

U.S. History: Sample Social Studies Extended Response Questions

The following is a sample of a social studies extended response question with a range of student answers. These answers were written by Tennessee students during the field test from the 2014-15 school year and are accompanied by a numeric score and reasoning for the score. The rubric was scored on a 4-point scale.

Please note that during the 2015-16 school year, answers will be scored on a 12-point scale (8 points for content, and 4 points for literacy). This sample from the 2014-15 school year can still be used for reference because it reflects the same expectations for student writing that will be assessed during the 2015-16 school year.

The following extended response question addresses standard US.99.

The timeline and excerpts contain information related to the Watergate Scandal.

Evaluate how the Watergate scandal affected the relationship between the three branches of government.

- How did the scandal impact the way media reported about the government?
- How did the public respond?
- Use evidence from these sources and your content knowledge to support your answer.

The timeline below is of important events related to the Watergate Scandal.

June 17, 1972: five men working for the Committee to Re-elect the President are arrested for breaking into the Democratic National Committee Headquarters at the Watergate office complex.

August 30, 1972: President Richard Nixon announces that an investigation by White House counsel John Dean had found no White House involvement.

January 8, 1973: The trial of the burglars begins. Some plead guilty while the court convicts others.

April 6, 1973: John Dean agrees to cooperate with an investigation of the break-in.

April 30, 1973: President Nixon fires John Dean, and several of Nixon's closest advisors resign.

May 18, 1973: Televised congressional hearings on the Watergate Affair begin.

June 25, 1973: John Dean testifies at the hearings that President Nixon helped cover up the break-in.

April 30, 1974: President Nixon refuses to hand over tapes of conversations made in the White House.

May 9, 1974: The House Judiciary Committee begins impeachment hearings.

August 9, 1974: President Nixon resigns.

The excerpt below describes the reaction of Congress to the Watergate scandal.

In the years following the Watergate investigation Congress passed legislation aimed at strengthening the legislative branch's oversight powers. In 1974, Congress overrode a presidential veto and revised the Freedom of Information Act, providing the public and the media with new tools to access information held by the executive branch. The 1976 Government in Sunshine Act required federal agencies to hold their meetings in public.

The Senate Watergate investigation remains one of the most significant congressional inquiries in U.S. history. Over the course of this 16 month investigation committee members maintained bipartisan accord, garnered public support, and expanded congressional investigatory powers to produce lasting legislative reform.

The excerpt below is from a speech made by Congressman John Conyers in 2013.

Since I first arrived in Congress, I have seen nine presidents occupy the White House. I have had my disagreements with all nine of them, but it is important to distinguish between mere political disagreements and true abuses of power.

That line was clearly crossed in the impeachment of President Richard Nixon.

The allegations against President Nixon were numerous, and very serious. From the outset, the House Judiciary Committee conducted its investigation

of these claims in a meticulous and bipartisan fashion. We hired expert staff, conducted months of research, and held 57 public hearings on the topic. Piece by piece, working across the aisle and with our Senate colleagues, we built a substantial case. The Committee did not act on impeachment until we were certain that we had the evidence to substantiate the allegations.

That painstaking approach paid dividends. The Committee worked diligently to uncover the facts of the Watergate break-in and other abuses. Our emphasis on the facts earned credibility with the public, the media, and the Republican caucus. In the end, it was the Republican leadership that, in 1974, convinced President Nixon to resign. We worked hard to build consensus around the need to reign in the executive branch.

In the years following President Nixon's resignation, Congress began to rehabilitate the federal government and restore the public's trust in our elected officials. . . .

While Congress did this work, we also witnessed the rise of the independent press. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein became models for journalists across the country. For a time, reporters learned not to give deference to elected officials simply because of their office.

In both the halls of Congress and press rooms in the Beltway and beyond, accountability and oversight became hallmarks of the post-Watergate era.

Yet, I fear that the lessons we learned in the aftermath of the Watergate episode are being slowly forgotten, and the reforms we enacted are quietly eroding.

The information below describes the Supreme Court case of *United States v. Nixon*.

Facing criminal prosecution for his role in the Watergate cover-up, President Nixon's former Attorney General, John Mitchell, requested that the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia subpoena the tapes belonging to the President in order to assist with Mitchell's defense. The Supreme Court, like the Court of Appeals, acknowledged that, under certain circumstances, a

President may successfully assert a claim of “executive privilege.” Nevertheless, it held that the right of the President to assert this claim must be balanced against the Fifth Amendment right of a criminal defendant, John Mitchell, to obtain compulsory evidence in his defense.

The excerpt below is from a speech by President Ford in 1974.

And I have sought such guidance and searched my own conscience with special diligence to determine the right thing for me to do with respect to my predecessor in this place, Richard Nixon, and his loyal wife and family.

There is an American tragedy in which we all have played a part. It could go on and on and on, or someone must write the end to it. I have concluded that only I can do that, and if I can, I must.

There are no historic or legal precedents to which I can turn in this matter, none that precisely fit the circumstances of a private citizen who has resigned the Presidency of the United States. But it is common knowledge that serious allegations and accusations hang like a sword over our former President’s head, threatening his health as he tries to reshape his life, a great part of which was spent in the service of this country and by the mandate of its people. . . .

“Now, therefore, I, Gerald R. Ford, President of the United States, pursuant to the pardon power conferred upon me by Article II, Section 2, of the Constitution, have granted and by these presents do grant a full, free, and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon for all offenses against the United States which he, Richard Nixon, has committed or may have committed or taken part in during the period from July (January) 20, 1969 through August 9, 1974.”

Sample A:

During the 1970s one of the greatest political scandals was discovered that led all the way up to the white house and the President of the United States. This political scandal was different in the fact that the media and the American public were well informed and had a great impact on the outcome of the scandal. In "September 18, 1973 televised congressional hears of the scandal appeared on the media." The media had full access to the hearings and watched many televised interviews with congress and government members. The media had further impact on the government when the "Sunshine Act of 1976 passed requiring all federal agencies to hold their meetings in public." This act allowed the US people and media to have a impact in their federal government from their own living room. Politicians soon began to understand the power of the media and how politics had been forever changed. Journalists and reporters now had a much greater impact on elections, and the public opinion of politicians. The independent press had a great rise with journalists such as "Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein." These journalists were free to report and not restricted to report against politicians simply "becasue of office." The media now had real reporting power and their power continues to this day. The Watergate scandal is still rembered by the media and the American public in "both the halls of Congress and press rooms in the Beltway and beyond."

The 1970s were a time of government doubt in America. The US had just departed Vietnam and many did not trust their elected officials. The Nixon Wategate scandal pushed many Americans over the edge to the point where they did not trust the government at all. The public was outraged that their own government was capable of such mistrust and this proved what many had thought all along: the US government could not be trusted, and their needed to be reform in US politics. The televised hearings further helped degrade American trust. With public trust destroyed many politicians had to quit their political career, such as "Nixon who resigned in 1974."

The Watergate scandal was an era in the US that had many lasting consequences. Public trust was altered and it took many years to gain it back. The media gained power in politics and the public became well informed. The effects of the Watergate scandal are still evident in politics today with many Ameicans still not trusting their president. The Wategate Scandal had significant effects in the lives of Americans, and the role of a democracy as a whole.

Score Point: Content 3, Literacy 3

Content: The student response demonstrates a general understanding of the Watergate scandal and addresses many aspects of the prompt question. For example, the way the media reported about the government is discussed with some detail using evidence from the stimuli (*The media had full access to the hearings and watched many televised interviews...the "Sunshine Act of 1976 passed requiring all federal agencies to hold their meetings in public"...allowed the US people and media to have a impact...the public opinion of politicians*). Missing from the essay is an analysis of what the Watergate scandal was or anything about Nixon's refusal to hand over tapes made in the White House. Also absent is any mention of what Congress did to restore the people's faith in the government such as overriding the president's veto of the Freedom of Information Act and explaining that the 1976 Government in Sunshine Act was also to bolster public support. Still, the response frequently exhibits proper use of historical data relating to the questions being asked.

Literacy: The response introduces the Watergate scandal with adequate clarity (*During the 1970s one of the greatest political scandals was discovered that led all the way up to the white house and the President of the United States*) and frequently uses relevant facts to analyze this event. For example the essay describes the 1970s as “a time of government doubt in America” and then adds that (*The US had just departed Vietnam and many did not trust their elected officials. The Nixon Watergate scandal pushed many Americans over the edge to the point where they did not trust the government at all*). The conclusion offers some support for the information presented in the response and is not merely perfunctory.

Sample B:

The time period that followed the Watergate Scandal consisted of the public's distrust of the Federal Government and ultimately led to the Legislative branch working diligently to restore that trust. Source Public Domain/ U.S. House of Representatives states, "In the years following President Nixon's resignation, Congress began to Rehabilitate the federal government and restore the public's trust in our elected officials." This excerpt proves the previous statement, in order for Legislation to restore the public's trust they began installing acts that would allow any meeting and/or order of business held within the federal branches to be readily available and easily accessible to the public. Source Public Domain/U.S. Senate states, "In 1974, congress overrode a presidential veto and revised the Freedom of Information act, providing the public and the media with new tools to access information held by the executive branch. The 1976 Government in Sunshine act required federal agencies to hold their meetings in public." Essentially what happened after Nixon was caught in the midst of this scandal, is that the public lost trust in the federal government and congress was left to clean up Nixon's mess. Nixon only made matters worse when he refused to release the tapes of meeting that were recorded within the Whitehouse. He was also held accountable for trying to cover up the scandal which escalated things even more. In order to calm the waters, congress passed acts that would prevent any further information being held from the public. Congress' actions helped restore the public's trust in the Federal Government.

Score Point: Content 3, Literacy 3

Content: The response successfully uses evidence from the stimuli to support some facets of its answer, such as discussing the congressional override of Nixon's veto of the Freedom of Information Act and the creation of the Government in Sunshine Act. This demonstrates a general understanding of the Watergate scandal and that Congress acted to restore the public's faith in the government. Frequent use of historical data adequately explains some cause-and-effect relationships (*Essentially what happened after Nixon was caught in the midst of this scandal, is that the public lost trust in the federal government and congress was left to clean up Nixon's mess. Nixon only made matters worse when he refused to release the tapes*).

Literacy: The response sufficiently describes relationships among ideas (*In order for Legislation to restore the public's trust they began installing acts that would allow any meeting and/or order of business help within the federal branches to be readily available and easily accessible to the public*), and typically uses relevant details to support them. The introduction to the Watergate scandal has adequate clarity (*The time period that followed the Watergate Scandal consisted of the public's distrust of the Federal Government and ultimately led to the Legislative Branch working diligently to restore that trust*) and the conclusion offers some support for the information presented earlier in the essay (*In order to calm the waters, congress passed acts that would prevent any further information being held from the public. Congress' actions helped restore the public's trust in the Federal Government*).

Sample C:

The Watergate scandal was a saddening, and eye opening experience for the citizens and government of The United State; it showed us that important and popular figures were not always what they claimed to be. This also affected relationships between branches of government by making the Executive Branch look weak, and also resulting in the Judicial and Legeslative branches to have less trust in the Executive. This scandal affected the Executive branch even after Nixon's resignation, because of the fact that the American people were upset by Nixon's actions which resulted in people having less trust for future presidents. This scandal gave the Judicial branch strength, by giving the supreme court the power to impeach president Nixon.

In a time when mass media was growing and thriving throughout The United States, the Watergate scandal gave reporters a way to create dilemmas of Richard Nixon and The United States government. It paved the way for the media to start questioning the government. It also gave them insight into presidential identities besides for just interviews and speeches givin by the President himself.

The public will always have a responce to everything, good or bad. The Watergate scandal was responded to very negatively by the public. Americans where very angry at Nixon, they felt as if they where betrayed by their president. The public was so angry about this that they responded negatively years later when President Ford pardoned Nixon.

Score Point: Content 2, Literacy 2

Content: The student response demonstrates a partial understanding of the Watergate scandal and makes little use of evidence from the stimuli for support. There is the occasional proper use of historical data (*The public was so angry about this that they responded negatively years later when President Ford pardoned Nixon*) and the essay arrives at some acceptable conclusions, but there are some errors (*This scandal gave the Judicial branch strength, by giving the supreme court the power to impeach president Nixon*). Overall, the analysis lacks clarity and the explanations lack depth and detail (*the Watergate scandal gave reporters a way to create dilemmas of Richard Nixon and the United States government*) that prevent the response from receiving a higher score.

Literacy: The response only occasionally uses adequate support of information, but does identify some of the relationships among ideas (*This scandal affected the Executive branch even after Nixon's resignation, because of the fact that the American people were upset by Nixon's actions which resulted in people having less trust for future presidents*). The introduction to the Watergate scandal has only limited clarity partly because what the scandal was, is never explained (*The Watergate scandal was a saddening, and eye opening experience for the citizens and government of The United State; it showed us that important and popular figures were not always what they claimed to be*). The conclusion, though referencing the stimuli, uses the same imprecise word choice found throughout the essay (*The public will always have a responce to everything, good or bad*) which detracts from its overall clarity.)

Sample D:

Watergate was an important issue in america. Were President Nixon was spying on people at the Watergate hotel. It was hard on the people know that their leader had let them down. Knowing he would probably would get impeached. The Watergate scandel will alway be remember through history. Now they have been laws passed to make sure this will never happen again.

Score Point: Content 1, Literacy 1

Content: The student response demonstrates little to no historical awareness of the Watergate scandal. The explanations are so brief, they are little more than vague statements strewn together with very little analysis (*It was hard on the people know that their leader had let them down*) in an attempt to answer the prompt question. However, the conclusions are inadequate and the essay does not exhibit the proper use of historical data.

Literacy: The introduction to the Watergate scandal lacks clarity (*Watergate was an important issue on America*) and the conclusion is equally vague (*Now they have been laws passed to make sure this will never happen again*). The brief analysis uses little support of facts and fails to identify relationships among ideas.