

Contextualization: APUSH Skills You Need to Master

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What is Contextualization?

Contextualization falls under the “Making Historical Connections” category of APUSH historical thinking skills. In a nutshell, contextualization is the ability to place historical events within a larger context. This means **connecting a historical event to the bigger picture**— what else was happening at the same time in different places, how this fits in with events that came before and after it, and what larger processes are at play.

How Do I Demonstrate Contextualization Skills?

You’ll be asked to use this skill a lot on the APUSH exam. Many multiple choice and short answer questions will require contextualization. It is a 100% guarantee that your essays will require this skill. Contextualization is worth one out of the seven points on the essay rubrics.

Remember the old “5 Ws” (who, what, where, when, why) that you’ve probably used since elementary school? Those are exactly what you need for contextualization. When you’re analyzing a document or thinking about a historical event, ask yourself questions based around the 5 Ws to help you see the larger context.

Who:

- Who wrote the document? or Who was involved in the event?
- What group(s) were they a part of? (Think broadly on this one: gender, race, religion, socioeconomic status, occupation, membership in an organization, etc., can all be important to placing the person and their ideas in historical context.)

What:

- What happened? or What does the document say?
- What larger events or processes was this a part of?

Where:

- Where did the event take place? or Where was this document created?
- Where is this place geographically? What region or state is it in?
- What are the characteristics of that place? (Think demographics, political leanings, social classes, religious affiliations, major industries, geographic features)
- How does what happened in X place relate to what was happening in the rest of the region/state/nation/world?

When:

- When did this event take place? or When was this document written?
- What else was going on at the same time? (locally, regionally, nationally, globally)
- How does this event relate to what happened before and/or after it in history?

Why:

- What caused this event? (long- and short-term)
- Why did the author write this document? What was going on that would motivate the author to create it?
- Why does this document/event matter in the long-run? What impact did it have on history? Why does it matter today?

Contextualization Examples and Non-Examples

Sample Prompt:

Evaluate the extent in which the Civil War was a turning point in the lives of African Americans in the United States.

Poor Contextualization:

The Civil War was a bloody event that led to the death of thousands of Americans.

Why is it so bad?

Of course this is a true statement, but is extremely vague. What led to the Civil War? Why was it so deadly? Without any specific detail, this student could not earn the contextualization point.

Also, Poor Contextualization:

Slavery had existed for hundreds of years in the United States. It was a terrible thing that had to be abolished.

Why is it so bad?

Again, this is a drive-by attempt at earning contextualization. It mentions things that are true, but lacks any meaningful details or explanation that would demonstrate understanding of the time period in discussion. What led to the beginning of slavery in the colonies? How did it develop? What made it so horrible? How did individuals resist and protest slavery? These are the types of details that would add meaning to contextualization.

Great Contextualization:

The peculiar institution of slavery had been a part of America's identity since the founding of the original English colony at Jamestown. In the early years, compromise was key to avoiding the moral question, but as America entered the mid 19th century sectional tensions and crises with popular sovereignty, Kansas, and fugitive slaves made the issue increasingly unavoidable. When the Civil War began, the war was transformed from one to simply save the Union to a battle for the future of slavery and freedom in the United States.

Why is that a good example?

Now THAT is contextualization! It gives specific details about the beginning of slavery and its development. It discusses attempts at compromise, but increasing sectional tensions that led to the Civil War. The writer paints a vivid and clear picture of the situation, events, and people that set the stage for the Civil War. Students don't want to write a 6-8 sentence paragraph (they will want to save time for their argument in the body), but they need to do more than write a vague sentence that superficially addresses the era.

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