U.S. HISTORY

Overview of Important Concepts

This U.S. history overview will introduce you to the basic historical chronologies and concepts that will be part of the GED® test. Since history will be the predominant subject on the exam, it is the longest of the overviews, appearing here in a two-part form. Not only will this review help you with the history portion of the exam, it will also help you with all of the others. Having a fundamental grasp of the way that the United States was formed will assist you in understanding how the rest of American society was formed.

It is as important to be familiar with the context of historical events as it is to know the tricks and tips to answer the questions. If you know nothing about what the question is asking, you will have a much harder time answering the question, though it is still possible to find the correct answer through deductive reasoning. Use this outline to review things you may have forgotten, but don’t worry about memorizing dates or specific information, because that will not be the focus of the questions. You need to be aware of the general concepts and chronological times, without needing to be overly specific. Usually, GED® history questions will provide all of the information you need to answer the question within the question. The focus will be on your ability to use the skills of comprehension, analysis, application and evaluation within the context of the subject.

Overview Part I: 1450-1879

I. 1450-1763: Exploration and Colonization

1. The discovery and exploration of new worlds was called the Age of Discovery.
   - European explorers went out in search of Asia and discovered a new continent - America
   - The Age of Discovery resulted in renewed rivalry between European countries
     - France, Spain, England, Portugal and the Netherlands competed for land

2. England developed permanent colonies in North America
   - Geographic diversity helped create distinct economic regions in North America
     - New England colonies were associated with shipbuilding and commerce
     - The middle colonies were associated with farming and commerce
     - Southern colonies were associated with cotton, tobacco and slavery
   - English colonies began to develop an autonomous government
     - The Mayflower Compact of 1620 laid the foundation for government by the consent of the governed
     - The House of Burgesses in 1619 was an early colonial attempt at representative self-government
     - The colonists demanded their rights as Englishmen
   - The population of the colonies increased steadily
     - Large families (10 or more) were commonplace
     - Regular immigration from abroad increased the general population
     - Europeans and Africans were the two major population groups
   - The idea of free public education began in the colonies
   - Class distinctions were less strict than in England, therefore a strong middle class emerged
   - The most prevalent religion in the colonies was Protestant
     - A single, established church was not practical in America
     - The decline of Puritanism led to a greater religious tolerance
II. 1763-1789: The Formation of the New Nation

1. The French and Indian War (1756-1763) was a crucial turning point in England’s domination over North America
   + The English victory ended the French threat in America
   + The English victory encouraged colonial America to seek out a more active voice for itself

2. Background for the American Revolution (1763-1776)
   + The English mercantile policy discouraged colonial economic independence
   + Colonial ideas of political and economic freedom were crucial factors leading to the American Revolution
   + Colonial opposition to British actions progressively increased during this time
   + The colonies used a variety of methods to change British actions, including petitions and boycotts
   + The Declaration of Independence stated the purposes for the colonies break with England

3. The American Revolution (1776-1781) was fought to obtain American independence
   + Problems with military effectiveness slowed down the early colonial effort
     - Colonial armies were not adequately equipped
     - There was pervasive opposition to fixed military terms
   + George Washington’s leadership turned the tide of battle
   + The French alliance (1778) brought men, equipment, and money to the American cause
   + The defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown (1781) brought victory to the colonies

4. The Articles of Confederation (1781-1789) were inadequate as a central government
   + The Articles held the nation together during the critical period
   + The Articles were limited by major weaknesses
     - The national government did not have the power to regulate foreign trade
     - The national government did not have a court system
     - The national government did not have an independent taxing power

5. The need for a strong central government was what led to the framing of the Constitution in 1789

6. The government under the Constitution solved many problems
   + A federal system was created that divided federal and state power
   + The separation of powers and a system of checks and balances were included to limit the power of the central government
   + The legislative, executive, and judicial branches were established to divide the new government’s power
   + The Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution in order to protect the rights of the people

III. 1787-1823: The New Nation

1. The early national period tested the functioning of the new federal government
   + President Hamilton’s financial plan gave the national government a firm financial basis
     - The national government paid back the state, national, and foreign debts to demonstrate the credibility of the new government
     - The national government encouraged American business expansion by passing excise taxes and a tariff
     - The national government raised revenue by initiating a tax on domestic whiskey
     - The national government authorized the use of coins and paper money to encourage the growth of commerce
     - The national government encouraged the development of a national bank to facilitate the expansion of business
   + President Hamilton’s financial plan led to the development of political parties
     - The Federalist Party believed in the concept of a strong central government ruled by the manufacturing interests of the country
     - The Anti-Federalist Party believed in the concept of limited federal power based on the farming interests of the country
     - The Federalist Party favored the wealthy
     - The antifederalist party developed a political philosophy that believed in the worth of the individual
Overview US History Part 1

+ Foreign policy during the early national period was weak and ineffectual
+ The Louisiana Purchase (1803) became the greatest real estate purchase in U.S. history
2. The War of 1812 (1812-1815) was fought between the U.S. and Great Britain
   + Among the multiple causes of the war of 1812 were violations of U.S. neutrality and impressments of U.S. sailors
   + The U.S. victory resulted in national pride, self-sufficiency, and credibility abroad
3. The new nationalism (1816-1823) followed the War of 1812
   + The scope and authority of the Supreme Court was established during this time
   + The political success of the Republican Party characterized the era of good feelings
   + The Monroe Doctrine was what defined American interests in the Northern Hemisphere
   + The new nationalism led to a new American culture

IV. The Rise of Democracy and the Western Movement
1. President Andrew Jacksons democracy (1826-1836) symbolized the rise of the common man
   + President Jacksons war against the bank and the tariff were crucial issues for the new Democratic Party
   + President Jackson initiated the spoils system in which political enemies are replaced by political friends
   + President Jackson pursued nationalistic policies
2. The Whig Party opposed the Democratic Party’s belief in states rights, favoring instead a strong national government
3. The expansion of U.S. territories moved from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean
   + The rise of the new West formed opportunities in transportation, education, politics, mining, and agriculture
   + Manifest Destiny encouraged expansion westward to the Pacific
     - In 1837 Texas was annexed into the U.S.
     - In 1846 the Oregon Territory was added to the U.S. and encouraged settlement of the Far West
     - The Mexican War (1848) added California and parts of the Southwest to the U.S.

V. 1800-1876: The Civil War and Reconstruction
1. The growth of slavery was bolstered by geographic and economic factors
   + The large dependence on cotton and slavery created a unique Southern economy
   + The cotton south led to sectionalism
2. Prior to the 1850s, the expansion of slavery was already an issue
   + The Missouri Compromise of 1820 limited the expansion of slavery
   + Potential slave territory was added to the U.S. in 1837 with the annexation of Texas
   + The Mexican War of 1848 was criticized as being expansionist and pro-slavery
3. The politics of compromise failed and war ensued:
   + The Compromise of 1850 did not succeed in holding the nation together
   + Slavery and sectionalism persisted and threatened the Union in 1850
   + The Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854 failed, leading to bloodshed over the continued expansion of slavery
   + The Dred Scott decision did not solve the slavery question
   + Secession became inevitable after the 1860 election of President Lincoln, a sectional candidate
4. The Civil War threatened the Union (1861-1865)
   + Both the North and the South began to prepare for war
     - The North was superior in firearms, manpower, and economic resources
     - The South was superior in leadership and territory
   + The Union strategy of isolating the South worked
     - The Union blockade economically smothered the South
     - General Lee surrendered at Appomattox in 1865 due to economic and military weaknesses
5. Attempts to reunite the nation through Reconstruction were made (1865-1866)
   + After the Civil War, the South needed economic, social, political, and military reconstruction
   + Congress and the President had different ideas on how to reconstruct the South
     - The Presidential plan emphasized tolerance
- The Congressional Plan wanted to use military force and treat the South like conquered territory
- Reconstruction was under Congressional (Radical) control from 1868 until 1876
- The 14th and 15th amendments were passed
- The Civil Rights bills were passed
- Military rule was in support of Radical Reconstruction (harsh Reconstruction policies of the radical Republicans)
- President Johnson was impeached for his opposition to Radical Reconstruction
- The election of 1876 ended Radical Reconstruction
- This was a setback for social justice for African-Americans
- The national commitment to equal opportunity rights was delayed for another 100 years

In addition to this general historical outline, there are four major historical documents that are referenced in the social studies section of the GED® test: The Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Federalist papers, and Landmark Supreme Court cases (in the US). These documents would be analyzed in a high school classroom with special attention paid to the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. You can access these documents on the Internet at the combined site for the Library of Congress and the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration:


You can read through these documents just to familiarize yourself with what they are about. You will not need to have them memorized for the GED® test. You will never encounter a question like "What does the 12th Amendment to the United States Constitution say?" You may have a question that references the 12th Amendment, but it will provide you with the text. We will further discuss these documents in the Civics and Government overview.