Student Guide to

HISTORICAL THINKING

Going beyond dates, places, and names to the core of history.

Linda Elder, Meg Gorzycki, & Richard Paul
Part One: Learning to Think Historically

How to Study and Learn History

The Problem:
Students are required to take a number of history classes while in school, but few come to see history as a mode of thinking or system of interconnected ideas. History is still generally taught as a series of names, dates, and places. Instruction in history sometimes helps students learn to detect a degree of cause and effect. But students are not typically taught to think critically while reading historical accounts, or to write critically when composing essays on historical events, issues and ideas. Students, for the most part, are not taught to listen critically during discussions on history. They are not taught to think through historical concepts, nor internalize foundational historical meanings. They are not usually encouraged to make connections between history and important events in life.

Even the best students are often unable to make connections between the past and the present because they have not learned to think critically about evidence or lack of evidence, the historian’s perspective, or the implications of a particular narrative.

How do you see history? To what extent do you think you have been taught to see history as a system of understandings which, when understood deeply, can help you live better? Or, conversely, to what extent have you come to see history as a disconnected list of names and events and places and times?

Some Basic Definitions:
Critical thinking is the kind of thinking—about any subject, content, or domain—that improves itself through disciplined analysis and assessment. Analysis requires knowledge of the elements of thought; assessment requires intellectual standards for thought. Historical thinking is, among other things, thinking about the past in order to live better in the present and the future. There are two forms of historical thought. One entails merely thinking about the past. Everyone is a historical thinker in this sense. The other entails thinking critically about the past. This means using the concepts and principles of critical thinking to create understandings of the past.

The Solution:
To study history well, and learn to think critically about history, is to learn how to think in a disciplined way about history. It is to learn to think within the logic of history, to:
raise vital historical questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely;

gather and assess historical information, using historical ideas to interpret that
information insightfully;

come to well-reasoned historical conclusions and interpretations, checking them
against relevant criteria and standards;

adopt the point of view of the skilled historian, recognizing and assessing, as need
be, historical assumptions, implications, and practical consequences;

communicate effectively with others using the language of history and the language
of educated public discourse; and

relate what one is learning in history to other subjects and to what is significant in
human life.

To become a skilled historical thinker is to become a self-directed, self-disciplined,
self-monitored, and self-corrective historical thinker, who assents to rigorous standards
of thought and mindful command of their use.

**Essential Idea:** The skills of critical thinking are necessary for learning to
think historically.
Understanding History as Historical Thinking

History, Like All Subjects, Represents A Systematic Way of Thinking.
A key insight necessary for deep learning of history is that history should be understood as an organized, integrated way of thinking.

Organized Systematically by Ideas.
Learning history entails learning the ideas that historians use to define and structure history. Learning a historical concept entails learning how to use it in thinking through some historical question or issue. Hence, to understand the idea of power in history is to learn how people have used power to get what they want. To understand the idea of exploitation in history is to learn how people with power have used people with little or no power to get what they want. To understand how and why people in power have exploited those with little or no power is to understand the role of irrationality in the pursuit of power. It is to understand, in other words, that people are often selfish and therefore unwilling to consider how their misuse of power (to get something for themselves) might harm others. It also entails understanding that people are often willing to deny the rights and needs of those outside their group to get something for their group – money, power, prestige, and so forth. In sum, the concepts of power, exploitation, and irrationality are concepts that historians often use to understand why and how people have behaved in certain ways throughout history. These are just some of the many concepts historians use to reason through historical problems and issues.

Leading to a Systematic Way of Questioning.
Ideas within history are intimately connected with the kinds of questions historians ask. In other words, history represents ways of asking and answering a body of questions. There is no way to learn historical content without learning how to figure out reasonable answers to historical questions and problems. For instance, historians might ask: What variables contributed to the development of these circumstances at this period in history, which led to these consequences? What patterns in human behavior can be identified by studying history? How can understanding these patterns help us live better in the present and in the future? (For more key questions historians ask, see The Logic of History, pages 36-39.)

Essential Idea: History, like all subjects, represents an integrated way of thinking, defined by a system of ideas, leading to a distinctive and systematic way of questioning.
Approaching History Classes as Historical Thinking

When you understand history as a way of thinking, you approach the study of history very differently from the typical student. Consider how a student who understands history as historical thinking might approach a history course:

“To do well in this course, I must begin to think historically. I must not read the textbook as a bunch of disconnected stuff to remember but as the thinking of the historian who wrote it. I must begin to be clear about historical purposes. (What are historians trying to accomplish?) I must begin to ask historical questions (and recognize the historical questions being asked in the lectures and textbook). I must begin to sift through historical information, drawing some historical conclusions. I must begin to question where historical information comes from. I must notice the historical interpretations that the historian forms to give meaning to historical information. I must question those interpretations (at least sufficiently to understand them). I must begin to question the implications of various historical interpretations and begin to see how historians reason to their conclusions. I must begin to look at the world as historians do, to develop a historical viewpoint. I will read each chapter in the textbook looking explicitly for the elements of thought in that chapter. I will actively ask (historical) questions in class from the critical thinking perspective. I will begin to pay attention to my own historical thinking in my everyday life. I will try, in short, to make historical thinking a more explicit and prominent part of my thinking.”

When you approach history classes as historical thinking, you begin to understand the historical dimension of other subjects as well. For example, you begin to recognize that every subject itself has a history and that the present state of the subject is a product of its historical evolution. You also notice the overlap between history as a study of the relatively recent past of humans (the last 30,000 years) and the much longer history of humans (canvassed in anthropology). You are able to place these last 30,000 years (which seem a long time when we first think of it) into the larger historical perspective of anthropology. This larger perspective begins its study of the human past some 2,000,000 years ago when our ancestors were small, hairy, apelike creatures who used tools such as digging sticks and clubs, walked upright and carried their tools. You are able to see humans moving from hunting and gathering civilizations, to agricultural civilizations, to industrial civilizations, to post-industrial civilizations, to the age of information.

When you think historically, you are able to take a historical perspective and put it into a larger historical view by shifting from anthropological thinking to geographical thinking. You understand that human history is itself a small part of a much older history, that of mammals, and that the age of mammals was preceded by an age of
reptiles, and that by the age of coal-plants, and that by the age of fish, and that by the age of mollusks. You can then take the next step and grasp that geological history, even though reaching back thousands of millions of years, is comparatively short when compared to that of the solar system, while that of the solar system is comparatively short when compared to that of the galaxy.

Your capacity to think historically in larger and larger time spans continues to develop as your study of all subjects is transformed by a developing sense of the drama of time itself. You are then able to shift from history to pre-history, from pre-history to anthropological history, from anthropological history to geological history, and from geological history to astronomical history. In this ever-expanding perspective, the history of human knowledge is pitifully short: a milli-second geologically, a microsecond astronomically. It is only a second ago—astronomically speaking—that a species has emerged, *Homo sapiens*, which drives itself, and creates the conditions to which it itself must then adapt in new and unpredictable ways. It is only a milli-second ago that we have developed the raw capacity, though not the active propensity, to think critically.

**Essential Idea:** When you approach history classes as historical thinking, you see applications of history to related subjects. Doing so increases the power of historical thinking and learning.
Raising Important Historical Questions

Every discipline is best known by the questions it generates and the way it goes about settling those questions. To think well within history, you must be able to raise and answer important questions in it. At the beginning of a semester of historical study, try generating a list of at least 15 questions that history seeks to answer. To do this, you might read an introductory chapter from the textbook or an article on the discipline. Then explain the significance of the questions to another person.

As your courses proceed, add new questions to the list, underlining those questions when you are confident you can explain how to go about answering them. Regularly translate chapter and section titles from your history textbooks into questions. For example, a section on the American Civil War may attempt to answer the question: What were the primary causes and implications of the Civil War? A section on “cause and effect” may attempt to answer these questions: How does it make best sense to conceptualize cause and effect in history? What are some different ways historians think of cause and effect?

In addition, look for key historical questions in every lecture. Relate basic historical questions to the differing theories historians use to think through historical issues. Master fundamental questions well. Do not move on until you understand them.

Notice interrelationships between key ideas and key questions. Without the ideas, the questions are meaningless. Without the questions, the ideas are inert—there is nothing you can do with them. A skilled historical thinker is able to take historical questions apart, generate alternative meanings, distinguish leading from subordinate questions, and grasp the demands that historical questions put upon the historical thinker.

Essential Idea: If you want to learn the essential content of history you must become skilled at asking historical questions.
The Elements of Historical Thought

- **Historical Point of View**: frame of reference, perspective, orientation
- **Purpose of Historical Reasoning**: goal, objective, function
- **Historical Implications & Consequences**: that which follows logically, results
- **Historical Question at Issue**: problem, issue
- **Historical Assumptions**: presuppositions, axioms, what is taken for granted
- **Historical Information**: data, facts, evidence, observations, experiences, reasons
- **Historical Concepts**: theories, definitions, laws, principles, models
- **Historical Interpretation & Inference**: conclusions, solutions

**Used With Sensitivity to Universal Intellectual Standards**

Clarity → Accuracy → Depth → Breadth → Significance

- Precision
- Relevance

**Essential Idea**: When you understand the structures of thought, you can analyze any historical thought.
Evaluating an Historian’s Reasoning

Once you understand how to analyze thinking (by targeting the elements of reasoning) and you understand the role of intellectual standards in the assessment of thought, you are in a position to evaluate any given historian’s reasoning.

Here are some dimensions to consider:

1. Identify the historian’s **purpose**: Is the purpose of the author well-stated or clearly implied? Is it justifiable?

2. Identify the key **question** that the written piece answers: Is the question at issue well-stated (or clearly implied)? Is it clear and unbiased? Does the expression of the question do justice to the complexity of the matter at issue? Are the question and purpose directly relevant to each other?

3. Identify the most important **information** presented by the historian: Does the writer cite relevant evidence, experiences, and/or information essential to the issue? Is the information accurate and directly relevant to the question at issue? Does the writer address the complexities of the issue?

4. Identify the most fundamental **concepts** at the heart of the historian’s reasoning: Does the writer clarify key ideas when necessary? Are the ideas used justifiably?

5. Identify the historian’s **assumptions**: Does the writer show a sensitivity to what he or she is taking for granted or assuming (insofar as those assumptions might reasonably be questioned)? Or does the writer use questionable assumptions without addressing problems inherent in those assumptions?

6. Identify the most important **inferences** or conclusions in the written piece: Do the inferences and conclusions made by the historian clearly follow from the information relevant to the issue, or does the author jump to unjustifiable conclusions? Does the historian consider alternative conclusions where the issue is complex? In other words, does the historian use a sound line of reasoning to come to logical conclusions, or can you identify flaws in the reasoning somewhere?

7. Identify the historian’s **point of view**: Is the historian clear about his or her own philosophy of history? Does the historian show a sensitivity to alternative, relevant points of view or lines of reasoning? Does he or she consider and respond to objections framed from other relevant points of view?

8. Identify **implications**: Does the historian display a sensitivity to the implications and consequences of the position he or she is taking?

**Essential Idea**: Historical thinking can and should be evaluated by applying intellectual standards to the elements of historical thought.
Critical Thinking and Historical Revisionism

Historian James McPherson has opined that history is under constant revision and that there is no single and absolute truth about the past and the meaning of past events. History relies on eyewitness accounts that are often contradictory, documents that are frequently destroyed or not forthcoming, and the perspectives of those constructing the narrative. History must be revised when new evidence surfaces and when traditional renditions of the past are simply unable to shoulder the weight of truth.

Revisionism concerns the re-thinking and re-writing of history with fresh evidence or new perspectives. It is conducted by amateurs and professionals alike, and almost always challenges the traditional, orthodox, or official understanding of the past. Revisionism is frequently controversial. Charles Beard’s *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) aroused the ire of his peers at Columbia and elsewhere as his thesis asserted that the authors of the Constitution created a document that represented their own material and pecuniary interests. The notion that personal profit played any part in the foundation of the Republic was, and continues to be in many circles, repugnant, as it offends the cherished belief that the Founding Fathers were motivated by philosophical and philanthropic concerns.

Revisionists act with a variety of motives and their work can be done well or poorly. One question the critical thinker must ask is, “What is the purpose of the revision?” Anti-Semites have claimed that the Holocaust never really happened; American neo-conservatives laid the blame for the Cold War squarely at the feet of the Kremlin in Moscow; and, white supremacists have blamed African Americans for their own assaults, their own lynchings, and vandalism of their own property. Historical revision conducted for the purpose of vindicating or justifying a person or group of people in the wake of false accusations and specious assertions may seem virtuous on the surface, but the real test of its merits lies in the extent to which it is true or justifiable given the evidence. The purest form of revision is that which seeks the truth (or the most reasonable interpretation) amid the tangle and debris of assumptions, opinions, political interests, distortions, lacunae, and lies; its chief objective is to render a more accurate and fair account of the past regardless of whether it upsets public authorities or is offensive to our most “trusted” institutions.

Because the long-range effects of our actions may not fully manifest themselves until one or more generations have passed, historians often revise their interpretations. The inventors of the locomotive and their contemporaries, for instance, could not have known that 80 years after the first train was set to track it would lead to the European partitioning of Africa, and that this would fuel world war and civil unrest in the 20th century; yet, this is what happened. The physicists who figured out how to split an atom could only speculate about what might happen if nuclear radiation were widely dispersed. It would be left for those who tested the bomb, and more importantly for the survivors of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Chernobyl, to illuminate the hideous consequences of nuclear toxicity. By virtue of enduring their consequences, every generation is a witness to the acts of their forefathers and the implications they anticipated, misunderstood, reported, or covered up.