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## Questions and Themes: **Thematic Structure of the Curriculum**

### [The Three Essential Questions](#)

### [The Seven Key Themes](#)

### The Three Essential Questions

World History for Us All introduces three overarching thematic questions as guides for organizing classroom activities and discussions:

#### [Humans and the Environment](#)

#### [Humans and Other Humans](#)

#### [Humans and Ideas](#)

Ideas related to the Three Essential Questions appear in the curriculum in three places:

- Study of each of the nine [Big Eras](#) of world history begins with an introductory essay titled "This Big Era and the Three Essential Questions."
- All Landscape and Closeup [Teaching Units](#) include a set of three broad discussion questions in a section titled "This Unit and the Three Essential Questions."
- At the end of the essay introducing each of the [Seven Key Themes](#), teachers will find thematic discussion questions that link that Key Theme to the Three Essential Questions.



### Humans and the Environment

How has the changing relationship between human beings and the physical and natural environment affected human life from early times to the present? Human beings are inhabitants of the biosphere and their history is inseparable from it. This is as true today as it was 200,000 years ago.

#### [Why this Essential Question?](#)



### Humans and Other Humans

Why have relations among humans become so complex since early times? We live in a

world of intense, complicated, and diverse relationships among billions of people. Throughout most of its history our species has lived in small, scattered communities of foragers and hunters. Questions about the ways in which humans have multiplied on the earth and come to relate to one another in such a variety of ways are fundamental to historical investigation.

[Why this Essential Question?](#)



## Humans and Ideas

How have human views of the world, nature, and the cosmos changed? History is not only the study of "what happened" but also about the ways in which humans have thought about, questioned, interpreted, and represented (in words, pictures, movies, and so on) what their senses tell them about the world and the universe. Ideas influence historical developments and, conversely, events shape ideas as humans strive to make sense of change.

[Why this Essential Question?](#)

## The Seven Key Themes

This feature of the curriculum offers seven themes that teachers and students may explore in relation to any or all of the [Big Eras](#). All seven of these Key Themes, each of which focuses on a particular sphere of human activity and thought, may be encompassed within and related to the broader [Three Essential Questions](#). World history classrooms may in the course of the school year choose to emphasize just one theme, a few of them, or all seven.

A brief essay introduces each of the Key Themes. Following each essay is a set of nine discussion questions that relate the Key Theme to each of the Three Essential Questions. All [teaching units](#) at Landscape and Closeup levels include a section titled "This Unit and the Seven Key Themes," which simply identifies the Key Themes most relevant to the content of that particular unit. For teachers who wish to explore certain thematic lines throughout their course, the curriculum will include an index of teaching units relevant to each of the Key Themes. This feature remains to be developed.

- [Key Theme 1](#)  
Patterns of Population
- [Key Theme 2](#)  
Economic Networks and Exchange
- [Key Theme 3](#)  
Uses and Abuses of Power
- [Key Theme 4](#)  
Haves and Have-Nots
- [Key Theme 5](#)  
Expressing Identity
- [Key Theme 6](#)  
Science, Technology, and the Environment
- [Key Theme 7](#)  
Spiritual Life and Moral Codes

Educators use the word "theme" in several different ways. In World History for Us All a theme is defined as a topic that addresses a particular sphere of human activity over time. The major themes presented here concern broad aspects of change that have been enduringly important in the human experience.

The teaching and learning framework of World History for Us All is fundamentally chronological. A premise of the curriculum is that historical learning works best when students begin their studies with remote eras and move forward, connecting patterns of cause and effect over time. Whether the scale of investigation is large or small, students are encouraged to analyze and understand the chronological relationships among events and to think about the full range of possible causes and effects of historical developments.

On the other hand, world history education should also include study of issues and problems that have recurred over time. Attention to particular themes, whether in the political, economic, cultural, social, environmental, or other spheres, offers a way to connect the study of particular periods and regions of the world to exploration of enduring aspects of the human condition.

This curriculum recommends that teachers and students select thematic questions to raise and discuss repeatedly in different ways throughout the school year. The goal is to encourage students to think more coherently, systematically, and comparatively about the past. By linking particular events, people, trends, and periods to questions about enduring aspects of the human experience, students may more successfully distill concrete meaning and significance from what they learn.

The [National Standards for World History](#) includes this statement about thematic history:

Here students identify and explore particular historical issues or problems over determined periods of time. For example, one unit of study might be concerned with urbanization in different societies from ancient to modern times, a second with slavery through the ages, and a third with nationalism in modern times. This approach allows students to explore a single issue in great depth, often one that has contemporary relevance. Teachers may want to consider, however, the hazards of separating or isolating particular phenomena from the wider historical context of the times. A useful compromise may be to choose a range of themes for emphasis but then weave them into chronological study based on one of the other three models.

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