

A History of Economic Relations and Trade Agreements between Japan and the United States

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Overview

Each year, nearly half a million students take the Advanced Placement (AP) United States History exam. However, apart from a few lessons on World War II, the College Board's AP curriculum largely overlooks significant economic developments between the United States and Japan. This project, therefore, aims to fill this gap and provide students with a deeper understanding of U.S.-Japan relations before and beyond the World War II narrative. It integrates lessons and assignments on the historical and contemporary economic connections between Japan and the United States into an AP United States History course through a series of activities spread across the academic year, allowing students to explore the evolution of economic ties between the two nations from 1853 to the present day.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Evaluate the evolution of economic relations between the United States and Japan from 1853 to the present.
- Analyze primary and secondary sources related to U.S.-Japan trade agreements.
- Assess the impact of historical events on economic policies between the two nations.
- Develop critical thinking skills through document analysis, role-playing activities, and written responses.

Grade Level: 11th grade (AP United States History)

Time Required: Multiple sessions spread across the academic year (November, February, April, May)

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

- Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change
 - Analyze change and continuity in U.S.-Japan economic relations.
- Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance
 - Explore how U.S.-Japan trade agreements reflect shifts in political power.
- Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption
 - Examine trade agreements as reflections of global economic trends.
- Theme 9: Global Connections
 - Analyze globalization's impact on U.S.-Japan relations.
- Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices
 - Explore diplomatic negotiations as civic practice.

AP United States History Curriculum Connections

- Topic 5.2: Manifest Destiny

- Topic 7.2: United States Imperialism
- Topic 9.4: A Changing Economy

Lesson Materials

- Primary source documents (treaties, agreements, diplomatic correspondence, maps, illustrations)
- Secondary source articles
- Computer access for research and digital portfolio creation
- Handouts (documents, readings, graphic organizers, essay prompts)

Part 1: U.S.-Japan Economic Relations in the 1850s

- **Objective:** Understand the context of Commodore Perry's 1853 expedition and analyze how it aligns with U.S. Manifest Destiny. (November)
- **Activities**
 - Give a short lecture on Manifest Destiny and U.S. expansionism.
 - Introduce students to Commodore Matthew Perry's 1853 expedition to Japan.
 - Have students analyze primary sources from [Brown University's "Perry in Japan: A Visual History" online exhibit](#).
 - <https://library.brown.edu/cds/perry/about.html>
 - Guide students through a close reading and “HAPP” analysis of the Kanagawa Treaty (1854) and Harris Treaty (1858), looking at the historical context, intended audience, purpose, and point of view of the documents.
 - https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/japan002.asp
 - <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/pw/18580729.T1E.html>
 - https://www.drurban.info/uploads/2/4/4/9/24492964/happ_document_analysis.pdf
 - Discuss the following question with students: *To what extent did U.S.-Japan relations in the 1850s represent an extension of Manifest Destiny?*
- **Assessment:** Students will write a document-based essay on the following prompt: *Evaluate the extent to which the United States' economic relations with Japan in the 1850s represented an extension of its policy of Manifest Destiny.* In this essay, students should use the provided documents and their knowledge of the historical context to construct a well-argued thesis about the nature of U.S.-Japan relations in the 1850s.
 - Steps to writing an AP U.S. History DBQ:
 - https://www.kaptest.com/study/ap-us-history/how-to-approach-document-based-ap-u-s-history-questions/?srsId=AfmBOou-kJeNVsbt2752_PtLL7SZ6q0cyeLDBPKMcoqboyw8J0zjFX1
 - AP U.S. History DBQ Essay Rubric:
 - https://www.tomrichey.net/uploads/3/2/1/0/32100773/apush_dbq_rubric.pdf
 - **Documents for the DBQ**
 1. **President Millard Fillmore's letter to the Emperor of Japan (1853)**
 - **Content:** Fillmore proposes a peaceful relationship between the United States and Japan, emphasizing trade, cooperation, and mutual respect.

- **Theme:** Diplomacy and the expansion of international commerce, driven by the United States' desire to open Japan to trade.
 - https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/black_ships_and_samurai/presletter.html
2. **Treaty of Kanagawa (1854)**
- **Content:** This treaty established formal relations between the United States and Japan, opening two Japanese ports to American ships for refueling and securing the safety of shipwrecked sailors.
 - **Theme:** It demonstrates the use of diplomacy and military presence to extend American influence, mirroring Manifest Destiny's themes of expansion.
 - https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/japan002.asp
3. **The Harris Treaty (Treaty of Amity and Commerce, 1858)**
- **Content:** Negotiated by Townsend Harris, this treaty opened more Japanese ports to U.S. trade and provided for extraterritorial rights for Americans in Japan.
 - **Theme:** Economic and legal dominance are seen as an extension of Manifest Destiny, with the U.S. enforcing its terms on a previously isolationist nation.
 - <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/pw/18580729.T1E.html>
4. **Map of Japanese defense forts on Tokyo Bay during Perry's Expedition to Japan in 1853-1854**
- **Content:** This 1853 ink-drawn map by an unknown Japanese artist shows the strategic defense forts along Tokyo Bay, illustrating Japan's military preparedness during Commodore Perry's expedition.
 - **Theme:** The map represents Japan's cautious approach to foreign contact and the tension of U.S.-Japan relations before the country's forced opening to Western trade in the mid-19th century.
 - <https://www.loc.gov/item/2022650224/>
5. **Excerpt from Commodore Perry's Journal (1853)**
- **Content:** Perry describes his impressions of Japan and the importance of opening Japan to the "civilizing" influence of the West, reflecting attitudes toward U.S. expansionism.
 - **Theme:** Perry's sense of a civilizing mission ties into Manifest Destiny's ideological justification for expansion and trade.
 - https://library.brown.edu/cds/perry/Perry_Journal.html
6. **Japanese Woodblock Print of Perry's Black Ships (1854)**
- **Content:** A Japanese woodblock print depicting Perry's "Black Ships" arriving in Japan, symbolizing the Japanese perspective on U.S. encroachment and power.
 - **Theme:** This visual document contrasts with the U.S. perspective, showing how Japan perceived U.S. expansionism and its sense of destiny as threats.
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perry_Expedition#/media/File:Japanese_1854_print_Commodore_Perry.jpg
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Part 2: American and Japanese Imperialism

- **Objective:** Understand early 20th-century U.S. Imperialism and its impact on U.S.-Japan relations. (February)
- **Activities**
 - Give a short lecture on U.S. Imperialism and Japan’s rise as a world power.
 - Read poetry from Emperor Meiji, collected and compiled [Meiji Jingu Intercultural Research Center](#), and discuss its connection to 19th-century imperialism.
 - “The Sky” (<https://ysnews.com/news/2022/12/harold-wrights-poetic-life>)
 - “Siblings of the Four Seas” (<https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/editorial/outside-contributors/20240809-203659/>)
 - Present background information on the 1905 Taft-Katsura Agreement and 1908 Root-Takahira Agreement.
 - Have students read secondary source articles from the Council on Foreign Relations and *Pacific Historical Review*.
 - TWE Remembers: The Taft-Katsura Memorandum
 - <https://www.cfr.org/blog/twe-remembers-taft-katsura-memorandum-0>
 - Theodore Roosevelt and American Involvement in the Far East, 1901-1909
 - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3636977?seq=1>
- **Assessment:** Assign students roles as American or Japanese diplomats from the early twentieth century and have them focus on the Taft-Katsura Agreement or the Root-Takahira Agreement. Working in pairs, students will complete the attached worksheet and draft fictional diplomatic letters from either the U.S. or Japanese perspective. Have students present their diplomatic letters and participate in a class discussion about U.S.-Japan relations in the early twentieth century.

Diplomatic Role-Play Worksheet
Your Role: <input type="checkbox"/> American Diplomat <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese Diplomat
Agreement being negotiated: _____
Key Interests of Your Country 1. 2. 3.

Potential Compromises

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Diplomatic Letter

Part 3: Contemporary U.S.-Japan Trade Relations

- **Objective:** Understand recent developments in U.S.-Japan trade relations. (April)
- **Activities**
 - Give a short lecture on globalization at the end of the twentieth century, specifically focusing on economic developments between the United States and Japan.
 - (Although World War II is covered in Unit 7 of the AP United States History curriculum, students might need some background on the aftermath of World War II. Here's a brief reading on "The American Occupation of Japan, 1945-1952" with some discussion questions: https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1900_occupation.htm.)
 - Introduce students to recent U.S. trade agreements with Japan. Have students read and analyze the following contemporary media accounts and government documents.
 - 1981 Voluntary Export Restraints (VER) agreement
 - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/05/01/japan-reports-us-accepts-new-auto-export-proposals/0e6a74fa-1fb6-49a3-bbbc-b28bdadb4b95/>
 - 1983 Joint Statement on Energy Cooperation
 - <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/joint-statement-japan-united-states-energy-cooperation>
 - 2019 Trade Agreements
 - <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11120>
 - <https://apnews.com/united-states-government-5c7adefc4824bcba15daf977250fb9b>
 - 2023 Critical Minerals Agreement
 - <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/27/business/economy/us-japan-battery-minerals-deal.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>
 - Guide students in completing the attached graphic organizer connecting these agreements to globalization and the changing economy.

Agreement	Year	Key Provisions	Impact on Globalization
Voluntary Export Restraints agreement			
Joint Statement on Energy Cooperation			
U.S.-Japan Trade Agreement			
Critical Minerals Agreement			

- **Assessment:** Students will submit their graphic organizers and engage in a class discussion on recent U.S.-Japan economic agreements and their impacts on the global economy.

Final Project: U.S.-Japan Economic Relations from 1853 to 2023

- **Objective:** Research primary sources for the final document-based essay based on continuity and change in U.S.-Japan trade relations throughout history. (May)
- **Activities**
 - Students will search online archives for six primary source documents tracing U.S.-Japan economic relations from 1853 to 2023. Primary sources might include trade agreements, diplomatic communications, or economic data. Some possible online archives include:
 - Japanese Studies Primary Sources in Western Languages (<https://guides.library.yale.edu/c.php?g=295865&p=1972708>)
 - Digital National Security Archive (DNSA): Japan and the United States: Diplomatic, Security, and Economic Relations, 1960–1976 (<https://proquest.libguides.com/dnsa/japan1960>)
 - The U.S.-Japan Project: Diplomatic, Security, and Economic Relations Since 1960 (<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/project/us-japan-project>)
 - Modern Japan in Archives (<https://www.ndl.go.jp/modern/e/utility/list.html>)
 - Japanese Collection: Asian Collections at the Library of Congress (<https://guides.loc.gov/japanese-collection/e-resources/by-type>)
 - Students will write a final DBQ essay that includes the documents they found, responding to the prompt: *Analyze the continuities and changes in U.S.-Japan economic relations from 1853 to 2023.*
 - Students will engage in peer review sessions and provide feedback on each others' work based on the AP United States History DBQ essay rubric (thesis, contextualization, evidence, and analysis).

- AP U.S. History DBQ Essay Rubric:
https://www.tomrichey.net/uploads/3/2/1/0/32100773/apush_dbq_rubric.pdf
- Students will compile all project components into a digital portfolio on “The History of Economic Relations and Trade Agreements between Japan and the United States, 1853-Present,” write a brief reflection, and then present their digital portfolios to the class.
 - Digital Portfolios should include the following:
 - Initial DBQ on Manifest Destiny
 - Diplomatic Letters
 - Graphic Organizers
 - DBQ on Continuity and Change
 - Written Reflection

Final Digital Portfolio Rubric: U.S.-Japan Economic Relations from 1853 to 2023

Category	Description	Points
Thesis and Historical Argumentation	Clear, analytical thesis; coherent argument throughout essay and portfolio.	0-10
Primary Source Analysis	Effective selection and integration of primary sources in various parts of the portfolio.	0-10
Secondary Source Integration	Appropriate use of secondary sources to support arguments and contextualization.	0-5
Historical Thinking Skills	Demonstrates continuity and change, causation, and comparison across tasks (DBQ, essays, letters).	0-10
Document-Based Essay (DBQ)	Follows AP DBQ rubric—strong thesis, contextualization, evidence, and analysis.	0-15
Graphic Organizers	Completed and accurate graphic organizers that summarize agreements and trends.	0-10
Letters to/from Historical Figures	Creative and well-researched letters, demonstrating an understanding of key trade agreements and historical context.	0-10
Peer Review and Collaboration	Engaged in meaningful peer review, provided and used feedback effectively.	0-5
Presentation Delivery	Clear, organized presentation with effective communication and response to questions.	0-10
Digital Portfolio Design and Organization	Portfolio is well-organized, visually appealing, and easy to navigate.	0-5
Overall Reflection	Reflective analysis on the evolution of U.S.-Japan relations and personal project takeaways.	0-10

Total Points: 100

Extensions Activities

1. Have students create timelines illustrating the evolution of U.S.-Japan economic relations over the past two centuries.
2. Have students compare U.S.-Japan trade agreements with other countries or regions, such as China or the European Union, across different time periods.
3. Have students research and present on cultural diplomacy efforts between the U.S. and Japan, such as student exchanges or cultural festivals like the National Cherry Blossom Festival.
4. Have students research key figures in U.S.-Japan relations (e.g., Townsend Harris, Commodore Perry, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe) and their roles in shaping economic and diplomatic ties.
5. Invite an expert in U.S.-Japan relations, such as an economist or diplomat, to speak virtually to students about current and future trends in trade relations.