

Meet the Themes



WHP AP Meet the Themes | World History Project

World history includes a lot of names, places, dates, events, and all kinds of other stuff. Historians use different tools to organize their narratives and make sense of all the complexity. The AP[®] World History course uses six themes to help guide you through the 800 years from 1200 to the present. Organizing past events into themes can help group different events together so we can tell what changed, helping us make comparisons and connections between different regions and time periods. This video introduces the six themes and shows you some tricks for decoding AP exam questions.

0:10

Rachel speaking in head bubble; text bubble: Themes; archaic paintings of common themes

John speaking in head bubble; photo of a book and potions; comic panel

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. .

Ohhh, I get it! Like how Harry Potter is about a wizard school! Or how the Marvel Cinematic Universe is about superheroes smashing aliens!

Well... not really. Harry potter isn't about wands, wizards, and dark lords; it's about friendship... and good and evil. And coming of age.

And the marvel movies aren't just flashy fight scenes. Black Panther is about the tension between tradition and change, and how we sometimes need to challenge authority. Themes of fatherhood, motherhood, and sacrifice run through many of the Marvel movies

1:08

Thematic bubble: themes help historians; transitional music

Six boxes illustrating the six themes of AP World History; text bubble; mnemonic devices

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 get it. So why are we talking about Harry Potter and superheroes? Well, the people who made the AP World History course structured it around six themes, which we're going to describe 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-T or PIECES, but they're all talking about the same six themes.

BHP Timeline

Without a tool like themes, history kinda looks like just a bunch of different dates and names.

2:04

Text bubble: organizing themes; archaic prints and paintings; photo of modern agriculture

Organizing past events into themes helps us group different events together so we can tell what changed and what stayed the same. That helps us make comparisons and connections between different regions and time periods.

We know that the AP exam can be stressful, but learning the themes will make the exam a lot easier.

Lots of AP exam questions reference the themes. Some questions are 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.

Table of the six different themes

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.

3:01

Transitional music

And once we're done with that, we promise we'll get back to how themes help with exam questions.

Humans and the Environment graphic; photo of nature

Clip of man walking in desert

Text bubble: environment and culture; Middle Eastern depiction of hell; photo of cold climate; photo of pond

4:01

Text bubble: key terms; transitional music

Clip of cultural traditions

Text bubble: Mansa Musa; archaic map

4:58

Men traveling by camels illustration; photo of woman with old book; photo of men out in desert

5:44

Text bubble: key words; transitional music and text bubble

Photo of voters; with text bubble description

Mongols in battle

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. Well, 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 site for the peoples who lived in the arid lands of the Arabian Peninsula where Islam 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 it's also about how humans have increasingly transformed our environment.

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 frequently produced entirely new cultural practices.

Today we can exchange culture instantaneously over the internet, but in the 14th century, it took a bit more effort. Mansa Musa ruled the West African Mali Empire.

He was Muslim but he ruled a diverse people who worshipped many different gods. In 1324, he decided to complete the year-long pilgrimage to the Islamic holy city of Mecca. He traveled with 60,000 servants and an astounding amount of gold. He spent lavishly and 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 him 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 whole region into a recession.

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

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 Mongols, 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?

6:37

Mongol painting and comic strip

Text bubble: key words; transitional music with text bubble

Clip depicting economics with text bubble definition

Mongol nobles and rulers married the daughters of people they conquered, and these women formed 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,” “taxes,” and “ideology.” This theme is all about how states form, expand, govern, and collapse.

Economics is a fancy Greek word used to describe how we make, distribute, trade, and consume all our stuff.

7:28

Paintings of Aztec Empire with text bubble descriptions

Text bubble: key words; transitional music with text bubble

Take, for example, the agricultural output of the Aztec Empire. To feed the six million 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 Aztec farmers covered them in mud, vegetable scraps, and night soil. This method of fertilization allowed these flotillas of feces to be so productive that crops could be harvested up to six times a year from each. This level of food production is what kept the engine of empire running.

This theme often focuses on who does the labor and who makes the profit. 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.

8:24

Clip of people in a park

Photo of woman in 80s fashion; paintings of 17th century Japan

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.

For example, I may or may not have had an 80s workout clothing phase in college, but I never got arrested for it. Well, in 17th century Japan, the stakes were a little higher. You see, the ruling samurai classes were jealous of how much money merchants made, so the samurai passed laws that regulated the smallest details of how fancy a merchant could dress, and they limited how big their house could be, and how rich they could act. There was even a law that forbade any merchant from using a silver clasp on their tobacco pouch. Too fancy.

9:24

Painting of samurai in fancy attire

Key words text bubble; transitional music

Clips of human innovation with descriptive text bubble

One woman was exiled just because she wore an elaborate dress to court—all because the samurai didn’t want to be out fancied.

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

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

*Ancient Greek astronomer
with text bubble
description*

10:16

Drawing of scholar

*Painting of 12th century
illustrations*

13th century Catholic friar

Photo of Lenscraftors

*Text bubble: key words;
transitional music with
text bubble*

11:13

*Timer and paintings of the
Industrial Revolution*

*Six theme cards; Aztec
manuscript with text
bubble: Pochteca*

12:06

AP World theme card

Ancient Aztec illustrations

Ancient Aztec illustrations

Ancient Aztec illustrations

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

... 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, I mean, really you want to thank the 12th century Italian who translated al-Haytham into Latin.

... Or maybe the 13th century Catholic friars who probably made the first spectacles for reading.

Then maybe give a shout out to Lenscraftors.

The point is: technologies change over time, and innovations in one place are usually built on earlier innovations that spread from other places.

Phew. Six themes. Nine units. 800 years. That's a lot to take in. The themes help you to make sense of all that history, but it's still not a simple job.

But hey, they don't call it Advanced Placement for nothing. It's not really all that hard. I bet I can do it in 10 seconds.

Watch: the Industrial Revolution—steam-powered machines, factories, and the telegraph—that's obviously about technology and innovation. Boom. Done with two seconds left over. What's next?

John—that's great, but come on. It's not always so simple. For example, I'm going to describe something, and you tell me which theme it belongs to.

In the Aztec Empire, a merchant class known as *pochteca* carried trade goods to markets hundreds of miles away by foot, collecting tribute for the Aztec emperor and spying on foreign governments.

Do they walk across any of those poop islands? This one's easy. Merchants, markets, trade. It's "Economic Systems"—E-C-N.

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, and there weren't many rivers you could sail on.

On top of that, these societies never developed sailing technologies, so *pochteca* had to carry everything themselves on their backs.

So, that's Economics, Humans and the Environment, and Technology and Innovation. Wow that's a lot of—

The *pochteca* also played political roles, helping the Aztec emperors collect tribute—a sort of tax. They also spied on enemy governments.

12:56

Ancient Aztec illustrations

Text bubble: exam questions

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're 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 hold on power.

Wow. You're right, Rachel. History really is like night soil. It's messy.

The themes in this course are all about perspective, and in that way they give you—a historian in training—a lot of power.

13:45

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, using evidence you encounter in this course.

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

And you'll be better equipped for the AP exam in May.

Screenshot of Three Close Reads Tool

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.

Six themes of AP World; outro music

Remember, these six themes are tools to help you make sense of world history. Learning them will help you build a usable past and—yes, John—it will also help you on the exam.

OER PROJECT

OER Project aims to empower teachers by offering free and fully supported history courses for middle- and high-school students. Your account is the key to accessing our standards-aligned courses that are designed with built-in supports like leveled readings, audio recordings of texts, video transcripts, and more. Offerings include a variety of materials, from full-year, standards-based courses to shorter course extensions, all of which build upon foundational historical thinking skills in preparation for AP, college, and beyond.

To learn more about The OER Project, visit www.oerproject.com