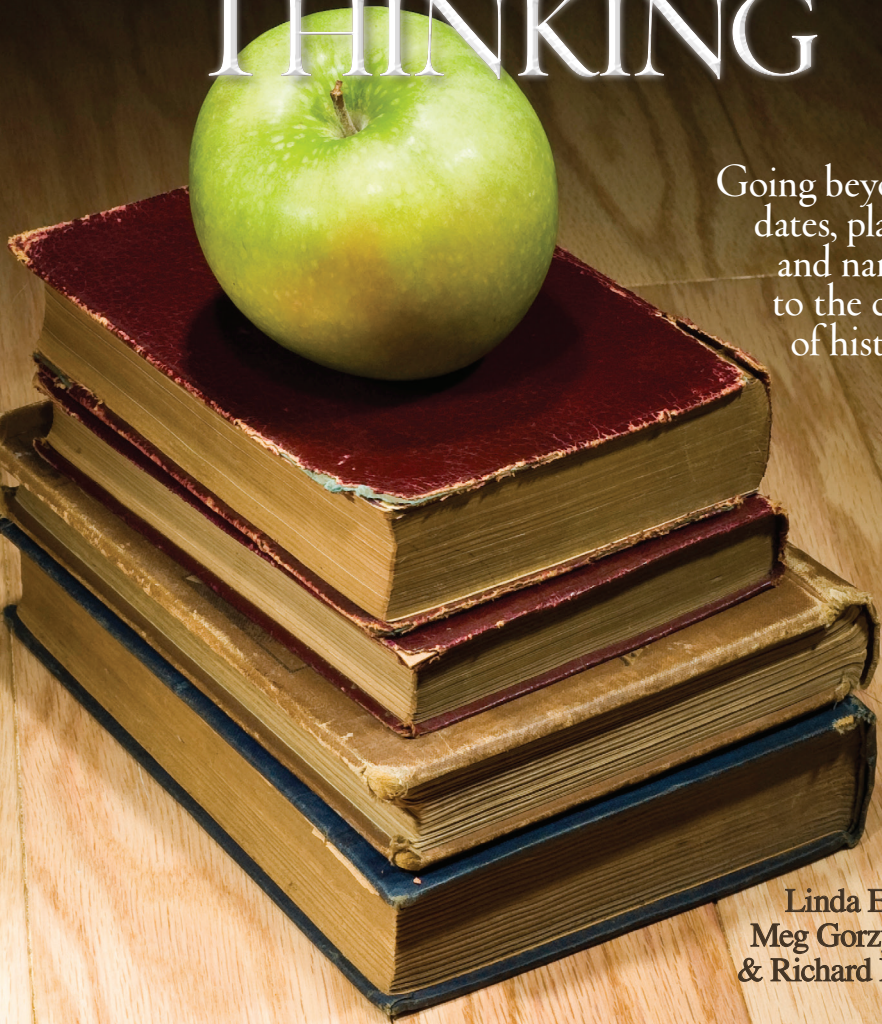




Student Guide to

HISTORICAL THINKING



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

Linda Elder,
Meg Gorzycki,
& Richard Paul

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Introduction

Everyone thinks about the past, but few people think critically about how they have come to think about the past. Most of us do not recognize that the stories we tell ourselves about the past are examples of historical thinking. What is more, these stories are often riddled with distortions of our own making. Our view of the past is largely prejudiced by the ideologies of the cultures and groups that have influenced us. We see the past through the lenses we have created in our own minds. We want to see the past in a certain way, so we do. We have been taught to see the past in a certain way, so we see it that way. We rarely question the cultural norms, customs, beliefs, taboos, and values that influence our conceptualizations of history.

If we are to create fairminded critical societies, societies in which all peoples, nations and cultures come to value fairminded critical thinking, we will need to think critically about history. We will need to see the past in ways that are less biased. We will need to use our understanding of the past to help us make better decisions in the present and future.

The purpose of this guide is to help you begin to understand history as a way of thinking, as a system of understandings. History is not a list of dates, names, and events to store up in your memory. It is a catalog of stories told about the past that, when told and understood insightfully and deeply, can help us live better in the future.

Every historical account has been told from some perspective, and that perspective can be analyzed and assessed using the tools of critical thinking. In fact, if you don't analyze and assess historical thought using these tools, you will likely uncritically accept views about the past that are distorted, illogical, based in biases or prejudices, or just plain nonsense. We believe that the concepts and principles of critical thinking introduced in this guide are essential to any serious study of history. All the best historians use these tools, though perhaps not explicitly. When you master critical thinking as it applies to history, you learn history. At the same time, you can learn the tools of critical thinking as you study history. But you cannot effectively study history without these tools.

In this guide, we begin with some essential understandings about the relationship between history and thinking and about the concept of historical thinking itself. In Part Two we offer suggestions for how to become a master student in history. In Part Three we introduce the basic concepts of critical thinking and how they apply to the study of history. In Part Four we briefly discuss some problems and issues in historical thinking.

This is not a guide to be read once; rather, it should be read and applied and read and applied, again and again. The principles that underlie it lend themselves to application at deeper and deeper levels.

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.

Understanding and Taking Command of Your Personal History

In a broad sense, you are a historical thinker. You tell yourself stories about the past, as do all humans. Your life can be thought of as “chapters” you have written in your mind (your “book”). You create memories of “your past.” You “write” or create them as they are happening and you often “rewrite” or recreate them over time.

Much of the story you are creating, much of your “personal history,” has been colored by wishful thinking, by the way you would like to see yourself. Much of your “history” is shaped by the people who have influenced you throughout your life—your parents, teachers, siblings, and friends. It is shaped by the people who are influencing you now. If you were to write an autobiography, it would not be an objective detailing of things that happened to you and things you have done; it would be a mixture of fact and distortion—of things that actually did happen and things *that just seem (in your mind) to have happened*.

In taking command of your personal history, strive to achieve an objective view of the conditions and factors that have contributed to your way of seeing the world and your place in it. While it may not be possible to achieve a completely objective perspective, it is possible for you to increase your awareness and understanding of certain assumptions that might be problematic. Some questions that might be useful in the process of constructing your own history include:

- Who are my parents or guardians, and what were their lives like before I was born?
- What were the dominant beliefs, concerns, values, and assumptions that influenced the way my parents or guardians raised me?
- What dominant ideas was I expected to accept uncritically in my schooling and through religious teachings?
- Who were the people that influenced me the most? How did they influence me?
- When did I begin to have a sense of myself as an individual with unique ways of seeing and doing things? What did that experience mean to me then? How does that way of seeing influence my thinking now?
- What do I remember as the most significant events in my life, and why are they significant?
- What do others remember about me, and the events that impacted me? How are the memories, perspectives, and conclusions of others about me different from my own? What can the memories, perspectives, and conclusions of others teach me about my life?

- What assumptions do I have about who I am, what I am able to do with my life, what I am obligated to do with my life, and what my life means? Am I open to changing these assumptions? Are there reasons why it might be advantageous to change these assumptions?

You can be the master of your personal history. You can decide whether to write the story of your life in ways that mirror or distort reality. You can decide whether to write the story of your past in largely negative or positive terms. In writing your story, you can highlight the positives and give less attention to the negatives, or you can highlight the negatives and downplay the positives. You can write your story insightfully or in a prescribed way. You can look beneath the surface of events and happenings for deeper meanings, or you can think in a limited, provincial way about them.

Either way, you are a historical thinker—not necessarily a good historical thinker, but a historical thinker nonetheless.

Realize that historical thinking can have at least two different meanings:

1. Any type of thinking about the past,
2. Thinking about the past in ways that are logical, reasonable, and which mirror what actually happened in the past.

Historians attempt to do the second, think about the past in ways that make most sense, in ways that are accurate or the most logical in context. Of course, historians don't always succeed at this because they are fallible—they make mistakes. Some are better than others at thinking critically about history.

Because you think about your past, it makes sense for you to think like a skilled historian about your past, to think critically about your past. You want to think critically about both the past that is behind you and the past that is being created every day. The way you think about your life is a product, not only of what happens to you, but how you see it. You have no control over what actually has happened to you to this point. But you do control how you see it. And, most importantly, you can significantly influence what happens in the present and in the future.

You will, and do, tell the story of your life, in your mind, at every phase of your life. There is, in other words, an ongoing narrative you create which is, in your mind, the story of your life (to that point). Are you trapped in that story or emancipated by it? Are you defining how you see your past? Are you shaping what you do today? Are you in control of your future? All of these questions are intimately connected with history, your personal history. And for you, there is perhaps no more important history.

Essential Idea: You can take command of your personal history. You can determine how you see your past and the actions you take in the future. Or you can let other people or groups define how you see your personal history.

Part Two: Becoming a Proficient Student of History

Thinking Within Historical Ideas

Learning to think within the ideas of a subject is like learning to perform well in basketball, ballet, or on the piano. Thinking within the ideas of a subject at an advanced level without disciplined practice is as unnatural to the human mind as sitting down at a piano and spontaneously playing Chopin's "Polonaise."

Merely sitting through lectures on history will not teach you how to think historically. You must therefore set out to discover how to think like a historian. You will not discover this thinking by cramming into your head large masses of partially digested contents of a history textbook or sets of lectures. Here is what we recommend.

Recognize that you are seeking a new way to look at learning history. Recognize that it will take time to become comfortable in this new perspective. Consider your task as a student to be learning new ways to think. Stretching the mind to accommodate new ideas is crucial.

Recognize that there are key ideas behind history that give it a unified meaning. Look up a variety of definitions or other conceptualizations of history (use dictionaries, textbooks, encyclopedias). Remember that you are looking for the ideas that give a unified meaning to history and thus enable you to experience it as a system. Try to find the common denominator of history as a field of study. Ask your instructor for help.

Now relate every new historical idea (in the textbook or lectures) to the fundamental idea with which you began. The big idea with which you began should be in the background of all new ideas. Seek intuitive connections—connections that make complete sense to you.

Essential Idea: There are basic ideas that act as guide-posts to all thinking within a subject. Look for these basic ideas in studying history and stretch your mind to learn them. Weave everything else into them.

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.

Asking Questions About History as a Field of Study

Answer as many of these questions as you can by examining historical texts. You may need help from your instructor on some of them.

1. To what extent are there competing schools of thought within history?
2. To what extent do experts in history disagree about the answers they give to important questions?
3. What other fields deal with some of the same content that historians deal with but perhaps from a different standpoint? To what extent are there conflicting views about this content in light of these different standpoints?
4. To what extent, if at all, is history properly called a science?
5. To what extent can historical questions be answered definitively? To what extent are historical questions matters of (arguable) judgment?
6. What are some of the various methods historians use to verify their claims and justify their conclusions of past events?
7. To what extent is there public pressure on historians to compromise their professional practice because of public prejudice or vested interest?
8. What does the history of history as a discipline tell you about the status of knowledge in the field? How old is the field? How common is controversy over fundamental terms, theories, and orientation?

Essential Idea: Many disciplines are not definitive in their pursuit of knowledge. As you study history, it is important to understand the extent to which it deals with definitive knowledge.

Asking Questions About History Books

All history books, as indeed all books, are products of reasoning. Hence, they can be analyzed using the elements of reasoning, and assessed by applying intellectual standards to these elements. In addition, you can ask the following questions about your history books. To answer them, you may need some help from your instructor.

1. Since there are competing schools of thought within history, what is the orientation of the writer(s)? Do these writers highlight competing schools within history and detail the implications of that debate?
2. Are other books available that approach history from a significantly different standpoint? If so, to what extent might this book be biased?
3. Would history experts disagree with any of the answers given in this book to important questions? How would they disagree?
4. Are there books in other fields that deal with the same content in this book (from a different standpoint, perhaps)? To what extent are there conflicting views about this subject in light of these different standpoints?
5. To what extent does this book represent history as a science? If so, do some history experts in the field disagree with this representation?
6. To what extent do the historical questions asked in this book lead to definitive answers? Conversely, to what extent are questions in this book matters of (arguable) judgment? And does the book help you distinguish between these very different types of questions?

Essential Idea: Not all history books are equal as to quality. As you read a history book, it is important to distinguish its strengths from its limitations.

Problems with History Textbooks

Democracy can be an effective form of government only to the extent that the public (that rules it in theory) is well informed about national and international events and can think independently and critically about those events. Hence, people cannot have a true democracy when their understanding of history comes from textbooks filled with bias and propaganda. Yet this tends to be the case the world over.

If students don't learn to recognize bias in their nation's textbooks, if they can't recognize propaganda when exposed to it in textbooks, if they cannot detect ideology, slant and spin in their textbooks, they cannot reasonably determine what parts of a textbook should be supplemented, counter-balanced or thrown out entirely.

Textbooks can be effective instruments of learning only to the extent that you, the student reader, learn to read them critically. Most students and teachers assume that their country's textbooks are more objective and more fairly written than those of any other nation. Educated persons come to reject this uncritical belief as they discover how textbooks are written and chosen.

Textbooks are primarily published to make money, not to enlighten students or the public. Textbooks yield high profits when chosen by large districts. And textbooks are fundamentally chosen in accordance with the mainstream views of a given culture. In other words, teachers and school administrators tend to choose textbooks whose authors present "history" in terms of what people in the culture already believe or want to believe. History teachers, frequently entrenched in the ideologies of the culture, unconsciously expect their textbooks to entail their culture's belief systems, just as people in the culture unconsciously expect the daily "news" to fit the same belief systems.

In his book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, sociologist James Loewen¹ catalogues a number of problems with history textbooks. These problems came to light for Loewen as he studied commonly used history textbooks over a number of years. Loewen says history textbooks in the U.S. fail to present a reasonable view of our past—glorifying our country, distorting the truth, and grossly misleading students. Referring to American history textbooks, he says:

The stories that history textbooks tell are predictable; every problem has already been solved or is about to be solved. Textbooks exclude conflict...They leave out anything that might reflect badly upon our national character. When they try for drama, they achieve only melodrama, because readers know that everything will turn out fine in the end.²

History should be taught so that you, the student, come to see a deep connection between how your life today has been influenced by the past, by how you perceive the past, by how past events have been presented to you by your culture. But history textbooks tend to take a simplistic view of history. As Loewen puts it "...textbooks seldom use the past to illuminate the present. They portray the past as a simpleminded morality

play. 'Be a good citizen' is the message that textbooks extract from the past. 'You have a proud heritage. Be all that you can be.'³

There are a number of reasons why history textbooks fail to live up to their promise - including nationalism, which is a form of group think, or sociocentric thought. Loewen says "Textbooks are often muddled by the conflicting desires to promote inquiry and to indoctrinate blind patriotism ... The titles themselves tell the story: *The Great Republic, The American Pageant, Land of Promise, Triumph of the American Nation* ... And you can tell history textbooks just from their covers, graced as they are with American flags, bald eagles, the Washington Monument."⁴

Loewen believes that history textbooks conceal the true nature of history. He says:

*History is furious debate informed by evidence and reason. Textbooks encourage students to believe that history is facts to be learned. "We have not avoided controversial issues," announces one set of textbook authors; "instead, we have tried to offer reasoned judgments" on them - thus removing the controversy! Because textbooks employ such a godlike tone, it never occurs to most students to question them.*⁵

As a student of history, you have probably been taught to uncritically accept what is in your history textbooks. One student of Loewen's regrets this blind acceptance: "In retrospect I ask myself, why didn't I think to ask, for example, who were the original inhabitants of the Americas, what was their life like, and how did it change when Columbus arrived? ... However ... everything was presented as if it were the full picture so I never thought to doubt that it was."⁶

If you are using a history textbook for a given course, compare it with other history textbooks for the same course; identify where there is overlap and where there might be disagreement among the authors (one of Loewen's suggestions). Then locate some alternative ways of looking at a given historical time period or a given set of historical events (found in history books or, preferably, original sources) and see how the textbook deals with the same time period or set of events. See if you can detect propaganda and bias in the textbook. See if you can recognize when your country is being glorified at the expense of the truth. You might need help with this one, but we suggest that you begin by looking at a couple of typical history textbooks and then compare what is found in them with what is found, for instance in Loewen's book referenced here, or in Howard Zinn's, *A People's History of the United States*.⁷

Understanding the Role of Questions in Historical Thinking and Learning

Historical thinking is not driven by historical answers but by historical questions. Had no historical questions ever been asked by scholars, history as a field of study would never have developed in the first place. Furthermore, history stays alive as a field of study only to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously as the driving force in thinking. To think through or rethink any issue in history, one must ask questions that stimulate historical thought. Historical questions define historical tasks, express historical problems and delineate historical issues. Answers, on the other hand, often signal a full stop in historical thought. Only when an answer generates a further question does thought continue. This is why it is only when you are asking historical questions that you are really thinking through and learning history.

So, instead of trying to store a lot of disconnected facts and names and places in your mind, start asking historical questions. Deep historical questions drive thought beneath the surface of things, forcing you to deal with complexity. Questions of purpose force you to define tasks. Questions of information force you to look at sources of information as well as assess the quality of information. Questions of interpretation force you to examine how you are organizing or giving meaning to information. Questions of assumption force you to examine what you are taking for granted. Questions of implication force you to follow out where your thinking is leading you. Questions of point of view force you to examine your perspective and to consider other relevant viewpoints.

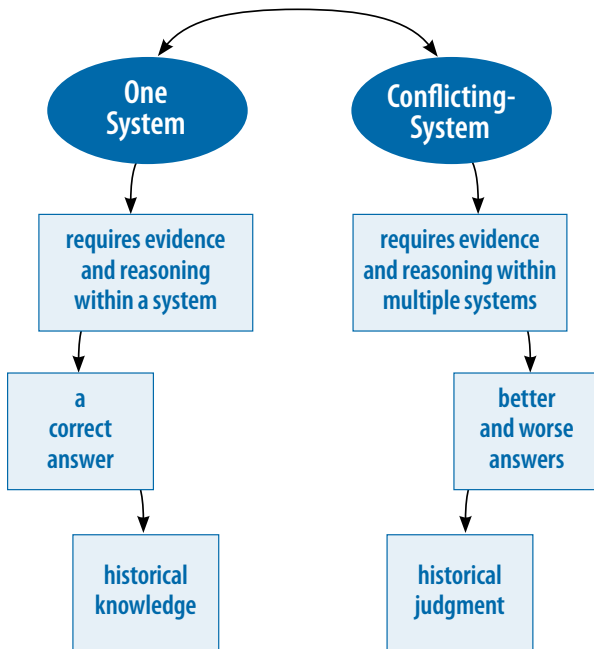
Questions of relevance force you to discriminate what does and what does not bear up on a question. Questions of accuracy force you to evaluate and test for truth and correctness. Questions of precision force you to give details and be specific. Questions of consistency force you to examine your thinking for contradictions. Questions of logic force you to consider how you are putting the whole of your historical thought together, to make sure that it all adds up and makes sense within a reasonable system of some kind.

Continually remind yourself that significant learning in history begins when deep and important historical questions are asked.

Essential Idea: If you want to learn history, you must ask questions that lead to further questions that lead to further questions. To learn history well is to learn to ask deep and important historical questions.

Distinguishing Two Kinds of Historical Questions

In approaching a historical question, it is helpful to determine the kind of system to which it belongs. Is it a question with one definitive answer? Alternatively, does the question require us to consider competing answers or even competing ways of conceptualizing the question?



Questions of Procedure or Fact (one system or established system; the thinker is required to find the correct system)—These include questions with an established procedure or method for finding the answer. These questions are settled by facts, by definition, or both. They are prominent in mathematics as well as the physical and biological sciences. But they are used in historical thinking wherever facts are relevant and can be obtained. Examples include:

- What constitutional amendment made slavery in the U.S. illegal?
- From what countries were slaves taken, for use in the U.S., prior to the Emancipation Declaration?
- At what age were girls allowed to marry in 1940 in Massachusetts?

- At what age are girls legally allowed to consent to sex in Italy today?
- What is the legal definition of statutory rape in the U.S.? Has this definition changed over time?
- What technical achievements made trans-oceanic travel possible in the 15th century?
- Who were the Romanov monarchs?
- On what date did Abraham Lincoln deliver what is now known as the Gettysburg Address?
- On what date did Neal Armstrong first set foot on the moon?
- How many American soldiers died at the Bay of Pigs?
- Of all the major military engagements the United States has been involved in, which war claimed the greatest number of American lives?
- Who is considered the primary author of the American Declaration of Independence?
- Of the four Civil War battles listed, which claimed the greatest number of total lives: Gettysburg, Shiloh, Antietam, Chickamauga?

Questions of Judgment (multi-systems or conflicting systems, within which the reasoner is required to think)—Questions requiring reasoning, but with more than one arguable answer. These are questions that make sense to debate, questions with better-or-worse answers (well-supported and reasoned or poorly-supported and/or poorly-reasoned). Here we are seeking the best answer within a range of possibilities. We evaluate answers to such questions using universal intellectual standards such as breadth, depth, logicalness, and so forth. Some of the most important historical questions are conflicting-system questions (for example, those questions with an ethical dimension). Examples of questions of judgment include:

- What variables were most responsible for the French Revolution?
- What was the most significant consequence of the French Revolution?
- What was the most significant cause of the fall of the Roman Empire?
- Which historians have made the most significant contributions to historical thought?
- What human phenomena are most important for historians to study and write about, if we are to use knowledge of these phenomena to live better in the present and future?

Historians must make many judgments while constructing historical narratives. They must determine which questions are worth asking, which sources are needed to answer the question, how to frame the inquiry so that readers appreciate and understand the significance of the inquiry, which avenues of thinking to pursue, and which to ignore.

Making judgments and interpreting history is central to historians' work. Historians routinely deal with questions that often have multiple possible answers, and with sources that frequently must be interpreted and contextualized. The answers to questions about history and the insights historians may lend to a particular problem often point the way to new considerations, rather than absolute and definitive conclusions.

Historians work with empirical data to gain a sense of the past and to construct insights about that which cannot be absolutely and precisely known. The historian knows, for example, that on July 3, 1863, approximately 12,500 Confederate troops charged Union soldiers poised at Cemetery Ridge near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; the historian knows that the assault, led by Major General George Pickett, resulted in horrible losses for his division and that the Union claimed victory at the Battle of Gettysburg. So what is the problem? We do not immediately know, for example, the motives of men who made the decision to execute Pickett's charge despite the conditions, the degree to which the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg affected the Confederacy's will to fight, and what long-range implications the Battle of Gettysburg had on the Senators and Representatives of Pennsylvania who would one day craft the terms of Reconstruction. There are many more questions to be asked regarding the Battle of Gettysburg, but one can readily see here that the historian is not merely chasing facts to fill in a chronology; the historian is after the meaning and the significance of the events; he or she is looking for ways to explain why things happened the way they did, what subtle variables may have played a potent part in the events, and what long-lasting impact events may have had.

Different historians take different views of the same events. This often results from the "frames" through which they view the past. While most people who live in the states that fought in the Union, during the war that occupied the United States from 1861-1865, call the conflict the "Civil War," many who live in states that fought with the Confederacy refer to the conflict as the "War of Northern Aggression." The difference is important because each label contains a perspective, and perhaps even an attitude, towards the event and those who engaged in it.

Questions of judgment have often been guided by particular schools of thought that frame the authors' views of the world, events of the past, and the meaning of events in the past. As a student, before you read historical narratives and theses, it is helpful for you to know something about these schools of thought so you can begin to recognize the authors' perspective as a critical element in the text.

Distinguishing Inert Information and Activated Ignorance from Activated Knowledge in History

The mind can take in historical information in three distinctive ways: by internalizing **inert information**, by forming **activated ignorance**, and by achieving **activated knowledge**.

By **inert information**, we mean taking into the mind information that, though memorized, we do not understand. For example, many children learn in school that democracy is government of the people, by the people, for the people. But most people could not explain the difference between these three conditions. Much human information is, in the mind of the people who possess it, merely empty words (inert or dead in the mind). Much of history is learned in this way in schools. Students memorize dates and names and places, but this information is disconnected from any important ideas that concern them. Therefore, the information is of no use. It has no potency or power in the mind.

By **activated ignorance**, we mean taking into the mind, and actively using, information that is false. For example, the philosopher René Descartes came to confidently believe that animals have no actual feelings but are simply robotic machines. Based on this activated ignorance, he performed painful experiments on animals and interpreted their cries of pain as mere noises. Wherever activated ignorance exists, it is dangerous. When nations write historical narratives that systematically ignore the things they have done to oppress certain peoples, they are able to conceptualize themselves in glorified terms. They are able to deceive themselves into believing they are not responsible for their oppressive actions and tendencies.

By **activated knowledge**, we mean taking into the mind, and actively using, information that is not only true but that, when insightfully understood, leads us by implication to more and more knowledge. For example, knowledge of critical thinking skills is activated knowledge when we use these skills over and over in the acquisition of knowledge in multiple fields. Knowing that history is always told from some perspective, and that any given perspective may be based in high or low quality reasoning, is activated knowledge that helps us effectively assess differing historical perspectives.

Activated knowledge is the ultimate goal of education. When we have it, it transforms us. For example, when we truly recognize how social groups tend to exercise control over our behavior, we bring a unique perspective to every social situation. We don't simply observe human behavior. We observe conformity, manipulation, and self-deception. Or again, when we recognize that the news media's goal is not public education but profit making, we are not surprised by their lack of global perspective

and emphasis on sensationalism. We realize that putting a reader-friendly spin on every story is a way to increase readership and sales. All of these realities are illuminated through historical thinking.

Activated knowledge is a key to lifelong learning. In history, seek the knowledge that can guide your thinking to further and further knowledge. Seek foundational principles. Seek basic laws and theories. Seek fundamental ideas. Use them as guideposts in learning further ideas in history and for learning ideas in other disciplines that connect with historical thinking.

Essential Idea: There are three very different ways to take in information while learning history:

1. In a way that it is meaningless to you,
2. In a misleading way, and
3. In a way that leads you to important knowledge through which you can acquire further knowledge and insight.

Exploring Key Ideas Within History

In this section we present you with two exercises that can help you think deeply about history and historical concepts. By stating, elaborating, exemplifying, and illustrating historical ideas, you will find yourself engaged in writing history substantively.

For example, consider answering the following questions, as part of the process of learning to think historically:

- Can you state, in one simple sentence, a reasonable meaning of “the misuse of power”?
- Could you elaborate more fully what is involved in the misuse of power?
- Could you give me an example from history of the misuse of power?
- Could you give me an analogy or metaphor to help me better understand the misuse of power?

The same four questions can be formulated for explaining a democracy, a revolution, cause and effect, oppression, feminism, social norms, societal taboos, and indeed any important historical concept whatever. Every subject is a network or system of concepts that must be internalized to think successfully within it. When we can answer these four questions for fundamental concepts within history, we begin to take command of both the concepts within history and history itself.

Beginning to Internalize a Key Concept in History

We can now suggest a practice pattern for internalizing any concept in history, say “x,” where “x” might be, for instance, “the misuse of power in history.” Here is the pattern:

1. “The misuse of power in history” might be best understood...
(State in one or a few sentences the main idea.)
2. In other words...
(Elaborate the idea in as many sentences as seem appropriate for the context. Consider using connectors like – “To put it another way,” “To elaborate,” or “To unpack this idea”...)
3. For example...
(Give one or more real life examples from history to support the concept.)
4. To illustrate...
(Give an analogy or metaphor from another domain of thought to help the reader understand the main concept. “X” is like...)

Practice writing your understanding of five key concepts within history using the format above. Here are some key ideas you might consider:

Fascism, Social Darwinism, philanthropy, Great Awakening, Invisible Hand of the Market, colonialism, religious fundamentalism, partisan politics, due process, genocide, human dignity, balance of power, class consciousness, social stratification, social causation, the nature of human beings, historical interpretations as value laden, the role of economics in history, the oppression of people historically.

Use relevant history books or other reference materials (e.g., textbooks, books in other disciplines) to figure out the meanings of these key concepts. But always write the meanings in your own words.

Once you have written your understanding of each concept, assess your writing by re-reading the explanation of the concept (from the relevant section in a textbook or other resource). By carefully comparing what you said (and didn't say) with the explanation in the textbook, you can identify strengths and weaknesses in your initial understanding of the concept.

Because every discipline contains key concepts or organizing ideas that guide everything else within the discipline, it is important to learn how to write in ways that help you internalize those concepts. Key concepts enable you to grasp the big picture of a discipline. You should master these concepts before learning subordinate concepts. In the next section we provide an example of a writing exercise that will enable you to “open up” history as a discipline. The following exercise builds on the previous one.

Example of Exercise 1: Beginning to Internalize a Key Concept in History

We will now exemplify the practice suggested above focusing on “the role of oppression” in history.

1. “The role of oppression” in history might be best understood as the tendency of people in positions of power, throughout history, to wield power over those with less power for purposes of selfish and vested interests, without regard to the rights and needs of those being oppressed. Oppression entails the unethical use of power over those with little or no choice as to their circumstances and generally involves some form of exploitation, cruelty and suffering on the part of the oppressed.
2. [In other words,] if we carefully study any historical period, we can often identify many instances of oppression, which comes in many forms. Focusing on any given set of historical events, we will find that some people will have more power than others and will often use that power in ways oppressive to those with little or no power. This is connected with the natural occurrence of stratification, which has existed throughout recorded history. Oppression is often overlooked or rationalized when those in the mainstream hold views that support authoritarian ideologies. For instance, throughout history, slavery of millions of people, often in ghastly conditions, has been countenanced by many “advanced” or “civilized” societies and cultures.

3. For examples of oppression historically, consider slavery in the Americas in the 17th through 19th centuries. Or consider the ways in which native peoples in the US were systematically lied to by the American government, removed from their lands, and driven further and further into poverty, subjugation and persecution.

Oppression is not limited to humans acting unethically toward other humans; it is mirrored (arguably) in unethical behavior of humans in relation to “animals” over which they exercise power. For example, it is not uncommon for humans to cause unnecessary pain and suffering to higher order animals they conceptualize as just so much “stock” (livestock). Consider the act of keeping animals in boxlike cages or containers for the whole of their lives for the purposes of raising them for human consumption, in other words, keeping them in living conditions in which these animals are unable to turn around or move significantly back and forth, and are unable to engage in their other natural behaviors. People who support this practice (animal farmers and ranchers, as well as the people who eat these animals) may then (arguably) be considered “oppressors” and the tight boxed animals the “oppressed.”

4. [To illustrate] Looking for general patterns of oppression historically can be compared with looking for general patterns of oppression in one’s own thought and behavior. Throughout history groups have oppressed other groups. Similarly, throughout our lives, we have at times oppressed others and at other times have been oppressed. We can study oppression historically, and we can study its effects in our own lives. Both are fruitful.

Deepening Your Understanding of Any Key Concept in History

Use the following guidelines for capturing the essence of key historical concepts:

1. Identify the historical concept and state the definition of the concept.
2. Describe how the concept is used in the context of the narrative.
3. State the significance of the concept to the understanding of history.
4. Give an example of the concept from real life.
5. Connect the concept to other important ideas in history.
6. Give examples for the connection between the concept and other important ideas in history.

Here is a pattern for practicing the guidelines above:

1. Concept X is defined as...
2. In this context, concept X is used in the following way(s)...
3. This concept is important to the understanding of history because...
4. An example of this concept in real life is...
5. This concept is related to these important ideas in history...
6. Some examples of the connection between this concept and other important ideas from history are...

Example of Exercise 2 – Capturing the Essence of a Historical Concept:

1. The concept, Social Darwinism, is defined as the belief that there exists a natural order to humanity in which some people are endowed with greater intelligence and industriousness and that, as such, they are entitled to greater privilege and wealth.
2. In the context of this piece, “March of the Flag” (1898) is a speech by Senator Albert Beveridge; the concept is used as a justification for going to war and for American imperialism in the Caribbean and Philippine islands.
3. This concept is important to the understanding of history because it was used by many industrialized nations to expand their influence and hegemony over Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Industrial nations typically had the technological ability to impose their will on others, but rationalized this imposition with assertions that they were ultimately helping others to advance civilization.
4. An example of this might be the belief that some people currently hold, that the top 1% in the distribution of American wealth deserve such wealth (because they worked hard to get it) even if it means that many others must live in abject poverty. Another example might be the idea that students who do not express a certain aptitude or quickness in learning should not be admitted into public colleges or universities.
5. Social Darwinism is related to other ideas and concepts in history such as “White Man’s Burden,” eugenics, and intelligence testing.
6. Some examples of the connection between Social Darwinism and other ideas include: 1) the efforts of Lewis Terman and Robert Yerkes to develop an exam that might sort the “intelligent” from the “unintelligent” in the human population for the purposes of routing individuals to “appropriate stations” in life; 2) the sterilization laws of the United States and Great Britain at the beginning of the 20th century; 3) the Holocaust.

Conceptualizing Grade Profiles for History

In your history class, your instructor may use the following grade profiles. If so, this will help you know precisely what is expected of you in class. When your instructor explicitly fosters critical thinking within history, through understanding and routine application of the elements of thought and intellectual standards, you should become more proficient in historical thinking. You should also develop explicit intellectual tools that will help you reason better in your other classes as well as in other domains of thought.

What Each Grade Represents

The Grade of A

(The essence of A-level work. Excellence overall, no major weaknesses.) A-level work implies excellence in historical thinking and excellent performance within the history course. It also implies development of a range of historical knowledge acquired through critical thought. The work at the end of the course is, on the whole, clear, precise, and well-reasoned. In A-level work, historical terms and distinctions are used effectively. The work demonstrates a mind beginning to take charge of its own historical ideas, assumptions, inferences, and intellectual processes. The A-level student usually analyzes historical issues clearly and precisely, usually identifies historical information accurately, usually distinguishes the relevant from the irrelevant, usually recognizes key questionable historical assumptions. The student usually clarifies key historical concepts, typically uses language in keeping with educated usage, and usually identifies relevant competing points of view in history. The student shows a general tendency to reason carefully from clearly stated premises, as well as noticeable sensitivity to important historical implications and consequences. The A-level student also demonstrates an accurate understanding of historiography and the various schools of historical thought. The A-level student consistently and proficiently links causes and effects by using accurate and relevant evidence and commentary. This student readily detects contextual variables that impacted past events and easily recognizes trends, patterns, and exceptions in the human experience. A-level work displays excellent historical reasoning and problem-solving skills. The A-level student's work is consistently at a high level of intellectual excellence.

The Grade of B

(The essence of B-level work is that it demonstrates more strengths than weaknesses and is more consistent in high level performance than C-level work. It nevertheless has some distinctive weaknesses, though no major ones.) The grade of B implies sound historical thinking and sound performance within the history course. It also implies development of a range of historical knowledge acquired through critical thought, though this range

is not as high as A-level work. B-level work at the end of the course is, on the whole, clear, precise, and well-reasoned, though with occasional lapses into weak reasoning. On the whole, historical terms and distinctions are used effectively. The work demonstrates a mind beginning to take charge of its own ideas, assumptions, inferences, and intellectual processes. The student often analyzes historical issues clearly and precisely, often identifies historical information accurately, usually distinguishes the relevant from the irrelevant, often recognizes key questionable assumptions, usually clarifies key concepts effectively, and typically uses language in keeping with educated usage. The student frequently identifies relevant competing points of view within history and shows a general tendency to reason carefully from clearly stated premises, as well as noticeable sensitivity to important historical implications and consequences. The B-level student understands historiography but is sometimes inconsistent in his or her ability to identify perspectives of various schools of thought. Though the student has a sound grasp of the role of context in historical analysis, he or she sometimes overlooks subtle cause-effect relationships, trends, patterns, and exceptions in human experience. B-level work displays good historical reasoning and problem-solving skills.

The Grade of C

(The essence of C-level work is that it demonstrates more than a minimal level of skill, but it is also highly inconsistent, with as many weaknesses as strengths.) The grade of C implies mixed historical thinking and mixed performance within the history course. It also implies some development of historical knowledge acquired through critical thought. C-level work at the end of the course shows some emerging historical thinking skills, but also pronounced weaknesses. Though some historical assignments are reasonably well done, others are poorly done, or at best are mediocre. There are more than occasional lapses in historical reasoning. Though historical terms and distinctions are sometimes used effectively, they are sometimes used quite ineffectively. Only on occasion does C-level work display a mind taking charge of its own ideas, assumptions, inferences, and intellectual processes. Only occasionally does C-level work display intellectual discipline and clarity. The C-level student only occasionally analyzes historical issues clearly and precisely, identifies information accurately, distinguishes the relevant from the irrelevant, and recognizes key questionable assumptions. The student only occasionally clarifies key historical concepts effectively and uses language in keeping with educated usage. The student only occasionally identifies relevant competing points of view within history, reasons carefully from clearly stated premises, or recognizes important historical implications and consequences. Sometimes the C-level student seems to be simply going through the motions of the assignment, carrying out the form without getting into the spirit of historical thinking. The C-level student can identify elements of historiography but struggles to apply them and has difficulty detecting the schools of historical thought embodied in historical narratives. This student can see blatant cause-effect relationships, but struggles with the subtle

relationships, as well as with transferring this concept from the study of one era to that of another. Patterns, trends, and exceptions do not readily emerge in the C-level student's reading, and so history is yet conceptualized as a chronology of events. On the whole, C-level work shows only modest and inconsistent historical reasoning and problem-solving skills, and sometimes displays weak historical reasoning and problem-solving skills.

The Grade of D

(The essence of D-Level work is that it demonstrates only a minimal level of understanding and skill in history.) The grade of D implies poor historical thinking and performance within the history course. On the whole, the student tries to get through the course by means of rote recall, attempting to acquire knowledge by memorization rather than through comprehension and understanding. On the whole, the student is not developing the skills of thought and knowledge requisite to understanding history. Most assignments are poorly done. There is little evidence that the student is critically reasoning through assignments. Often, the student seems to be merely going through the motions of the assignment, carrying out the form without getting into the spirit of it. D-level work rarely shows any effort to take charge of ideas, assumptions, inferences, and intellectual processes. In general, D-level thinking lacks discipline and clarity. In D-level work, the student rarely analyzes historical issues clearly and precisely, almost never identifies historical information accurately, rarely distinguishes the relevant from the irrelevant, and rarely recognizes key questionable assumptions. The student almost never clarifies key historical concepts effectively, frequently fails to use language in keeping with educated usage, only rarely identifies relevant competing points of view, and almost never reasons carefully from clearly stated premises, or recognizes important implications and consequences. The D-level student does not understand the concept of historiography or schools of historical thought. This student tends to see events as isolated episodes which have no bearing on the present and no need for analysis as the events seem to "speak for themselves." D-level work does not show good historical reasoning and problem-solving skills and frequently displays poor historical reasoning and problem-solving skills.

The Grade of F

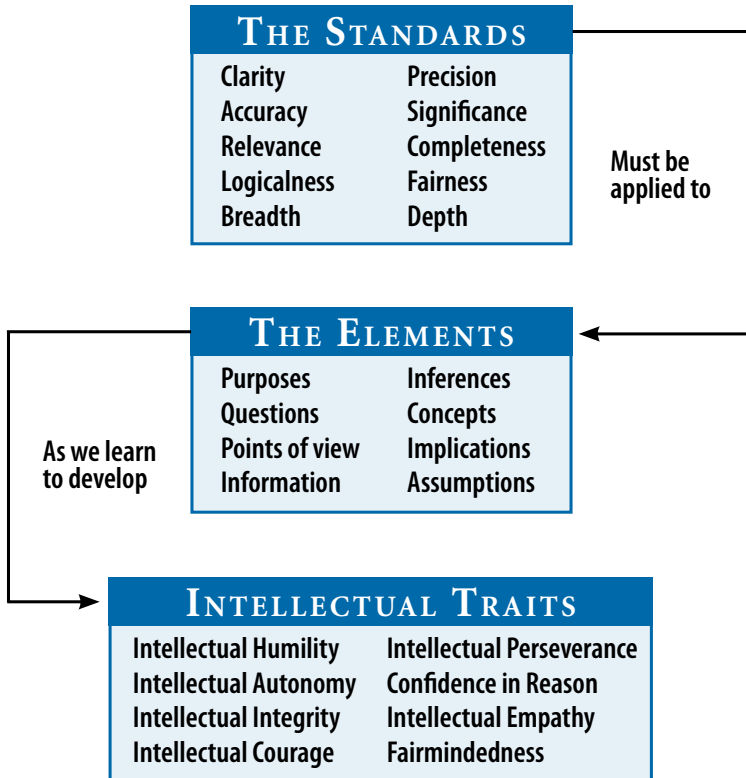
(The essence of F-level work is that the student demonstrates a pattern of unskilled thinking and/or fails to do the required work of the course.) The student tries to get through the course by means of rote recall, attempting to acquire knowledge by memorization rather than through comprehension and understanding. The student is not developing the skills of historical thought and the historical knowledge requisite to understanding course content. The F-level student is unable to construct accurate chronologies and to accurately identify key documents and persons of

interest relevant to historical questions. Here are typical characteristics of the work of an F-level student: The student does not understand the basic nature of what it means to think historically, and in any case does not display the thinking skills and abilities at the heart of the history course. The work at the end of the course is as vague, imprecise, and unreasoned as it was in the beginning. There is little evidence that the student is genuinely engaged in the task of taking charge of his or her historical thinking. Many assignments appear to have been done *pro forma*—the student simply going through the motions without really putting any significant effort into thinking his or her way through them. Consequently, the student is not analyzing historical issues clearly, not identifying historical information accurately, not accurately distinguishing the relevant from the irrelevant, not identifying key questionable assumptions. The student is not clarifying key historical concepts, not identifying relevant competing historical points of view, not reasoning carefully from clearly stated premises, or tracing historical implications and consequences. The F-level student does not understand historiography and tends to believe that while history can be interpreted, interpretations are legitimate by virtue of the individual's right to free speech and not whether they are based in critical thought. The student's work does not display discernible historical reasoning and problem-solving skills.

Part Three: Understanding Critical Thinking as the Key to Historical Thought

It is important to understand the essential dimensions of critical thinking and how they interface with historical thinking. In this section we introduce these dimensions and some of their connections with historical reasoning. We can begin with this overview:

Historians who think critically routinely apply *intellectual standards to the elements of thought* as they seek to develop intellectual virtues.



Analyzing Historical Thought

To reason well about history or the topics that emerge in historical studies, it is essential to analyze historical thought by focusing on the elements of reasoning embedded in it. But first consider this argument:

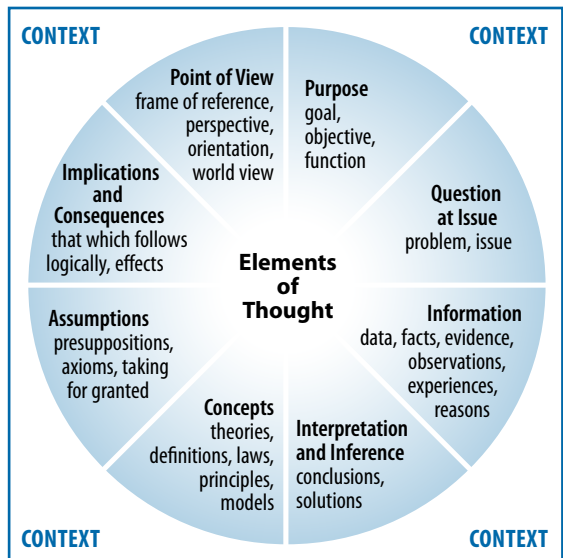
Everyone thinks; it is our nature to do so. But much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, or prejudiced. Yet the quality of our life and of what we produce, make, or build depends precisely on the quality of our thought. If we want to think well, we must understand at least the rudiments of thought, the most basic structures out of which all thinking is made. We must learn how to take thinking apart.

Thinking Can Be Defined by Eight Elements

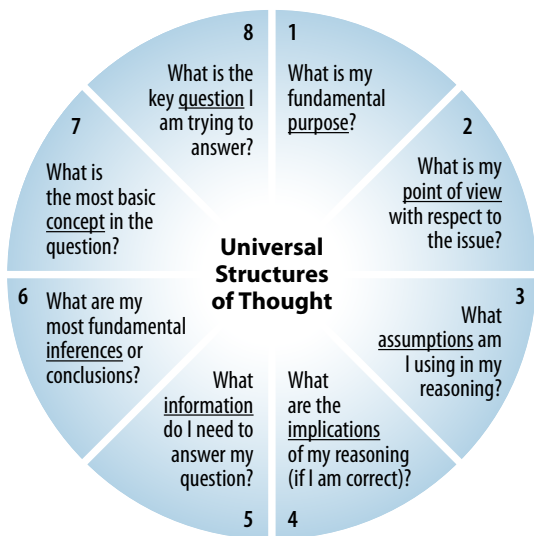
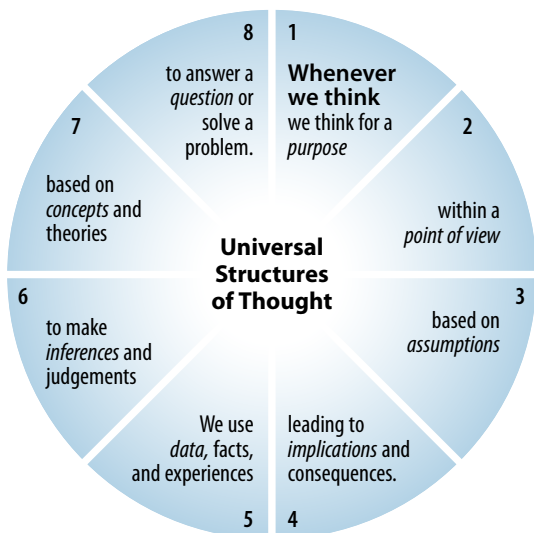
Eight basic structures are present in all thinking: Whenever we think, we think for a purpose, within a point of view, based on assumptions, leading to implications and consequences. We use concepts, ideas and theories to interpret data, facts, and experiences in order to answer questions, solve problems, and resolve issues.

Thinking, then:

- generates purposes
- raises questions
- uses information
- creates concepts
- makes inferences
- makes assumptions
- generates implications
- embodies a point of view



The Elements of Thought and Questions They Imply



The Elements of Historical Thought



Used With Sensitivity to Universal Intellectual Standards

Clarity → Accuracy → Depth → Breadth → Significance
 Precision
 Relevance

↓
Fairness

Essential Idea: When you understand the structures of thought, you can analyze any historical thought.

The Logic of History

The Purpose of History: To study the past in order to improve how we live in the present and the future. In studying the past, historians create narratives that are attempts to portray events as they actually occurred. When historical narratives are well constructed by historians, they can be used to improve human life.

A scholarly study of history can help us better understand complexities in issues and the merit in looking at issues from multiple perspectives. It can help us understand that change for the good often comes only in the long run. But it also helps us see that humans do not naturally progress as thinkers.

Key Questions Historians Ask: What happened during a given period of time? What caused these events to happen in this way? What were the conditions and forces that brought about these events? Are there patterns about past events that can be discovered? Do we need to rethink the way we have viewed the past in light of some new information? Have we treated as historical facts what have instead been misleading inferences or interpretations? Has some information, for the time period we are studying, been irretrievably lost? What is the most insightful interpretation of the data and information? What role does the interpretation of the “lived experience” of past peoples play in historical understanding, and how does the historian arrive at justified statements about this lived experience? Is it possible to arrive at justified interpretations of long-dead peoples, their mindsets, and their actions? How confident can we be in our statements about the past, about the features of past institutions, structures, and peoples, and about the explanatory relations among them? How does it make sense to conceptualize the events of this historical time period? What human meanings and intentions underlie a given complex series of historical events?

Key Concepts Historians Use or Have Used in Their Thinking: Historians within different specialties and with differing viewpoints use differing and often conflicting concepts in their thinking. Here are some of the key concepts historians use or have used in the past:

1. *Causation* in history, which focuses on the causes of historical events.
2. The idea of past events being depicted in the form of a narrative.
3. The extent to which there is a *grand design* in human history. In other words, whether and to what extent human history follows an inherent deterministic process (largely obsolete).
4. *The role of divine intervention* in history (largely obsolete).
5. *The role of the individual* in determining history.

6. *The role of the culture* in determining history (focusing, for instance on the extent to which cultures are oppressive to certain peoples).
7. *The role of the entire human species* in determining events.
8. The role of *class consciousness* in history.
9. The role of *social causation* in history.
10. *The role of powerful or important people* in history.
11. *The role of women* in history.
12. *The role of ethnic groups* in history.
13. *The significance* of historical events.
14. *The role of material circumstances* in human affairs.
15. *The role of economics* in human history.
16. *The role of sociocentric thought* in human history.
17. *The role of human psychology* in human history.
18. *The role of religion* in human history.
19. *Large, embracing patterns* in history.
20. *Seeking general laws* in history.
21. *Historical objectivity vs. historians interpretations as necessarily value-laden.*
22. *Historical causation* (highlighting objectivity, truth and correspondence to facts) vs. *historical narrative* (highlighting subjectivity and multiple interpretations).

Other concepts historians focus on include: Invisible hand of the market, war of attrition, collateral damage, due process, just war, balance of power, inalienable rights, representative democracy, fair wages, human dignity, fair trade, and revolution.

Key Types of Information Historians Use: Historians are generally focused on collecting, organizing, and presenting information about past events in narrative form. Information can come from, among other sources, articles, books, newspapers, magazines, scrolls, symbols, diaries, private communications between officials, letters, treaties, minutes from official proceedings, institutional reports, pictures, audio or video interviews, word of mouth, internet sources, and videos. Information may be in the form of either verifiable facts or probable facts. Often the only information available to the historian is that which has already been filtered through the interpretations of others. For instance, Socrates did not leave any written work of what has come to be known as the Socratic method. We know the thinking of Socrates only through the writings, and therefore interpretations, of others (most of which comes to us through the writings of Plato and Xenophon, both of whom were students of Socrates).

Key Inferences or Interpretations of Historians: Historical knowledge depends on procedures of empirical investigation, and the justification of historical claims depends on providing convincing demonstration of the empirical evidence that exists to support or invalidate the claim. Historians should engage in good-faith interrogation of the evidence in constructing their theories of the past. But this should not be understood to imply that there is always one uniquely true interpretation of historical processes and events. Historical interpretations are often underdetermined by the facts. Interpretations of the past will vary in accordance with the specific historical question being posed about the same body of evidence. In short, historical narratives have a substantial interpretive component, and often involve substantial construction of the past.

Some Important Implications of Historical Thinking: If historians do a good job of developing and presenting historical reasoning, and if people take historians' work seriously, the following implications may become realities:

1. People will be more likely see the importance in studying history as they will see it more relevant to their own lives.
2. People will be more likely to learn from the past.
3. People will come to recognize that all interpretations and narratives of the past are not of the same quality, and therefore they will think more critically about interpretations and narratives of the past (rather than uncritically accepting them).
4. People will be more likely to see themselves as historical thinkers and they will take greater command of the stories they tell themselves about their own past.

Some Important Assumptions That Historians Begin With in Their Thinking:

Historians of different stripes will differ in the beliefs they take for granted, depending on their viewpoint, perspective and world view. But in general, here are some assumptions historians begin with:

1. That if we understand the past we can better understand humans and why they behave as they do.
2. That if we study the past, we can learn important things about people, which will help us make better decisions in the future.
3. That there is a potentially unlimited archive of information and facts that have to be sifted through and interpreted with respect to broadly-based historical questions.
4. That purported facts may not be *actual* facts, or may not be *relevant* facts.
5. That there is always the possibility that new information will become available with respect to a given historical question and when this happens, prior interpretations about historical events may need to be reconsidered.

The Points of View of Historians: The points of view from which historians look at the past will vary depending on the concepts they use in their thinking—concepts which guide their interpretations of historical information. But in general, historians look at the past as essential to understanding who we are as humans and how we can improve human societies in the present and in the future. Further, a given historian’s point of view can be shaped by many potential factors: time, culture, religion, gender, colleagues, economic interest, emotional state, social role, or age group, to name a few. In addition, historians can look at the world from:

- a point in time (16th, 17th, 18th, 19th century)
- a culture (Western, Eastern, South American, Japanese, Turkish, French)
- a religion (Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Jewish)
- a gender (male, female)
- an orientation (gay, straight)
- a profession (lawyer, teacher, . . .)
- another discipline (biological, chemical, geological, astronomical, sociological, philosophical, anthropological, literary, artistic, musical, dance, poetic, medical, nursing, sports)
- their own peer group, or set of colleagues
- an economic interest
- an emotional state
- an age group

Additional Thoughts on the Elements of Historical Reasoning

A reasonable approach to investigating the past entails targeting the elements of thought. For instance, it might require considering perspectives (*points of view*) of archaeologists, geologists, anthropologists, economists, biologists, engineers, political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists who play vital roles in the “re-construction” of the past.

Historical inquiry also requires that scholars apply the elements of thought in ways specific to the discipline of history. For instance, in terms of *information*, historical inquiry and reporting include primary and secondary sources of information. This information might come in the form of such artifacts as a speech, diary, letter, poem, treaty, article, film, news broadcast, or political advertisement. While all disciplines must be concerned about the source and quality of information, the historian must take special care to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, and to recognize the intentions of the originators of these sources, as well as the inherent usefulness and limitations of each. Typically, historians are concerned with the written or recorded word, and so are interested in the authorship, authenticity, credibility, and perspective of the source, the editorial processes to which the documents may have been subjected, and the function of documents at the time they were created.

These are just a few of the many ways in which historical thought is illuminated through inquiring into the elements of reasoning. Whenever historians reason about any historical issue or event, they formulate purposes, articulate questions, gather information, and make inferences based on that information. They begin with a particular historical point of view, based on their assumptions and the ways in which they conceptualize the issues. And there are implications of their historical reasoning.

Thus, it is important for both historians and instructors to be explicitly aware of, and deliberately target, the elements of thought when reasoning through historical issues, composing historical theses and narratives, and structuring historical investigations.

Essential Idea: The elements of reasoning are implicit in all historical thought. By explicitly targeting them, you can improve your ability to think historically.

A Checklist for Historical Reasoning

1. All historical reasoning has a **PURPOSE**.
 - Can you state your purpose clearly?
 - What is the objective of your historical reasoning?
 - Does your reasoning stay focused on your historical goal?
 - Is your goal realistic?

- 2) All historical reasoning is an attempt to figure something out, to settle some **QUESTION**, to solve some **PROBLEM**.
 - What historical question are you trying to answer?
 - Are there other ways to think about the question?
 - Can you divide the question into sub-questions?
 - Is this a question that has one right answer or can there be more than one reasonable answer?
 - Does this question require historical judgment rather than facts alone?

3. All historical reasoning is based on **ASSUMPTIONS**.
 - What assumptions are you making? Are they justified?
 - How are your assumptions shaping your point of view?
 - Which of your assumptions might reasonably be questioned?

4. All historical reasoning is done from some **POINT OF VIEW**.
 - What is your point of view? What insights is it based on? What are its weaknesses?
 - What other points of view should be considered in reasoning through this problem? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these viewpoints? Are you fairly minded considering the insights behind these viewpoints?

Continued on page 42

5. All historical reasoning is based on **DATA, INFORMATION,** and **EVIDENCE.**
 - To what extent is your reasoning supported by relevant data?
 - Do the data suggest explanations that differ from those you have given?
 - How clear, accurate, and relevant are the data to the historical question at issue?
 - Have you gathered data sufficient to reach a valid conclusion?

6. All historical reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, **CONCEPTS** and **THEORIES.**
 - What key concepts and theories are guiding your historical reasoning?
 - What alternative explanations might be possible, given these concepts and theories?
 - Are you clear and precise in using historical concepts and theories in your reasoning?
 - Are you distorting ideas to fit your agenda?

7. All historical reasoning contains **INFERENCES** or **INTERPRETATIONS** by which we draw **CONCLUSIONS** and give meaning to data.
 - To what extent do the data support your historical conclusions?
 - Are your inferences consistent with each other?
 - Are there other reasonable inferences that should be considered?

8. All historical reasoning leads somewhere, that is, has **IMPLICATIONS** and **CONSEQUENCES.**
 - What implications and consequences follow from your reasoning?
 - If we accept your line of reasoning, what implications or consequences are likely?
 - What other implications or consequences are possible or probable?

Analyzing the Logic of a Historical Article, Essay or Chapter

One important way to understand an essay, article or chapter is through the analysis of the historian's reasoning. Once you have done this, you can evaluate the historian's reasoning using intellectual standards (see pages 47-51).

Here is a template to follow:

1. The main **purpose** of this article is _____.
(Here, you are trying to state, as accurately as possible, the historian's intent in writing the article. What was the author trying to accomplish?)
2. The key **question** that the historian is addressing is _____.
(Your goal is to figure out the key question that was in the mind of the author when he/she wrote the article. What was the key question addressed in the article?)
3. The most important **information** in this article is _____.
(You want to identify the key information the historian used, or presupposed, in the article to support his/her main arguments. Here, you are looking for facts, experiences, and/or data the author used to support his/her conclusions.)
4. The main **inferences** in this article are _____.
(You want to identify the most important conclusions the historian comes to and presents in the article.)
5. The key **concept**(s) we need to understand in this article is (are) _____.
By these concepts the historian means _____.
(To identify these ideas, ask yourself: What are the most important ideas that you would have to know to understand the historian's line of reasoning? Then briefly elaborate what the historian means by these ideas.) See pages 35-36 for some of the key concepts historians often use in their reasoning.
6. The main **assumption**(s) underlying the historian's thinking is (are) _____.
(Ask yourself: What is the historian taking for granted [that might be questioned]? The assumptions are generalizations that the historian does not think he/she has to defend in the context of writing the article, and they are usually unstated. This is where the historian's thinking logically begins.)

Continued on page 44

- 7a. If we accept this line of reasoning (completely or partially), some important **implications** are _____.
(What important consequences are likely to follow if people take the historian's line of reasoning seriously? Here, you are to pursue the logical implications of the author's position. You should include implications that the historian states as well as those the historian does not state.)
- 7b. If we fail to accept this line of reasoning, some important **implications** are _____.
(What important consequences are likely to follow if people ignore the historian's reasoning?)
8. The main **point(s) of view** presented in this article is (are) _____.
(The main question you are trying to answer here is: What is the historian looking at, and how is he/she seeing it? For example, in this thinker's guide, we are looking at "history" and seeing it as "an integrated system of understandings about the past that must be reasoned through using the tools of critical thinking.")

If you truly understand these structures as they interrelate in an article, essay, or chapter, you should be able to accurately analyze and then empathically role-play the thinking of the historian.

Essential Idea: It is possible to use the basic structures of thinking to analyze historical articles, essays, and chapters. This analysis will deepen your insight into the author's historical reasoning.

Analyzing the Logic of a History Book or Textbook

Just as you can understand a historical essay, article, or chapter by analyzing the parts of the author's reasoning, so too can you figure out the system of ideas within a history book or textbook by focusing on the parts of the author's reasoning within it. To understand the parts of the author's reasoning, use this template:

1. The main **purpose** of this history book or textbook is _____.
(Here, you are trying to determine the author's purpose for writing the book or textbook. What was the author trying to accomplish?)
2. The key **question(s)** that the author is addressing in the book or textbook is/are _____.
(You are trying to figure out the key questions in the mind of the author when he/she wrote the book. In other words, what are the key questions which the book answers? Here, you might identify the most broad question the book answers, along with the most important sub-questions it focuses on.)
3. The most important kinds of **information** in this book are _____.
(You want to identify the types of information the author uses in the book to support his/her main arguments [e.g., historical documents, primary sources, historical interviews, etc.]).
4. The main **inferences/conclusions** in this book are _____.
(You want to identify the most important conclusions that the author comes to and presents in the book. Focus on this question: What are the most important conclusions that the author presents—conclusions that, if you understand them, shed important light on key beliefs in the field of history?)
5. The key **idea(s)** we need to understand in this book is (are) _____.
_____. By these ideas the author means _____.
(To identify these ideas, ask yourself: What are the most important ideas that you would have to grasp to understand the book? Then elaborate on precisely what the author means by these basic ideas. Begin with the most fundamental idea presented, such as "history, historical consequences, philosophy of history." [In a textbook, these can usually be found in the first chapter.] Then identify the other significant concepts that are deeply tied into the most fundamental one.)

Continued on page 46

6. The main **assumption**(s) underlying the author's thinking is (are) _____

(Ask yourself: What is the author taking for granted [that might be questioned]? The assumptions are sometimes generalizations that the author does not think he/she has to defend in the context of writing the book. In a textbook, the assumptions are sometimes stated in the first chapter as the key assumptions underlying history.)

- 7a. If people take the book seriously, some important **implications** are _____.

(What important consequences are likely to follow if readers take the book seriously? Here, you are to follow out the logical implications of the information/ ideas in the book. You should include implications the author argues for, if you believe them to be well-founded, but you should also include unstated implications.)

- 7b. If people fail to take the textbook seriously, some important **implications** are _____.

(What important consequences are likely to follow if the author's thinking is ignored?)

8. The main **point(s) of view** presented in this article is (are) _____.

(The main question you are trying to answer here is: What is the author looking at, and how is he/she seeing it? For example, the author might be looking at "history" and seeing it as "leading to powerful insights about why humans behave as they do.")

Essential Idea: Use the basic structures of thinking to analyze the thinking implicit in historical books and textbooks.

The Spirit of Critical Thinking

*There is a logic to this,
and I can figure it out!*

**The logic
of historical
questions,
issues,
problems**

Essential Idea: Highly skilled historians have confidence in their ability to figure out the logic of historical issues or problems. They continually work towards logical interpretations and interrelationships among ideas. You can do the same.

The Foundation for Critical Thinking
PO Box 220
Dillon Beach, CA 94929



About the Authors



Dr. Linda Elder is an educational psychologist who has taught both psychology and critical thinking at the college level. She is the President of the Foundation for Critical Thinking and the Executive Director of the Center for Critical Thinking. Dr. Elder has a special interest in the relation of thought and emotion, the cognitive and the affective, and has developed an original theory of the stages of critical thinking development. She has co-authored four books on critical thinking, as well as twenty-one thinkers' guides.



Dr. Meg Gorzycki is a faculty consultant at the Center for Teaching and Faculty Development at San Francisco State University. She taught history, psychology, and ethics and media at the secondary level for 23 years and the junior college levels; she has also taught in Russia and Saudi Arabia. Dr. Gorzycki's research interests include ethical literacy, the pedagogy of higher education, and the history of the Cold War.



Dr. Richard Paul is a major leader in the international critical thinking movement. He is Director of Research at the Center for Critical Thinking, and the Chair of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, author of over 200 articles and seven books on critical thinking. Dr. Paul has given hundreds of workshops on critical thinking and made a series of eight critical thinking video programs for PBS. His views on critical thinking have been canvassed in *New York Times*, *Education Week*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *American Teacher*, *Educational Leadership*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Reader's Digest*.

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