

AP United States History	Common Mistakes
<i>Every point on this exam is won or lost on the same rubric, and almost every lost point is evidence that was never connected to an argument. The ✕ line is what students write; the ✓ line is what earns the point.</i>	
The rubric – thesis, context, evidence, reasoning	
✕ Writing a thesis that rephrases the prompt.	
✓ Take a defensible position that someone could argue against, and establish a line of reasoning.	
The guidelines list restating the prompt among the responses that do not earn the thesis point.	SG 5 years
✕ Splitting the thesis between the introduction and the conclusion.	
✓ Put it in one place – one or more sentences together, in the introduction or the conclusion.	
The rubric requires the thesis to consist of one or more sentences located in ONE place.	SG 3 years
✕ Opening with a sentence of background and calling it contextualisation.	
✓ Describe a broader development before, during or after the prompt’s timeframe, in several sentences.	
The guidelines state the context must be more than a phrase or a reference, and reject overgeneralised statements about the period.	SG 5 years
✕ Naming an event and moving on – ‘Ottoman armies used cannons’.	
✓ Say what it shows: name the evidence, then explain how it supports your argument.	
The guidelines give exactly this kind of sentence as an example that does NOT earn the point, because there is no reasoning.	SG 4 years
✕ Offering one piece of evidence and developing it.	
✓ Use at least two specific pieces, and more for the higher points.	
Identifying a single piece of evidence is listed among the responses that do not earn points.	SG 4 years
✕ Using evidence from outside the prompt’s date range.	
✓ Stay inside the years the prompt names; use earlier or later material only as context.	
The guidelines reject evidence outside the timeframe as irrelevant to an argument about the prompt.	SG 4 years

✕ Adding a final sentence that mentions another perspective.	
✓ Build the complexity into the argument – qualify it, corroborate it, or weigh a counter-view as you go.	
The guidelines state repeatedly that complex understanding must be part of the argument and more than a phrase or reference.	SG 5 years
■ The rubric points are independent: a response can earn evidence without earning the thesis. Never abandon a section because an earlier one went badly.	SG 5 years
The document-based question	
✕ Walking through the documents one at a time, in order.	
✓ Group them by the argument they support, and cite them inside your own paragraphs.	
A document-by-document answer offers no reasoning connecting the evidence to an argument, which is what the rubric awards.	SG 4 years
✕ Using two or three documents thoroughly.	
✓ Use at least three for the first point, and attempt all seven for the top one.	
The guidelines state that using fewer than three earns nothing, and that the complexity point requires an attempt to use all seven in support of an argument.	SG 4 years
✕ Quoting a document at length instead of explaining it.	
✓ Say what it shows and why that supports your claim.	
Quoting the content without interpretation is listed among the responses that do not earn the point.	SG 4 years
✕ Naming the author and the date and calling it sourcing.	
✓ Explain how the point of view, purpose, situation or audience affects the document’s argument.	
The guidelines reject identification alone: sourcing must explain the relevance of that attribute.	SG 5 years
✕ Sourcing one document well.	
✓ Source at least two, and preferably three.	
Explaining sourcing for fewer than two documents is listed among the responses that do not earn the point.	SG 5 years
✕ Restating what a document says as your outside evidence.	
✓ Bring in something specific and relevant that no document mentions.	
Evidence a document already provides cannot serve as the additional evidence the rubric asks for.	SG 4 years

Reading the prompt

- ✗ Answering only the change half of a continuity-and-change prompt.
 - ✓ Address both, explicitly, and say which mattered more.
 - A thesis that does not address all parts of the question does not earn the point.
- ✗ Describing where the verb was EXPLAIN.
 - ✓ Give the causal connection: not what happened, but why it followed.
 - The task verbs are defined in the rubric, and answering a different one earns nothing.
- ✗ Treating a label – feudalism, absolutism, modernisation – as an explanation.
 - ✓ Say what people or institutions actually did, then name the pattern if it helps.
 - A model asserted as a fact provides no reasoning connecting evidence to an argument.
- ✗ Reusing the same example in two parts of a short-answer question.
 - ✓ Use a different one for each part.
 - The rubric expects distinct evidence for each part, and a repeated example earns only once.
- ✗ Inferring cause from sequence – ‘this happened, then that, so it caused it’.
 - ✓ Name the mechanism by which one development produced the other.
 - Asserting the use of a reasoning process without demonstrating it is listed among the responses that do not earn points.
- Historical accuracy is required throughout. The rubrics state that the components require students to demonstrate historically defensible content.

2 · Period 2: 1607–1754 : 1607–1754

- ✗ Treating the thirteen colonies as one society with one economy.
 - ✓ Distinguish them: New England towns and shipping, the mid-Atlantic’s mixed farming and diversity, the Chesapeake and Southern plantation economies.
 - A generalisation about the colonies cannot be historically defensible evidence, which the rubric requires.
- ✗ Describing the Atlantic slave trade only as forced migration.
 - ✓ Connect it to the plantation economy it supplied and the racial slave codes that followed.
 - Evidence with no reasoning connecting it to an argument is the commonest way a correct fact earns nothing.

3 · Period 3: 1754–1800 : 1754–1800

- ✗ Explaining the Revolution as a reaction to taxes alone.
 - ✓ Add the constitutional argument about representation and consent, and the ideas colonists took from the Enlightenment.
 - A single-cause explanation cannot demonstrate the complex understanding the top point requires.
- ✗ Writing about the Constitution without the Articles of Confederation.
 - ✓ Say what the Articles could not do – tax, regulate trade, put down Shays’s Rebellion – and how the Constitution answered it.
 - The causal mechanism is what turns the fact into evidence for an argument.

5 · Period 5: 1844–1877 : 1844–1877

- ✗ Saying the Civil War was caused by states’ rights, without saying rights to do what.
 - ✓ Name it: the expansion of slavery into the territories was the issue every compromise failed to settle.
 - An unqualified label is the kind of assertion the rubric declines to credit as reasoning.
- ✗ Ending Reconstruction at 1877 with no account of what changed.
 - ✓ Weigh the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments against sharecropping, Black Codes and disenfranchisement.
 - Considering both the change and its limits is exactly the qualification the complexity point rewards.

7 · Period 7: 1890–1945 : 1890–1945

- ✗ Describing the New Deal as ending the Depression.
 - ✓ Distinguish relief, recovery and reform, and note that full recovery came with wartime production.
 - An overstated claim is not historically defensible, and the qualification is where the complexity point sits.
- ✗ Treating the two world wars as the same kind of American involvement.
 - ✓ Contrast them: late entry and rejection of the League after 1918, against total mobilisation and postwar leadership after 1945.
 - A comparison that names the difference is the reasoning process the rubric asks for.

8 · Period 8: 1945–1980 : 1945–1980

- ✗ Describing the civil rights movement as one campaign with one leader.
- ✓ **Distinguish the legal strategy, mass nonviolent protest, federal legislation, and later Black Power critiques.**

Diverse perspectives within a movement are what the complexity point is looking for.

CED 8.9

- ✗ Explaining the Cold War only through Soviet actions.
- ✓ **Give both sides’ aims and fears, and how containment shaped domestic policy too.**

Considering alternative views is one of the named routes to the complexity point.

CED 8.2

9 · Period 9: 1980–Present : 1980

- ✗ Writing about recent decades in general terms because the period feels close.
- ✓ **Use specific evidence – a named act, election, court case or economic shift.**

The evidence point requires specifics whatever the period, and this is the period where responses most often generalise.

CED 9.2
- Period 1 and Period 9 each carry few questions but appear as context. Knowing one specific development in each is cheap insurance for the contextualisation point.

CED 1.1