

Grade 7: 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 7.69.

The information below relates to advances in Mesoamerican civilizations.

Analyze the importance of these major innovations of Mesoamerican societies.

- In which areas of life did the calendars have important functions?
- How did they influence life in Mesoamerican societies?
- Use evidence the information provided and your knowledge of ancient Mesoamerican history to support your answer.
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Like other cultures around the world, the pre-contact American peoples developed methods of measuring time based on astronomical observations of the movements of heavenly bodies. Because the moon is easily visible and changes in appearance each day, it became the basis of calendars in many ancient societies. Solar calendars also arose for measuring the length of the day and year. Development of accurate calendars requires sophisticated mathematical calculations.

The system developed by the ancient Maya civilization was astronomically more accurate than the Julian calendar used in Europe at the time of the first encounters between early explorers and native cultures. The Maya used three interrelated calendars, two of which were used simultaneously.

Spanish soldiers discovered a comprehensive collection of Maya astronomy and calendar systems they sent back to Europe. There scholars used the impressive Dresden Codex to unlock the hieroglyphics used by the Mayans. The Codex even included tables derived from calendars and used for predicting events and scheduling religious ceremonies that are based on the solar cycle and the cycles of the Moon and Venus.

Another important find to understanding the Mesoamerican cultures were documents describing an Aztec calendar wheel. Using it, Spanish scholars discovered that the Aztec calendar consisted of 260 days –13 months, each containing 20 days. The calendar was used to determine events in the life of each Mexica (Aztec). In Aztec society, priests consulted the calendar to determine [the best] days for weddings and other important events.

Sample A:

The Mesoamerican lifestyle was revolved around the calendar. These Mesoamerican civilizations had developed many different calendars to give important dates. Calendars were the basis of most of the Mesoamerican areas of life and played an important role in many daily life functions.

Astronomical calendars were very common in the daily life of a Mesoamerican. "The movement of heavenly bodies was easy to see, because the moon's appearance changes every day". (Public Domain, Line 2-3) This calendar was more accurate and could be used to base more areas off of. One major calendar needed area was farming. People had to use the calendars to determine when to harvest and when to plant their crops. Astronomical calendars helped keep the civilization thriving and made sure that the civilization had a good crop to population proportion.

Calendars were also a major key in religion. The Mesoamerican civilizations were polytheistic, which means that they believed in many gods. "The solar calendar was predicting events and scheduling religious ceremonies that were based on the solar cycle and the cycles of the Moon and Venus". (Library of Congress, Line 3-5) The gods of these civilizations were named after the planets, the stars, and the environment. The calendar was there to help determine when the religious rituals, sacrifice, would happen. Since religion was one of the major prospects of life, this calendar kept them on schedule and "happy" with their gods.

The calendar was a major advancement of the Mesoamericas and had a very important key role in the life of these civilizations. Farming had to be successful by knowing when to plant and harvest the crops, and the only way that was possible was with the calendars. Religion gave the Mesoamericans faith to connect with their gods by sacrifice and to keep the gods happy and knowing when the gods were "planned" to have their ritual. Without the use of the calendar, the Mesoamericans would've not been able to accomplish the tasks they did with it. The calendar was the invention that unified the civilizations and helped with the major successes that were accomplished.

Score Point: Content 4, Literacy 4

Content: This response demonstrates a thorough understanding of why the Mesoamerican calendars were important and influential in their societies (*The calendar was the invention that unified the civilizations and helped with the major successes that were accomplished*). The student's explanation of how the calendar enabled the Mesoamericans to develop agriculture is focused and clear (*One major calendar needed area was farming. People had to use the calendars to determine when to harvest and when to plant their crops. Astronomical calendars helped keep the civilization thriving and made sure that the civilization had a good crop to population proportion*). Additionally, the writer addresses all aspects of the question, and cites evidence from the stimulus (see second and third body paragraphs). As a whole, this response demonstrates a thorough understanding of the historical period being referenced and merits a **score point 4** in content.

Literacy: The topic of this response, the impact that the calendar had on Mesoamerican culture, is directly related to the prompt and is introduced with clarity. Claims within the response (*Calendars were also a major key in religion. . . . The calendar was there to help determine when the religious rituals, sacrifice, would happen. Since religion was one of the major prospects of life, this calendar kept them on schedule and "happy" with their gods*) are developed with well-chosen facts and quotations (*Astronomical calendars were very common in the daily life of a Mesoamerican. "The movement of heavenly bodies was easy to see, because the moon's appearance*

changes every day”). A clear organizational plan, lends cohesion to the response and helps clarify the relationship among ideas, while providing a conclusion that is supported by the information presented in the response (*The calendar was the invention that unified the civilizations and helped with the major successes that were accomplished*). Holistically, this response earns a **score point 4** in literacy.

Sample B:

The calendars in Mesoamerican culture were the center of many parts of the culture. They were used based off of the movement of the celestial objects, and required a complex mathematical formula to calculate. Some of the ancient Western civilizations used the calendars to predict the future, such as when religious festivals were to be held.

While the calendars based a lot on the movement of the heavens, the Moon is the primary source of information from which the dates are derived. The Moon is easily visible, so it would be a natural choice for deciphering the will of the heavens. Furthermore, the Moon changes its appearance every day, so the predictions would be different, giving the Mayans better access to the stars above.

The Mayan people used three interrelated calendars rather than the generic Julian calendar used in Europe at the time. Two of the calendars were used at exactly the same time. The Aztec calendar wheel consists of 13, 20-day months, or 260 days in total. The priests used the calendar for determining the "good" days from the "bad". On the good days, the priests could hold weddings, feasts, and all around good events. On the bad, they would advise the people to stay in their houses. So the Aztecs relied on the calendar for daily life.

The calendars were a central part of Mesoamerican life. The culture centered around it, and people used the calendar every day to help them prepare for the next week, month or even year. The people depended on the calendar, for without it, they would not know any way to prepare for religious festivals, or important natural events like the end of the world.

When the Europeans received several Mayan and Aztec calendars, they used a secret code, the Dresden Codex, to understand the rhyme or reason to the calendars. The Codex had tables that were based off of calendars using the solar cycle and the orbits of the Moon and Venus. So the Europeans now understood the Mesoamerican calendars. But they still could not make one. The extremely advanced mathematical system of the Americas allowed the Aztecs and Mayans to build an impressive daily system centered around one thing that we still use today: the calendar.

Score Point: Content 3, Literacy 3

Content: Through adequate explanation and analysis, the writer of this response demonstrates an understanding of how the Mesoamerican calendars impacted their culture (*The calendars were a central part of Mesoamerican life. . . . The people depended on the calendar, for without it, they would not know any way to prepare for religious festivals*). Although the student demonstrates an understanding of the historical period referenced in the question and addresses many aspects of the question (*Two of the calendars were used at exactly the same time. . . . The priests used the calendar for determining the "good" days from the "bad". On the good days, the priests could hold weddings, feasts. . . . On the bad, they would advise the people to stay in their houses*), he or she makes no mention of how their calendars affected agriculture. Though there are no direct quotes from the stimulus, it is referenced/paraphrased throughout (*The moon is easily visible, so it would be a*

natural choice for deciphering the will of the heavens). There are no significant content errors that would indicate a misunderstanding of social studies concepts. As a whole, this response demonstrates adequate understanding and earns a **score point 3** in content.

Literacy: This response focuses on the importance of the Mesoamerican calendars and introduces claims with adequate clarity. Some conclusions in the response are supported with facts and references to the stimulus (*The moon is easily visible, so it would be a natural choice for deciphering the will of the heavens*). The relationship among ideas and concepts are established within each paragraph; however, connections to the ideas between the paragraphs are not always explained, resulting in a lack of cohesion one would see in a score point 4 (*The calendars were a central part of Mesoamerican life. . . . The people depended on the calendar, for without it, they would not know any way to prepare for religious festivals*). Still, the response is generally appropriate for task purpose and audience, earning this response a **score point 3** in literacy.

Sample C:

The Mesoamerican societies were influenced greatly by the Maya and Aztec cultures. They both watched the moon and recorded its changings, which helped them develop a basis of the calendar.

Calendars were very important to their lifestyle. It states in the passage that, "The calendar was used to determined events in the life of each Mexica." They also used calendars for planning wedding days and other important events. Their understanding of the calendar was remarkable. They even predicted when to have religious ceremonies based on the solar cycle and the cycles of the Moon and Venus.

Because of the Maya and Aztec preserving their knowledge, Mesoamericans got the chance to study it and understand it for themselves. They discovered an Aztec calendar wheel that consisted of 260 days (13 months).

Mesoamerica got the privilege of studying the wonderful findings of the Maya and Aztec cultures. They both made a huge contribute to the world and our understanding of time. The preserving of their documents gave the world an oppurtunity that changed our knowledge forever. We would not be at where we are today without the Maya and Aztec cultures.

Score Point: Content 2, Literacy 2

Content: This response demonstrates a limited understanding of how the calendars impacted ancient Mesoamerican society, but the explanation lacks depth and detail (. . . *the Maya and Aztec cultures . . . both made a huge contribute to the world and our understanding of time . . . We would not be at where we are today without the Maya and Aztec cultures*) and the analysis lacks focus and clarity. Only a partial understanding of the historical period referenced in the question is evident (*They used calendars for planning wedding days and other important events. . . . They even predicted when to have religious ceremonies based on the solar cycle and the cycles of the Moon and Venus*). While this response attempts to address most aspects of the question, vague wording, sparse development, and content errors (*Mesoamerica got the privledge of studying the wonderful findings of the Maya and Aztec cultures*) make it impossible to determine if the student has any more than a partial understanding of the content. Holistically, this response earns a content **score point 2**.

Literacy: This response is partially focused on the calendars' effects on ancient Mesoamerican culture with large sections veering off into generality (*They both made a huge contribute to the world and our understanding of time. . . . We would not be where we are today without the Maya and Aztec cultures*). Some conclusions offer little support. However, the student does describe some of the relationships among ideas and concepts (*They used calendars for planning wedding days and other important events. . . . They even predicted when to have religious ceremonies based on the solar cycle and the cycles of the Moon and Venus*), helping this response earn a **score point 2** in literacy.

Sample D:

Mesoamerica invented the calendars, and they helped the people know when special events are. Mesoamericans used astronomy as well. Mesoamericans had to send astronomy and calendars back to Europe. These scholars used codex to unlock the hieroglyphics used by the Mayans.

The calendars contained 260 days, 13 months, and each month containing 20 days. The calendar was used to determine when certain events in life of each Mexico (Aztec). In the Aztec society, priests consulted the calendar to be able to determine when certain events should be held like weddings or other important events. Calendars are really important today also because if we didn't have one we wouldn't even know what day, month, or year it is. Calendars let us know when every single popular event is today. Today, most people use their phones for a calendar instead of a paper calendar.

Score Point Content 1, Literacy 1

Content: This brief response demonstrates little to no understanding of how the calendars influenced ancient Mesoamerican societies or the historical period referenced in the question. The writer attempts to address some aspects of the question, but his or her conclusions are inadequate (*Calendars let us know when every single popular event is today. Today, most people use their phones for a calendar instead of a paper calendar*). As a whole, this paper demonstrates little or no knowledge and receives a **score point 1** in content.

Literacy: This response fails to introduce the topic with clarity and the sentences not lifted from the stimulus (*Mesoamericans used astronomy as well. Mesoamericans had to send astronomy and calendars back to Europe*) lack concrete details and fail to explain the information presented. This response earns a **score point 1** in literacy.