

## U.S. HISTORY Summer Reading Program (2026-2027)

Welcome to U.S. History! This course will help prepare you for the Regents Exam in June by building your knowledge of the people, events, and ideas that have shaped our nation, while also strengthening the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills you will need throughout high school and beyond. Like any worthwhile course, it asks for real effort: careful reading, thoughtful writing, and a willingness to dig into material outside of class time.

Every U.S. History student is expected to complete the assignment below before the first week of school. Begin your work right away by setting aside regular time during the summer to read and reflect, don't wait until the week before school starts! A little time each week now will help you build the habits you'll need to succeed in this course.

**A Bit of Background.** Uncle Tom's Cabin was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe and published in 1852, less than a decade before the Civil War began. At the time, the United States was bitterly divided over the question of slavery, an issue that had been growing more urgent for decades. Stowe's novel told the stories of enslaved people in the South and of the many people, black and white, North and South, whose lives were shaped by the institution of slavery. It quickly became one of the best-selling and most talked-about books of the nineteenth century.

Uncle Tom's Cabin: **READING FOR IDEAS, IMPORT AND CONTEXT.** Langston Hughes called Uncle Tom's Cabin, "the most cussed and discussed book of its time." Upon meeting the author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Abraham Lincoln is said to have remarked, "So you are the little woman who started this Great War." And it remains the second most commonly translated book in the world, after the Bible.

Historians still debate exactly how much this novel influenced the coming of the Civil War, but its characters and images remain familiar even today. For many readers, then and now, the book made the conflict over slavery feel immediate and personal. At the same time, it can be seen as

one of many sparks that pushed the country closer to war — a book that, in one form or another, the growing crisis over slavery was almost bound to produce.

### **A Few Terms to Know Before You Begin**

**Abolitionist:** A person who actively worked to end slavery in the United States.

**Antebellum:** The period before the Civil War, roughly 1815–1861.

**Fugitive Slave Act of 1850:** A federal law that required citizens, even in free states, to help capture and return enslaved people who had escaped to freedom.

**Sentimental novel :** A style of 19th-century fiction that appealed to readers' emotions: sympathy, pity, even tears, to persuade them to think differently about an issue.

As you read, think about how the novel reflects the time period in which it was written. When you are finished reading, respond to each of the prompts below in a well-developed paragraph (at least 5–7 sentences). Be sure to address every part of each question and support your ideas with specific details and examples from the novel. A few of the questions below ask you to imagine the perspective of someone living during this period, this is good practice for seeing history through the eyes of people who lived it, even when their views are very different from your own.

1. What role does religion play in the characters and tone of this book? What things do you learn about faith in America as a result?
2. What do you think Lincoln was saying when he said to Stowe, “So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this Great War”? Why might this be true?
3. Some readers have described *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a novel “perfectly situated to its time.” In your own words, explain what this phrase means, and use evidence from the

novel and its historical context to explain why it had such a powerful impact when it was first published in 1852.

4. Imagine that you are a southern planter and slave owner; what part of this book raises your anger most and why?
  
5. Imagine that you are a resident of a northern city, but not a strict abolitionist. Would any part of this book inspire you to become an abolitionist? Explain which part, and why you would be so moved.
  
6. Do you think it is possible for a book, like this book, to change the course of history, or was the destiny of the United States of the 1850s and 60s already set? Explain.