

Thinking Like a Historian

By Sam Wineburg

Historical Thinking: Memorizing Facts and Stuff?

When I recently asked Kevin, a sixteen-year-old high school junior, what he needed to do well in history class, he had little doubt: “A good memory.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope. Just memorize facts and stuff, know 'em cold, and when you get the test, give it all back to the teacher.”

“What about thinking? Does that have anything to do with history?”

“Nope. It's all pretty simple. Stuff happened a long time ago. People wrote it down. Others copied it and put it in a book. History!”

I've spent nearly 20 years studying how high school students learn history. Over the years I've met many Kevins, for whom the life has been sucked out of history, leaving only a grim list of names and dates. When confronted with the term “historical thinking,” many students scratch their heads in confusion, stumped by an alleged connection.

Historians as Detectives: Searching for Evidence Among Primary Sources

The funny thing is that when you ask historians what they do, a different picture emerges. They see themselves as detectives searching for evidence among primary sources to a mystery that can never be completely solved. Wouldn't this image be more enticing to a bored high school student? It would, and that's one reason why thinking like a historian deserves a place in the American classroom, the sooner the better.

To historians, history is an argument about what facts should or shouldn't mean. Even when historians are able to piece together the basic story of what happened, they rarely agree about what an event means or what caused it. Historians argue about the past's meaning and what it has to tell us in the present.

But, you may ask, if history has already happened, what's there to argue about? Plenty. Was the American Revolution a fight against tyranny or an attempt by the well bred to maintain their social status? Was the Cold War really a conflict of democracy versus communism or a struggle between two superpowers for dominance?

Divergent opinions swirl around these questions and other matters of unsettled history – opinions that get students talking, and thinking, and learning. But while everyone is entitled to an opinion, not every opinion deserves to be believed. In history, a persuasive opinion is one backed up by evidence.

What is Historical Thinking?

It would be easy to conclude that historians simply know more about American history than high school students do. But this isn't necessarily the case. Beyond highly specialized areas of concentrations, even doctoral level historians don't possess factual knowledge about every topic. What historians do have is a “historical approach” to primary sources that is often taken for granted by those practiced in it. However, this approach unlocks a world closed to untutored readers.

For example, before approaching a document, historians come prepared with a list of questions—about author, context, time period—that form a mental framework for the details to follow. Most important of all, these questions transform the act of reading from passive reception to an engaged and passionate interrogation. If we want students to remember historical facts, this approach, not memorization, is the key.

Teaching Students to Think Historically

How can teachers help their students to begin thinking like historians? Teaching a way of thinking requires making thinking visible. We need to show students not only what historians think, but *how* they think, and then guide students as they learn to engage in this process.

Consider introducing students to several specific strategies for reading historical documents: sourcing, contextualizing, close reading, using background knowledge, reading the silences, and corroborating. Each strategy is defined below, followed by teaching ideas.

- **Sourcing:** Think about a document's author and its creation.

Select a historical document, such as a diary entry, letter or memo, and provide students with copies. Model for students how to scan the document for its attribution, often at the end, as a first step instead of reading the text from beginning to end. Demonstrate how to begin questioning the source by posing questions to the class: Who created this document? When? For what purpose? How trustworthy might this source be? Why?

- **Contextualizing:** Situate the document and its events in time and place.

Encourage students to brainstorm the document's historical context, piecing together major events, themes, and people that distinguish the era or period in which the document was created. List students' responses for the class to add to and refer to during close reading.

- **Close reading:** Carefully consider what the document says and the language used to say it.

Teachers can model this strategy with a brief (90 seconds) “think-aloud” while reading the document to students. Try to verbalize every thought that comes to mind, no matter how trivial, as you try to make meaning of the document's account. For example, you may notice interesting words or phrases (“I've never heard that expression before”), consider contextual clues about

time, place or people (“Hmm, that may be a reference to...”) or question facts, opinions and perspectives (“I wonder if that’s what really happened?”).

- **Using Background Knowledge:** Use historical information and knowledge to read and understand the document.

Encourage students to practice this strategy by pausing to ask as they read: What else do I know about this topic? What other knowledge do I possess that might apply?

- **Reading the Silences:** Identify what has been left out or is missing from the document by asking questions of its account.

After reading the document, ask students to think about what they did not hear. Prompt class discussion with questions: What is the document's author not mentioning? Whose voices are we *not* hearing in a particular document or historical account? Which perspectives are missing?

- **Corroborating:** Ask questions about important details across multiple sources to determine points of agreement and disagreement.

Ask students how they could proceed with this historical investigation: What questions arise, after careful reading and interpretation of the document? What other primary sources might corroborate or refute this interpretation? Have students discuss their responses in pairs and then share with the class.

You can also apply these strategies to reading textbooks. Textbooks offer an interpretation of history, but none gives us the final word. For example, textbook authors try to combine perspectives but they can never escape the fact that textbook is written by people living in a particular time and place. As such, textbooks record our contemporary (and unrecognized) assumptions, biases, and blind spots. One way to teach for historical thinking using a textbook is to have students compare its story of a historic event with evidence from primary sources. Another idea is to compare a current textbook’s account of, say, the Spanish-American war with a textbook version written fifty or hundred years ago. Get students thinking with this question: “If history already happened, why does it keep changing?”

Any teacher's goal (and his or her students' goals) in reading and thinking like a historian should be to treat with skepticism any account that claims to present a full story of the past. Achieving this goal requires students to:

- Question the source
- Evaluate the evidence it offers for its assertions
- Read and consider the source more carefully than any historical account read before.

Why Teach Students to “Think Like Historians?”

Students need to be taught to “think like historians” not because they will become professional historians but precisely because most won't. The goals of school history are not vocational but to prepare students to tolerate complexity, to adapt to new situations, and to resist the first answer that comes to mind.

When a video uploaded from a cell phone in Tehran can be transmitted to San Francisco in half a second, history reminds us to start with basic questions: Who sent it? Can it be trusted? What did the camera angle miss? There's no shortage of forces telling students what to think. In this daily avalanche of information, students have never been in greater need of ways to make sense of it all.

Kevin's right: Without thinking, history is meaningless. But when you add thinking, especially the specific skills of “thinking historically,” the past comes to life. In the end that is what reading, and thinking—and I would add, teaching—like a historian is all about.

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