

Thinking like a Historian: A Framework for Teaching and Learning

Amidst the challenges of constructing engaging and meaningful lessons it is easy to lose sight of the larger questions that should also shape history education. What does it mean, for instance, to understand history? What is historical thinking? How can we teach our students to think like historians? These are not new questions. In fact, there is a lot of scholarship on historical thinking and history teaching (1). This literature, though, does not generally show teachers how to teach specific historical topics. For this type of advice, we turn to tools—like the *OAH Magazine of History*—which offer more immediate help through specific articles and lesson plans. These tools, however, rarely connect specific lessons to those that precede or follow, making it difficult to connect individually meaningful lessons to a larger pedagogical mission of teaching historical understanding and thinking. How can we, as teachers, bridge this divide and use the insights from current research on historical thinking to choose or plan history lessons that not only stand on their own, but work over the long run to develop students’ historical literacy?

Although I grappled with these questions for a number of years, I had to confront them head-on when I became project director for a Teaching American History (TAH) program in 2003. Like other TAH grant programs, our partnership proposed to “improve students’ historical literacy by ensuring that their teachers have a firm knowledge of historical events as well as the disciplinary methods of inquiry and analysis through which historians explore the meaning of those past events.” We defined historical literacy as an understanding of what history “is” and what historians “do.” As a result, we concluded that historical literacy requires a degree of fluency in the disciplinary language of history and, more broadly, requires fluency in historical “ways of knowing” (2).

If historical literacy is grounded in an understanding of the disciplinary language and methodologies of history, then our task it seemed was to help teachers become proficient in the language of history and

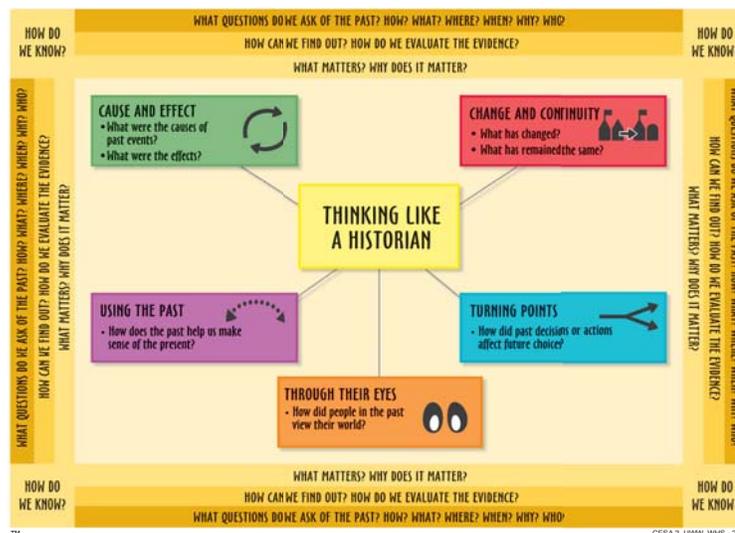
develop effective methods to teach this to their students. We needed to determine what language was used, how we could teach it, and how we could assist teachers in transferring their own historical literacy into the classroom. While this began in response to the challenges that we faced in our particular TAH project, the result became a larger project with relevance far beyond the confines of the TAH program.

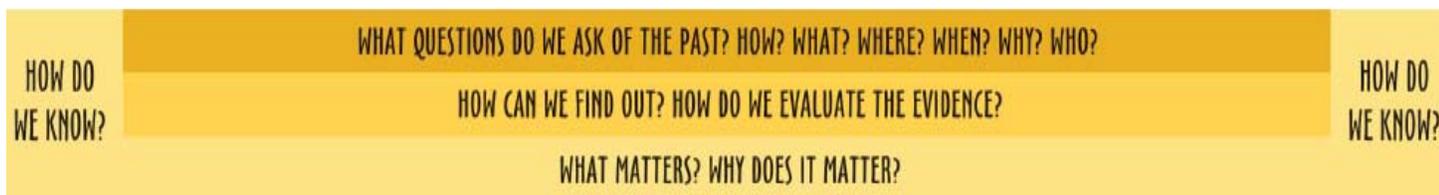
Thinking Like a Historian: Foundations of Historical Literacy

In response to the challenges of teaching historical literacy, we developed “Thinking Like a Historian” (TLH), a method that takes what we do as historians and teachers and makes it more comprehensible, both to ourselves and to our students. TLH encapsulates the key elements of historical literacy in a common language and embeds that language in the discipline’s specific ways of knowing (see full-size chart on page 61). After explaining how the chart represents history as a discipline, I will draw examples from our three years spent developing this framework to suggest ways it can support effective history teaching and learning.

The TLH chart incorporates the key elements of historical literacy identified by professionals and practitioners as they constructed national- and state-level history standards (3). The TLH framework differs from those standards, however, in two significant ways. First, it separates the way historians study the

past—or what might be called the historical process—from the way historians organize their understanding of the past—what might be called historical categories of inquiry. (4) Historical literacy incorporates the historical process (the disciplinary skills and procedures that historians use to study the past) and the historical categories of inquiry (the conceptual patterns that historians use to make sense of the past). These two aspects of historical literacy are embedded in all history standards. In fact, individual history standards typically combine elements of both without distinguishing their relationship to one another. As a consequence, the distinctive qualities and functions of the historical





process and historical analysis are not clear. The TLH framework is unique because it purposefully separates and investigates these crucial aspects of historical literacy.

The relationship between these two aspects of historical literacy is represented on the TLH poster by the outer banner and the inner panel. The outer banner and inner panel are in continuous, dynamic interaction with one another.

Outer Banner: Historical process is the history-specific way of learning about the past: How do we know?

Relationship to inner panel: The outer banner wraps around the entire poster because the historical process of studying the past informs what can be known about the past.

Inner Panel: Historical categories of inquiry are ways of organizing inquiry and analysis of the myriad people, events and ideas of the past. These categories of historical inquiry and analysis describe the comparable patterns that help us make sense of the past.

Relationship to outer banner: The inner panel is relevant to all stages of the historical process because these categories of inquiry are used to formulate the questions we ask of the past and to determine what matters and why it matters as we construct a historical interpretation.

Historical Process—How Do We Know?

The historical process is the procedure that historians use to learn about the past. Historians use this disciplinary process whenever they study the past. In its most condensed form, it consists of three steps. Although it must necessarily look and feel a bit different in the classroom, teaching and learning historical literacy requires the same three steps.

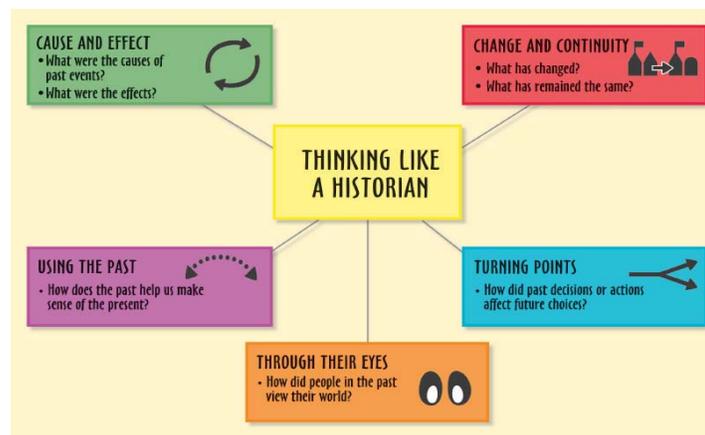
1. Asking questions about the past: History begins with questions about something we want to know or that we are curious about?
2. Gathering sources and evaluating the evidence in those sources: Use primary and secondary sources that may include, but are not limited to, textbooks. 🔍
3. Drawing conclusions, supported by the evidence, that answer the questions: All historical interpretations are not equal. Some are better than others. Some are wrong or misleading. ⚖️

The TLH Teachers' Rubric is useful for self-reflection, evaluating lesson plans and classroom activities connected to each of these steps.

Historical Categories of Inquiry—Patterns That Make Sense of the Past

Historical categories of inquiry are ways of organizing investigations and interpretations of the past. They encapsulate key patterns of historical inquiry, analysis and synthesis. Regardless of the specific time or place, historians' curiosity about the past (questions) and their conclusions about what matters and why (interpretations) are connected to these categories. Teachers can use these historical categories of inquiry to connect the study of one period, place, or event to other periods, places, or events. Pedagogically, this serves two important purposes: First, continuous use of these historical categories provides a way to integrate students' prior knowledge. In this respect, the TLH framework forms

the foundation of a spiraled and sequenced curriculum, even as the "content" topics shift from the American Revolution to the Civil War or from state history to ancient civilizations. Second, continuous use of these historical categories builds a common language that students can use to direct their curiosity and exploration of any historical topic. As students learn to think about the past using these disciplinary patterns, they are freed from the notion that history is a collection of facts. History becomes a way of thinking about the past, rather than details



to be memorized for a test.

The TLH Question Chart and TLH Teachers' Rubric are useful for developing questions and evaluating lesson plans and classroom activities.

🔄 Cause and Effect

Students need to explore the full complexity of the past, recognizing that every event was affected by and affected multiple groups of people and institutions, and that every event is connected to both short-term and long-term developments, some of which were obvious and some of which were unknown or unintended at the time.

🏰 Change and Continuity

Historical chronology differs from other chronologies. Historical chronology is focused on change over time. Historical chronology marks the passage of time and the passage of people and events of that time. Understanding what changed and what stayed the same opens the door to understanding the uneven pace of historical chronologies.

➡ Turning Points

Turning points are characterized by change of such magnitude that the course of individual experiences and societal development begins to follow a new trajectory, shaped by a new set of possibilities and constraints.

Using the Past

Using the past to better understand events in the past and to inform choices in the present makes history relevant and invests history with meaning. Responsibly using the past requires finding the useable past.

Through Their Eyes

This can be the most fascinating and the most misunderstood aspect of historical study. We have a different set of beliefs, expectations, desires, fears, opportunities and experiences than people in the past. What is logical or rational to us may have been impossible, inconceivable, or foolhardy in their world—and vice versa (5). In order to understand why people thought and acted the way they did in the past, we need to see the world as they saw it.

Using the TLH Framework

The following examples come from teachers who developed and piloted this framework over the past three years. Like the TLH framework itself, they are applicable to any historical topic. Most can be used, with some adaptation, at multiple grade levels.

Lesson and Curriculum Planning

Reflecting on Current Practice:

A. Which historical categories of inquiry are you teaching or expecting your students to understand? One way to examine what we do as teachers is to take a TLH inventory of the questions we ask our students.

1. Gather tests and major project assignments for the semester.
2. Cut and rearrange the test and project questions by TLH categories of inquiry.
3. Consider: Am I asking questions in all categories? Does my teaching tend to concentrate in one or another category or does it vary? Is this intentional and is there a supportable reason for this concentration or breadth?
4. Variation: Use the TLH rubric to consider whether the test questions and project assignments require students to think at a higher level.
5. Variation: do a similar exercise for the three steps of the historical process. Are students given regular opportunities to pose questions? Are students expected to use multiple sources and are they given regular opportunities to evaluate different kinds of sources? Are students asked to support their interpretations and explain the significance of their conclusions?

The high school teacher who pioneered this strategy discovered that virtually all of his questions addressed issues of “cause and effect.” He decided to expand the range of questions and, with this, the historical issues that he and his students would study the next time he taught the course.

B. Do lessons and course materials give students an opportunity to develop a broad understanding of the past, including the experiences and perspectives of multiple groups in different places? The TLH Rubric provides guidelines that can be used to evaluate lessons and course materials:

1. Identify the historical processes or categories of inquiry that best match the lesson or materials.

2. Compare the Rubric criteria to the lesson or course materials.

3. Consider: If the lesson goes as planned and if students use the course materials as intended, is it possible or likely that they will understand the topic at a high rubric level?

A middle school teacher who used the TLH Rubric to query the course textbook asked: Whose perspectives are represented in the textbook? (through “whose” eyes?) She discovered that the textbook account of the American Revolution explained how colonial leaders experienced the war, but paid no attention to the experiences of the “common person.” She compiled grade-appropriate excerpts from the diaries of five men, women, and children to create a new lesson that examined the war through the eyes of the common person (6).

Asking Questions

Begin each lesson and unit with a question or set of questions. This level of transparency shows students that history begins with questions. It also gives direction and purpose to classroom activities. Teachers can do this in a number of ways:

1. Define syllabus topics in the form of questions rather than phrases. For example, rather than “The New Imperialism” one might give purpose and direction to this unit by posing the question: “Was American Imperialism New?”
2. Write the unit questions on the board and leave them up throughout the entire unit.
3. Begin lectures or class periods by restating the driving question(s).
4. Write lesson or unit questions on all worksheets so that students connect each activity or assignment with the larger question.

Using Multiple Sources

Omniscient textbooks seem to defy the historical process, which depends on multiple sources and perspectives. However, the textbook can be turned into one of many sources if the lesson or unit is directed by a question, rather than by a need to “cover” the topic:

1. Construct historical questions that are not explicitly answered by the textbook. Then, assign those sections of the textbook that are relevant to the lesson or unit question(s).
2. Use the textbook narrative and bibliography, supplemental or special topic sources (such as the *OAH Magazine of History*), and your own knowledge of the event or time period to identify additional people or sources whose voices or perspectives are essential to understanding the topic and answering the question.
3. Next, use or assign two or more sources in addition to the textbook. These may be a combination of primary and secondary sources. Using more than two sources is preferable. This helps to position a textbook as one of many sources, rather than as the primary or most authoritative source.
4. Variation: this can easily become a lesson on the difficult subject of historiography.

A fourth grade teacher taught both content and historiography by asking his students to read three different sources on the Black Hawk War (7). Students learned about this series of settler-Indian confrontations by using the three sources to construct annotated timelines and maps. When they compared and contrasted the ways in which the three sources reported the same series of events, they learned that different sources tell different stories. Further, they learned that it is the historian’s task to interpret and draw conclusions from multiple sources.

Making Connections Across the Curriculum

Connecting each topic of study to the broader patterns represented by historical categories of inquiry makes it possible to draw connections between separate topics that might otherwise be missed or ignored. It also invests each topic with historical significance and a meaningful place in the larger story of human development. Connections can be built around thematic topics, as in the example below.

A middle school teacher decided to build an immigration theme into her year-long American History course. She wanted students to develop a deeper understanding of immigration in the American experience.

The historical categories of inquiry served as prompts to help her look for meaningful connections to the immigration theme. She decided to explore questions that asked students to “Use the Past.”

This helped her select immigration policy as one of the immigration threads. Students could be asked to use their understanding of past immigration policies and concerns to support informed opinions about current immigration policies.

The unit on mid-nineteenth-century westward expansion was an excellent topic for postholing into the immigration policy theme. However, the textbook did not discuss westward expansion as an immigration issue. It devoted one page to Anglo-Americans in Texas, for example, but paid no attention to the Mexican state to which they emigrated. Here was an opportunity to consider immigration policy from another perspective.

With this purposeful goal in mind, she found an excellent set of resources in the *OAH Magazine of History* that might have escaped her attention or been difficult to integrate into her previous unit on westward expansion (8).

In the Classroom

Asking Questions

Historical thinking means asking questions as well as answering them. Asking good historical questions can be quite challenging. One way to give students practice at historical questioning is to use the TLH Chart Worksheet at the beginning of each new unit or topic. Students can be directed to:

1. Write the historical topic in the center box.
2. Write a question about that topic related to one or more historical categories of inquiry in the appropriate outer boxes.

This exercise could be assigned as an individual or small group activity. Repeated use of this strategy will familiarize students with historical categories of inquiry. Over time, students should begin to think of the past in these meaningful ways, rather than as a collection of information to be memorized and recalled on demand. Completed worksheets can be used in a variety of ways:

1. To discuss and evaluate the quality of historical questions.
2. To discuss the kinds of sources and research needed to answer historical questions.
3. To direct or focus reading in textbooks or other sources.
4. To direct individual or group research projects.
5. Variation: ask students to write one question for one of the historical categories of inquiry on an index card. Use these as enter or exit cards.

The high school teacher who pioneered this strategy sometimes

uses a variant near the end of a unit. She asks students to write exam questions for each of the historical categories of inquiry. The class uses these questions as study guides.

An elementary school teacher uses a less formal strategy. At the beginning of each new unit of study she asks students to brainstorm questions about the topic. This invitation and free flowing discussion engages students in the topic. It creates an opportunity to discuss which questions are most interesting, easily answered, difficult or impossible to answer. This format frees the teacher. The teacher no longer feels compelled to answer every student question.

Modeling Historical Literacy

Regular use of the historical process and historical categories of inquiry will promote students’ historical literacy. This will be most effective if it is transparent.

1. Lectures: Begin lectures by stating or writing the driving question(s). Explicitly distinguish between the supporting evidence and sources you are using and the interpretive conclusions you are making. Explain how the sources support the conclusion and how you evaluate and account for conflicting or challenging sources.
2. Discussions: Prepare discussion questions that will require students to draw information and ideas from the sources (including primary, secondary, lectures, films). During discussions ask students to support interpretive statements with specific evidence or citations from the sources.
3. Document Analysis Worksheets: This type of worksheet can help students collect, evaluate and organize information. These student-created secondary sources should be designed to help students answer a meaningful historical question. Document analysis worksheets should not be an end in and of themselves (9).
4. Historical Process Worksheet: This W-H-W worksheet is a history specific variant of the familiar K-W-L approach. It prompts students to think about their historical knowledge in terms of evidence and significance.

Some teachers post the poster-size TLH Chart on their classroom walls while other teachers prefer to include the smaller version of the charts in student resource packs. This encourages continuous and frequent use of the language of historical literacy. It provides a visual reinforcement and a reminder that empowers both teachers and students to connect their study of any particular historical topic to broader historical understandings.

The following resources are available at the end of the teaching strategy:

- TLH Chart, p. 60.
- TLH Question Chart, p. 61.
- TLH Chart Worksheet, p. 62.
- W-H-W Worksheet, p. 63.

The TLH Teachers Rubric can be downloaded at <<http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/>>

This article is adapted from the TLH instructors’ guide, *Thinking Like a Historian: Rethinking History Instruction*, part 2. Full guide is available at <<http://www.uww.edu/cls/departments/history/teachers/>> or <<http://wisconsinhistory.org/thinkinglikeahistorian/>>.

Endnotes

1. For a sample of the growing literature on this topic see: *Educational Psychology*, 1994; 29:2 issue devoted to historical thinking; Robert Bain, "They Thought the World Was Flat?" Applying the Principles of How People Learn to Teaching High School History," in *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics and Science in the Classroom*, ed. John Bransford and Suzanne Donovan (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2005); Robert Blackley, *Perspectives on Teaching Innovations: Teaching to Think Historically* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1999); Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Frederick D. Drake and Sarah Drake, "A Systematic Approach to Teaching Historical Thinking," *The History Teacher*, August 2003, 36:4; Peter Stearns, *Thinking History* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2004); Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, "What Does it Mean to Think Historically?" in *Perspectives*, January 2007.
2. Ibid. Also see Mary Blenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger, Jill Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986).
3. These elements are derived from three national- and two state-level sets of standards and thinking skills: the five "Historical Thinking Skills" from the National History Standards (National Center for History in the Schools), the thirteen "Habits of Mind" from the National Center for History Education, the ten "Historical Thinking Benchmarks" from the American Historical Association, the eighteen History Standards from the state of Wisconsin Model Academic Standards and the six Historical Literacy goals embedded in the California Social-Science Framework.
4. Clearly the terms "historical process" and "historical categories of inquiry" carry multiple meanings and uses. They are used here to emphasize the distinction between these two different elements of the discipline. This is not meant to imply that there are not other situations in which these terms may be the best shorthand for completely different sets of meanings.
5. Teaching Fellows involved in the development of the TLH framework preferred "through their eyes" to the more commonly used term "historical empathy" because they felt that it does a better job of capturing this distinction.
6. The teacher researched and excerpted from the diaries and journals of George Robert Twelves Hughes, Lieutenant Jabez Fitch (Connecticut Regiment), Mary Fish Silliman, Sarah Wister and Thomas Sullivan.
7. The three sources included an excerpt from the class textbook, a short account of the Black Hawk War prepared by the Wisconsin Historical Society and an excerpt from Black Hawk's *Autobiography*. The *Autobiography* and Wisconsin Historical Society essay can be accessed at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Turning Points website, <<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/>>.
8. Sam W. Haynes, "To Colonize 500 families . . . Catholics, and of good morals': Stephen Austin and the Anglo-American Immigration to Texas, June 4, 1825," *OAH Magazine of History*, November 2005, 57-59.
9. Document analysis worksheets are readily available for different types of primary sources. In addition to those found in the *OAH Magazine of History*, also see the Learning Page, Library of Congress at <<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/>> and Teaching with Documents: Lesson Plans, National Archives and Records Administration at <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/>>.

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