

About

Unlike previous versions of the GED, you will need considerable knowledge about social studies topics, and much of the content is about US history and government. Also, you may have to use some skills that you also use on other parts of the test such as reading charts and graphs and some math. A few problems will give you an on screen calculator to help you

US Government

The GED Social Studies test is about 50% Civics and government. The test will expect you to be familiar with modern and historical types of government, the structure of the US government and the main principles of US government.

Types of Government

Monarchies

In a monarchy, one individual, or monarch has power over the nation. King George III was the monarch of Great Britain when the US gained independence. Today, most monarchies are constitutional monarchies, which means the monarch's power is limited by a constitution. Few absolute monarchies still exist.

Direct Democracy

In a direct democracy, everyone gets a vote in creating laws. Direct democracies can be difficult in large countries because everybody would have to vote for every law. Some examples of direct democracy that exist are towns that have town hall meetings in which the residents gather to vote on town laws. Another example of direct democracy is the referendum, which is when a law is put on the ballot for the people to vote to pass it.

Representative Democracy

In a representative democracy, officials are elected by the people to vote for their interests. The US Congress is an example of representative democracy. Most democracies are some form of representative democracy.

Parliamentary Democracy

In a parliamentary system, the political party that controls the parliament controls the government. The top official is usually called a prime minister and is elected by the parliament, not by the people. The parliamentary system is used in many European countries and Canada. Sometimes, a president or monarch can share power with the prime minister.

Presidential Democracy

In a presidential democracy, the people elect the president. In the US, the president leads the executive branch of government. One major difference between a presidential democracy and a parliamentary democracy is that the president does not have to be from the party that controls The Congress.

Principles of US Democracy

Natural Rights

Natural rights is a philosophy that comes from the Enlightenment period. It is the idea that people are born with certain rights. Thomas Jefferson included natural rights philosophy in the Declaration of Independence by writing that people have the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Popular Sovereignty

Popular sovereignty is the idea that the government has authority because the people can control it. It is sometimes also called “consent of the governed.” Under popular sovereignty, if the people do not like the government, they can make changes to it. In the US, changing the government usually means voting for new elected officials.

Constitutionalism

Constitutionalism is the idea that the government is based on a set of rules spelled out in a document that government officials must follow. When the courts decide if a law is fair or not, they refer to The Constitution to determine if the law breaks any of the rules in The Constitution

Separation of Powers

US Government is divided into three parts: The Legislative, Executive and Judicial branches. The roles of all three branches are outlined in The Constitution.

Checks and Balances

All three branches have the opportunity to keep a law from being enacted. Because all laws must be upheld by all three branches of government, the three branches keep each other in check and create a balance.

Rule of Law

The philosophy of rule of law is the idea that all people are equal under the law. In absolute monarchies, monarchs could single out people and punish them without them having broken a law. In the US, for someone to be punished, it must be proven that they have broken a law. John Adams described our government as a “government of laws, not of men” because the all people must follow laws, not the will of a ruler.

Enumerated Powers

Powers that are specifically for the federal government and outlined in the Constitution are called enumerated powers. All other powers, according to the 10th Amendment, are left up to the states. However, the Constitution contains a clause that the federal government can make laws that are “necessary and proper” for government to function.

Amending the Constitution

Though The US Constitution is still in use, changes have been made to it over the years. The amendment process is difficult on purpose. Two thirds of both The House of Representatives and The Senate must approve the amendment. It must then be approved by three fourths of the individual state legislatures.

Political Parties

The US has two main political parties: The Democrats and The Republicans. There are also many other third parties. Currently, all members of the US House and Senate caucus, or meet, with one of the two main parties.

Electoral College

When presidential elections are held every four years, they are run using an organization called The Electoral College. The Electoral College is made up of

electors from each state. Each state gets one elector for each member of the House of Representatives they have and two more for their Senators. The electors are chosen by the political party that wins each state in the election. After the election, the electors meet and elect the President.

Structure of US Government

Legislative Branch

The Legislative Branch includes Congress, which is divided into two houses: The House of Representatives and The Senate. Congress is where laws are created. New laws must be approved by a majority of both houses of Congress.

Executive Branch

The Executive Branch includes the President and the departments of his or her cabinet. The secretaries of the cabinet head specific government departments. They report to and advise The President on matters concerning their department. The President also must sign all laws passed by Congress. If the president refuses, that is called a veto.

Judicial Branch

The Judicial Branch includes the courts. The federal courts have branches all over the US and a Supreme Court in Washington. If a person believes a law is unfair, they may sue to have the law changed. The courts must then determine if the law goes against The Constitution. If the law is determined to be unconstitutional, the court strikes it down.

US History

Historical Texts

Ability to read historical texts is a necessary skill for the GED. Some texts may be written in older language or language that contains legal terms. Practice reading texts and reading around words you don't know the meaning of to try to understand the main ideas of texts. Use the menu on the right to read portions of some historical texts.

US Constitution Preamble

In this section, we'll take a look at the preamble, or introduction to the US Constitution. The original document is in blue.

Even if you do not know the meaning of all of the words, like tranquility or posterity, take the passage phrase by phrase and try to get the main idea by finding the meaning of the phrases you can understand.

We the People of the United States,

tells you who is writing the document

in Order to form a more perfect Union,

tells you their purpose. They want to make a better union of the states that make up the United States

establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare,

These are all things that they seek to do with The Constitution that will make the union better. Justice must be established. The union must have domestic tranquility, or peace, inside the country. The Union must have defense, such as a military. Finally, the Constitution also seeks to provide for the people's well being.

and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,

They want liberty for themselves and their children, or posterity

do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

To do all these things above, they are writing a constitution.

Gettysburg Address

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

In this paragraph, Lincoln is referring to the creation of the US by the Declaration of Independence. A score is twenty years, so "four score and seven years ago" means 87 years ago. He goes on to say that the new nation that was created by The Declaration was based on liberty and equality.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

He says that The Civil War is testing the country. He acknowledges those who died in the battle and explains that they are there to dedicate the cemetery.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.

He says that he can not dedicate the cemetery, but that it was already given a better dedication by those who died there. He believes that the speech will not be remembered, but the bravery of the soldiers will. He then refers to their unfinished work, meaning that the war is not over.

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

He acknowledges the work still to be done. He advocates continuing with the war effort out of respect for those who died. That they would not want to see the country disappear.

Letter from Birmingham Jail (excerpt)

In this section, we'll look at Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail. King was arrested while protesting discriminatory laws against African Americans in Birmingham, Alabama. He wrote a lengthy letter explaining to his critics why he went to Alabama. This is an excerpt from the letter.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

Though there may be a few difficult words, King's idea is stated fairly thoroughly. He is responding to people who said that he should not travel to protest in a city that is not his own. He explains that all communities are connected and bad things happening in Birmingham should concern people everywhere.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

In the opening of this paragraph, he calls out his critics for criticizing his protesting, but not criticizing the conditions that he was protesting. He accuses them of only looking at effects, and not the cause of the problems in Birmingham. He ends by saying that the people in charge of the city have left African Americans no choice but to protest.

Letter from Birmingham Jail copyright 1963 Martin Luther King Jr.

Events in US History

Revolutionary Era

Magna Carta

The Magna Carta was a document written in England in 1215. It declared that no man could be punished by the will of The King alone. It is an example of the philosophy of “rule of law”

Mayflower Compact

The Mayflower Compact was a declaration made by English settlers in Massachusetts in 1620. It was the first document establishing a government of English settlers in the US

Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence was written by Thomas Jefferson and signed at the Second Continental Congress in 1776. It declared that the US was a separate country from Great Britain. It also declared that citizens had individual rights and listed grievances, or complaints, against The King.

Revolutionary War

The Revolutionary War began as a protest against unpopular taxes and the presence of British soldiers in the American colonies. It ended with the British Army being pushed out after the Battle of Yorktown in Virginia.

George Washington

George Washington was the commander-in-chief, or military leader of American forces during The Revolutionary War. He was later elected the first President of the US.

Articles of Confederation

The Articles of Confederation were a document that created a US government. It gave very little power to the federal government and president and more to the individual states. It was not successful because of disagreements between the states.

US Constitution

The US Constitution is the framework of US government. It explains what the branches of the government are and their roles. It was signed in 1789 and is still in use today. Changes have been made to it, which are called amendments. The first ten amendments are called the Bill of Rights because they outline rights guaranteed to individuals.

War of 1812

In The War of 1812 the US declared war on Great Britain again. The war was fought over the British Navy forcing American troops to join them and British relations with Native Americans. Fighting broke out across the US, including the burning of Washington DC

US-Indian Policy

Early on, Native American groups acted as autonomous, or independent, nations within the US. President Washington recognized them as sovereign. President Andrew Jackson, however, disagreed, saying that sovereign nations could not exist within the US.

Indian Removal Act

In 1830, Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act forcing all Native Americans to move west of the Mississippi River. There was some resistance fighting, especially among the Seminole people. Native Americans were walked to Oklahoma, and many died along the way in what is called the "Trail of Tears."

Manifest Destiny

Manifest Destiny was a popular idea in the US in the 1800s saying that the US should reach all the way across the US to the Pacific Ocean. It was used to advocate for wars against Mexico and the Native Americans in The West.

Civil War

Slavery in the US

African Americans were kidnapped and brought to the US and sold as property. Enslaved workers were forced to work in inhumane conditions and subjected to brutal treatment. A movement to abolish slavery began in the northern states.

Sectionalism

Sectionalism refers to the philosophical divide that existed in The US in the years leading up to The Civil War. White Southerners began to feel they had different values than those in the north. They had more of an agriculture-based economy, while The North was beginning to industrialize and more people were working in factories. Those in The South sought to preserve slavery, while an abolitionist movement was growing in The North.

US Civil War

The US Civil War began when southerners fired on a US Navy base at Fort Sumter South Carolina in 1860. The southern states seceded and declared themselves an independent nation. Richmond, Virginia was established as the capital of the Confederate States of America. As the war went on, both sides saw massive casualties. Major battles include Bull Run, Fredericksburg, Antietam, Gettysburg, Shiloh and Richmond. As US troops closed in on Richmond, the Confederate army burned the city and fled to Appomattox Courthouse, where they signed a peace agreement.

Civil War Amendments

Several important constitutional amendments were passed during the Civil War era. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude (except for criminals). The 14th Amendment defined citizenship and equal protection under the law, and made every person born in the US a citizen, including those who had been enslaved. The 15th Amendment prohibits restricting voting based on race, color or previous servitude.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction was the period after the Civil War when the US was recovering from the war. A focus was put on transforming the Southern economy away from slavery. Some northern politicians went south to be elected and were called "carpetbaggers." The South entered an economic depression.

Civil Rights

Women's Suffrage

Elizabeth Cady Stanton began pushing for women's right to vote in the mid-1800s. In the 1870s some western states began granting women the right to vote. By the 1910s thousands of women were protesting for the right to vote. The 19th Amendment, passed in 1915, granted women the right to vote.

Jim Crow Laws

Jim Crow laws were laws meant to separate the races in the southern US. Unfair literacy tests and other laws were designed to keep African Americans from voting. Schools and nearly all public facilities were segregated. African Americans experienced widespread unfairness under these laws.

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)

Plessy v. Ferguson was a Supreme Court case about segregated train cars in Louisiana. The decision upheld segregation and allowed for "separate but equal" facilities.

Brown v. Board of Education (1954)

In Brown v. Board of Education, the Supreme Court decided that separate facilities could not be equal. The case involved Oliver Brown suing over unequal segregated schools in Topeka, Kansas. It led to desegregation of all schools. Some southerners protested, including Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd Jr. who advocated for "massive resistance" to integration.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King advocated for African Americans to oppose Jim Crow laws. They did this by having nonviolent protests and sit-ins. His most influential works include the Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963) and leading the March on Washington, in which he gave his "I Have a Dream" speech.

World War I and II

World War I

The First World War broke out between two European powers: The Entente Powers of France, Great Britain, Russia and later The US; and The Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, The Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria. Several philosophies contributed to the beginning of the war: Imperialism, which is the control of one nation over another; nationalism, or identifying or feeling attached to your nation; and militarism, which is the idea that a strong military makes a strong nation.

Russian Revolution

In 1917, The Russian tsar, or monarch, Nicholas II was overthrown. The Bolsheviks, or Russian communists, came to power under Vladimir Lenin. Russia withdrew from World War I in 1918 and became the Soviet Union (USSR)

US Involvement

President Woodrow Wilson attempted to keep the US out of World War I. One event that helped draw the US into the war was the German Navy sinking of the RMS Lusitania, which was a British passenger ship that contained American passengers. A second event that drew the US in was the Zimmerman Telegram: a message sent from Germany inviting Mexico to attack the US and side with Germany. The US declared war in 1917.

Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles was the peace treaty that ended World War I. It included a "war guilt clause," which made Germany responsible for paying damages from the war. It also established a League of Nations to make sure the treaty was carried out.

Neutrality Acts

The US policy of the 1930s was neutrality or isolationism: Staying out of other countries' conflicts. The US could see that Europe was on the brink of another war.

World War II

The major powers in World War II were the Allied Powers: France, UK, US, and USSR and the Axis Powers: Germany, Italy and Japan. The war began in Asia when Japan invaded China and The USSR. Then, war began in Europe when Germany invaded Poland.

Fascism and Nazism

Fascism is a political movement that led to totalitarianism, or complete control under a dictator. Ultra-nationalism and militarism are traits of fascism. The Nazis were the fascist party of Germany, led by Adolf Hitler.

The Holocaust

Nazis and fascist in Europe caused the genocide of six million Jews. Families were forced to live in ghettos before being sent to labor and death camps. Communists, homosexuals, prisoners of war and Romani were also killed.

Japanese-American Internment

After Japan attacked the US at Pearl Harbor, the US government ordered Americans of Japanese ancestry be locked in internment camps. White American farmers and retailers who wanted to shut out competition motivated the internment movement.

Decolonization

Following World War II, colonies in Asia and Africa held by European powers began to have revolutions to push out colonial rule.

GI Bill

The GI Bill gave benefits to veterans returning from World War II. The benefits included unemployment and education assistance and affordable mortgages. Many more Americans were able to go to college and buy houses than in previous generations. The GED test was also created for veterans who did not have a high school credential.

The Cold War

Communism

Communism is an economic system in which wealth is shared among all workers. In communism the government has strict control over the economy and owns all property.

Capitalism

In capitalism, the free market determines who gets wealthy. The government has some economic controls, but businesses and property are privately owned. Businesses are motivated by profit.

Cold War Powers

On one side of the cold war were the capitalist countries of NATO, which included North America and Western Europe. On the other side were the communist countries of The Warsaw Pact of the USSR and Eastern Europe. It was called The Cold War because although the two main powers of The US and USSR gathered many weapons, they never fought directly.

Division of Germany

Germany was divided after World War II. The western countries controlled West Germany and made it an independent capitalist country, while the USSR controlled

East Germany and made it a communist country. The city of Berlin was also divided between east and west, though it was surrounded by East Germany. The US airlifted food and supplies into West Berlin.

Truman Doctrine

President Harry Truman proposed a policy called “containment” for communism. The US would give aid to stop the spread of communism anywhere in The World. The US gave aid to Greece and Turkey and became involved in wars in Korea and Vietnam.

Marshall Plan

The Marshall Plan was the plan for the US to give aid to European countries after World War II. The intent was to stop the spread of communism.

Great Society

The Great Society was president Lyndon Johnson’s plan to eliminate poverty and racial injustice. It included funding for medical care, education and transportation. Eventually the Vietnam War prevented funding of many programs.

Nixon and Watergate

Richard Nixon was the president after Lyndon Johnson and he continued the Vietnam War. His administration was responsible for the Watergate Scandal in which Republican operatives broke into the Democratic headquarters. Nixon became the first president to resign from office.

Collapse of The USSR

After a 1991 coup, the Soviet leader handed over power to the new Russian president. The Soviet Union dissolved into 12 separate nations. Other communist nations in Europe dissolved and most are now democratic.

After 9/11

On September 11, 2001, members of the terrorist organization Al Qaeda hijacked four airplanes and crashed them into buildings in the US. This attack led to a global war on terror. The US began wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Increased attention has also been given to cyber threats.

Economics

Economics makes up about 15% of the GED test.

History and Economics

Civil War

Following the US Civil War, the US economy was heavily damaged. The loss of life and destruction of major cities hindered production of goods.

Industrialization

Beginning in the late 1800s, the US began a process of industrialization. Many people left family farms to live in cities and work in large factories. Trains made it possible to easily ship goods produced in a central location to cities and towns around the country.

Westward expansion

Economic opportunities in the 1800s also influenced Americans to move west. Available land and gold rushes in California and Alaska motivated more people to populate the western states.

Great Depression

While the US economy was booming in the 1920s, it fell in the 1930s. Factors that led to the Great Depression were an overinflated stock market that crashed in 1929 and a severe drought, called the Dust Bowl, which affected the Midwest. The Great Depression ended after president Franklin Roosevelt passed a series of bills to assist the public called The New Deal and when World War II began and many people went to work to support the war.

After World War II

After World War II, troops who returned home were given benefits to help buy homes and obtain an education. This boosted the economy and led to many scientific advancements. More Americans also bought cars, which made travel easier. Other new inventions like television and air conditioning changed the way people lived

Economic Terms

Markets

A market describes the place or infrastructure in which people exchange goods or services. It is a very broad term that includes exchanging goods or services for other goods or services, which is called barter. A market can also involve the selling of goods and services for money.

Incentives

Incentives are anything that motivates someone to do something. In economics, incentives are what motivates people to spend money. Incentives are often the idea that the spender is getting a good value for their money.

Monopoly and Competition

When two businesses offer the same goods or service, they are in competition. Competition encourages businesses to lower prices or add other incentives. When a business has no competition, it has a monopoly. With a monopoly, a business can raise prices and limit incentives like good service.

Labor and Capital

When a business produces goods, there are some resources it needs. Capital refers to the goods needed to start the business, such as equipment and labor refers to people needed to produce the goods.

Opportunity Cost

When a consumer makes a choice, the opportunity cost is what they lose by not choosing the item they chose not to take. For example, if a person is choosing between buying a sports car or a minivan, the opportunity cost of buying the minivan would be losing the ability to drive very fast. The opportunity cost of the sports car is not being able to carry many passengers.

Profit

Profit is the difference between the purchase price of goods or services and the cost to the business in producing the goods and services.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is the process of starting a business. An entrepreneur develops a business model, invests in capital and hires labor. An entrepreneur is responsible for the risk that the business may succeed or fail.

Comparative Advantage

If one business can produce a similar good to other businesses at a lower cost or lower opportunity cost, they have a comparative advantage. They can then charge a lower price than their competition.

Specialization

Specialization is a way for businesses to increase production by dividing their operations into departments that make specific goods.

Productivity

Productivity is a measurement of how efficiently a business can produce goods or services.

Interdependence

Interdependence in economics refers to businesses that depend on each other to exist. A factory that produces goods may rely on suppliers for raw materials and stores to sell the product. The stores and suppliers rely on the factory to manufacture the goods.

Supply, Demand and Price

Supply and demand refers to the relationship between the availability of goods, the desire for people to buy goods, and the price of the goods. If the demand for a good increases and the supply is limited, the price will increase. Also, if supplies of a good decrease, that will also cause prices to rise. Too much of a good on the market can cause prices to drop.

Fiscal and Monetary Policy

The government can have some control over the economy. Fiscal policy refers to how much money the government brings in, usually as taxes. Monetary policy refers to how much money the government produces. The government can also control the economy through the regulating or easing regulations on institutions like banks.

Inflation and deflation

In an economy, rising prices are called inflation and falling prices are called deflation. The inflation rate is the rate at which prices are generally rising on goods over a long period of time.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

GDP is the total amount of goods and services produced by a country. It is used as a sign of a country's economic health.

Unemployment

Unemployment is the percentage of people who want to have a job but do not. Those unable or not trying to work are not a part of unemployment.

Tariffs

Tariffs are taxes on goods being imported to a country from another country. They provide revenue for the government and help the economy by giving a comparative advantage to producers of goods in the country.

Geography

The GED Social Studies test is about 15% geography.

Environment and Society

Nationhood

A nation is a country that is independent of other countries. It has its own government and is usually recognized by other nations. Often, members of a nation have the same language, culture and history.

Sustainability

Sustainability is how the environment can endure and continue to support life. Relying on resources that can be used up or that pollute the environment so that it cannot support life is not sustainable.

Technology

Technology is the use of any tools and inventions to help humans control their environment. While modern technologies include things like computers and cell phones, even technologies like fire and the wheel have been important to the development of human societies.

Natural Resources

Natural resources occur naturally in the environment. All man-made goods come from natural resources. Water, air, and all living things that are used by people are natural resources

Borders and Migration

Religion and place

Religion and place are key factors in defining a culture. Religion is a set of beliefs that are part of a culture. Cultures also often have a sense of place, or an attachment to a location.

Diversity

Diversity means having many different things. If a community includes people from different cultures, it is said to have cultural diversity. Similarly, if a natural environment allows for many different species of living things, it has natural diversity.

Immigration, Emigration and Diaspora

Migration is the movement of people from one place to another. Immigration is people entering a place or country, while emigration is people leaving. Diaspora refers to the places a population exists in. For example if people of a culture emigrate from their home country to many other places, those places are part of a diaspora.

Cultural Diffusion

Cultural diffusion is when aspects of one culture affect another. If people of another culture move into a community, people of the community may adopt some of the new people's food, language or fashion

Assimilation

Assimilation is when people of a culture move to a new community and change in order to fit in. They may have to learn a new language or change their behavior in other ways.

Rural and Urban Settlement

Until industrialization, the overwhelming majority of people in the World lived in rural areas and survived mainly by farming. With improvements in transportation, manufacturing and other technologies, more people began moving to cities. Today, more people are moving from rural areas to cities in many countries.