It also covers topics like migration, population growth, disease, and natural disasters. But its also about how humans have increasingly transformed our environment.

5:28

*Theme 2: Cultural
Developments and
Interactions (CDI)*

*Montage of photos: Mali
Empire map; Mansa
Musa's pilgrimage; woman
reading the Quran; men on
horseback*

Culture is what makes us, us. It's the fabric that ties our societies together through shared ideas, beliefs, and traditions. Culture differs dramatically from place to place, but cross-cultural exchange has always produced entirely new cultural practices. Today, we can exchange culture instantaneously over the internet, but in the 14th century it took a little more effort.

Mansa Musa ruled the West African Mali Empire. He was Muslim, but he ruled a diverse people who worshiped many different gods. In 1324, he decided to complete a year-long pilgrimage to the Islamic holy city of Mecca. He traveled with around 60,000 servants and an astounding amount of gold. He spent lavishly and he donated generously.

Though he ruled a powerful empire that was rich beyond measure, he wanted to recruit Muslim scholars from the Middle East and North Africa to help spread Islam across West Africa. In his attempts to bring Islamic culture back to Mali, he spent so much gold that he caused runaway inflation in Egypt, sending the entire region into a recession.

The questions you'll see on this theme often relate to religions and to belief systems. But music, art, architecture, literature, language, and fashion, these things are all part of cultural developments and interactions.

6:55

Theme 3: Governance (GOV)

*Paintings depicting
Mongol warriors; comic
strip about sister/cousin
alliances*

Who has the right to rule? Where does political authority come from? Societies have produced different answers to these questions as new states emerged, expanded, and collapsed. Governments have used a variety of methods to maintain and justify their power. For example, consider the mighty Mongol Empire.

When we think about the Mongol, we think about men with swords on horses, riding across the open plains of Eurasia. But did you know that the empire was mostly held together by women? Mongol nobles and rulers married the daughters of people they conquered. And these women made networks of sisters and cousins who formed alliances with each other. Their alliances helped stop the fighting between their husbands, and sometimes they decided who the next ruler would be. Wife power and sister power ran the empire.

This theme is one of the easiest to identify. Just keep an eye out for words like "empire", "governments", "politics", "nations", "revolutions", "military", and "taxes". This theme is all about how states form, expand, and collapse.

8:05

Theme 4: Economics (ECN)

*Series of paintings: Aztec
people, map of empire*

*Drawing of chinampas;
"Night soil = people poop!"
graphic*

Economics is a fancy Greek word that is used to describe how we make, distribute, trade, and consume stuff. Take for example the agricultural output of the Aztec Empire. To feed the 6 billion people living in their empire, the Aztecs developed an agricultural technology called "chinampas".

These were man-made islands that floated on the shallow lakes of central Mexico. The lakes kept the islands moist and the Aztecs covered them in mud, vegetable scraps, and night soil.

This method of fertilization allowed these flotillas and beasties to be so productive that crops could be harvested from them up to six times a year. To identify evidence in this theme, keep an eye out for terms like "money", "resources", "trade", "labor", "industry", and for economic theories like "capitalism" and "socialism".

9:03

Theme 5: Social Interactions and Organization (SIO)

All societies develop ideas about how people ought to interact with each other. These interactions influence political, social, and cultural dynamics in every society. This theme can help you understand how these relationships have changed over time, and how communities in different parts of the world have organized themselves.

*Photo of leopard print
shirt over the speaker's
shoulder*

For example, I may or may not have had a leopard print clothing phase in college, but I wasn't arrested for it. Well, in 17th century Japan, the stakes were a little higher. You see, the ruling samurai classes were really jealous of how much money merchants made. So, the samurai class passed laws that regulated the smallest details of how fancy a merchant could dress, how big their house could be, and how rich they could act. One law even forbade merchants from having silver clasps on their tobacco pouches. One woman was exiled just because she wore an elaborate dress to court. All because the samurai didn't want to be out-fancied!

*Montage of images: 17th
century Japan, Japanese
home interior, women
dressed up, a samurai*

This theme is all about how societies determine how people fit into groups: gender, class, race, ethnic hierarchies, as well as how family and social life are organized in different places and how these relationships change over time.

10:05

*Theme 6: Technology and
Innovation (TEC)*

Humans have always been problem solvers. Our technological innovations have impacted all levels of society. And these innovations often resulted from interaction and exchange amongst societies.

*Drawings of Ptolemy,
Ibn al-Haytham, and a
Catholic friar*

For example, if you're using eyeglasses or contact lenses, you should thank the ancient Greek astronomer, Ptolemy.

*Arabic to Latin translation
of Ibn al-Haytham's work*

Actually, you should thank the 11th century Arab scholar Ibn al-Haytham, who corrected and improved Ptolemy's ideas and revolutionized the field of optics.

Well, really you ought to thank the 12th century Italian who translated Ibn al-Haytham into Latin.

Or then again, maybe the 13th century catholic friars who probably made the first pair of spectacles for reading. You get the idea. Technologies change over time and innovations in one place are usually built on earlier innovations that spread from different places.

11:28

*Drawings of the Industrial
Revolution*

Phew. Six themes. Nine units. 800 years. That's a lot to take in. The themes help make sense of the past, but it's still not a simple task.

But hey, they don't call it Advanced Placement for nothing. And this is easy, watch. The Industrial Revolution, steam powered machines, factories, and the telegraph. That's obviously about technology and innovation. Boom. Job done. What's next?

11:55

List of 6 themes

Well, not really. For example, let's see which students were paying attention. I saw at least three of them texting. I'm going to describe something, and you tell me which theme it belongs to. In the Aztec Empire, a merchant class of *pochteca* carried trade goods to markets hundreds of miles away by foot, collecting tribute for the Aztec emperor and spying on foreign governments.

Did they walk across any of those poop islands? This one's easy Merchants, markets, trade? This one's economic systems. ECN.

12:30

*Montage of drawings:
Mesoamerican society,
pochteca*

Not so fast. History is messy and some things don't fit neatly into just one theme. The Aztec pochteca were important to the economy but they also tell us about the environment, technology, governance, and social organization. Mesoamerican societies didn't have pack animals like horses or oxen. There weren't many rivers you could sail on.

And they never developed sailing technologies. These merchants had to carry everything themselves on their backs. The pochteca also played political roles, helping the Aztec emperors collect tribute, a sort of tax. They also spied on enemy governments. And pochteca were a class of people who, like those Japanese merchants, made a lot of money.

But the nobility made laws to keep them subservient and limit how they spent their wealth, no matter how much money they made. So when you see an exam question that asks you to compare the growth of trade routes, the pochteca can serve as a useful piece of evidence, but, they are also great for an exam question asking you to explain how environmental factors shaped economic systems. Or for a discussion of how different empires maintained their old power.

13:44

*Photo of book, "The Cave
of Time", to speaker's
right*

Wow, history really is like night soil. It's messy. The themes of this course are all about perspective. And in that way they give you, a historian in training, an awful lot of power. This course is a little bit like a choose your own adventure story, as long as the choices you make are supported by the evidence that you encounter. The six themes will help you interpret the past, but they also give you some authority to make choices about how to frame past events.

By examining and comparing many different perspectives across multiple themes, you will be better equipped to support, extend, and challenge the historical narratives you encounter in this course.

And you're going to be better equipped to pass the AP exam in the spring.

14:29

*Photos of AP articles and
Three Close Reads tool*

List of 6 themes

The key is to practice. As you read articles in this course use the Three Close Reads tool to take notes about which pieces of evidence relate to the different themes.

Remember these six themes are tools to help you make sense of World History. They'll help you build a useable past, and, yes Bennett, they'll help you pass the exam.