

*The Student's Guide to*  
**HISTORICAL  
THINKING**

Going Beyond Dates, Places, and  
Names to the Core of History

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# 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.

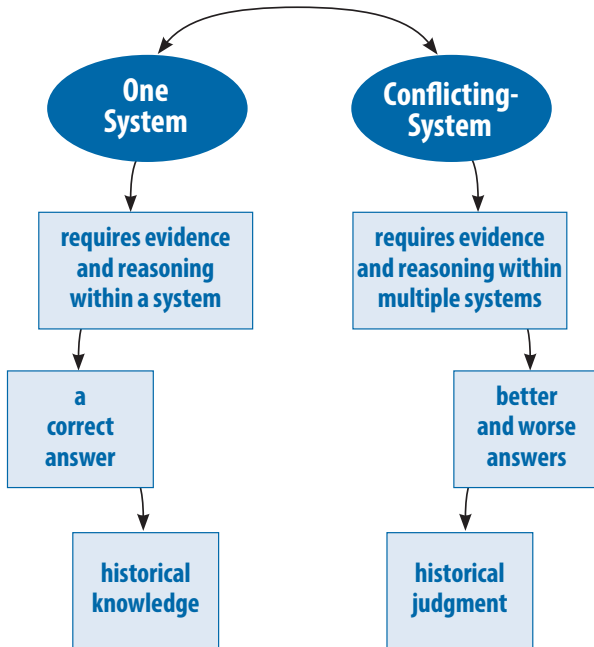
### Leading to a Systematic Way of Questioning.

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.

## 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?

## 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:

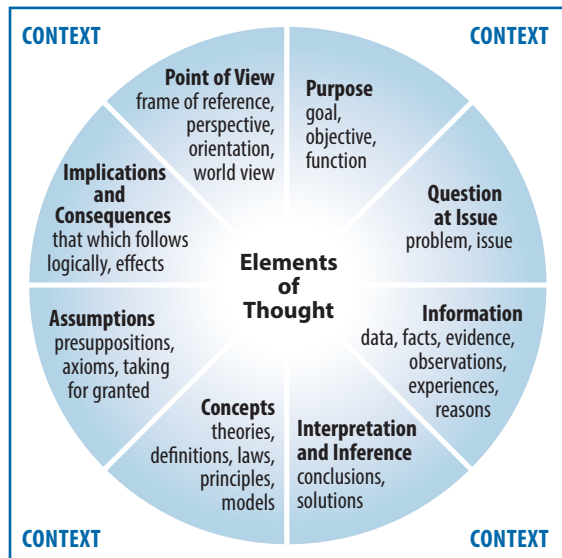
*Everyone thinks; it is our nature to do so. But much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, or prejudiced. Yet the quality of our life and of what we produce, make, or build depends precisely on the quality of our thought. If we want to think well, we must understand 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





## A Checklist for Historical Reasoning

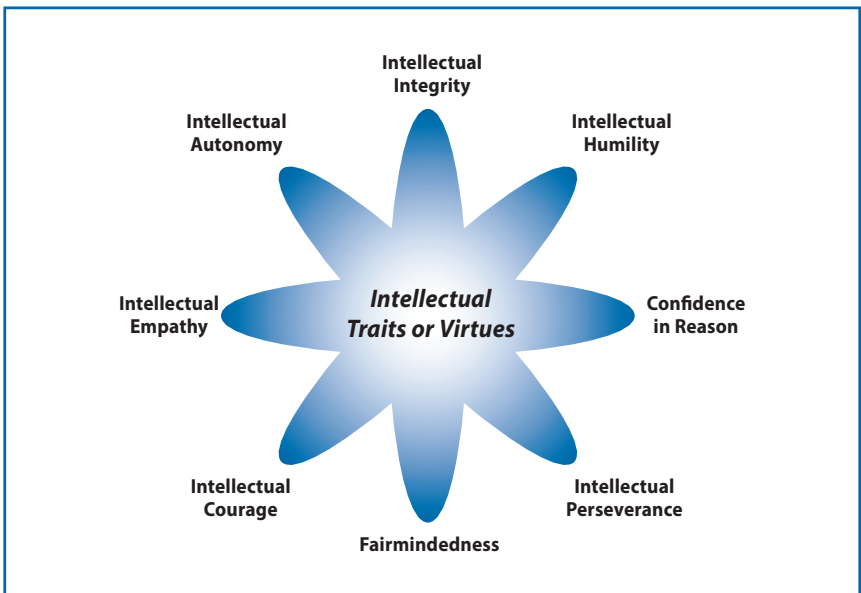
1. All historical reasoning has a **PURPOSE**.
  - Can you state your purpose clearly?
  - What is the objective of your historical reasoning?
  - Does your reasoning stay focused on your historical goal?
  - Is your goal realistic?
  
- 2) All historical reasoning is an attempt to figure something out, 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 considering the insights behind these viewpoints?

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uncritically assume the reasonability of a given group's ideology (because they will not be able to see through that ideology).

## The Fairminded Historian

If we want to think like fairminded historians, it is not enough to develop intellectual skills and abilities. Equally important is our commitment to developing what might be called "intellectual character traits." The most important of these are: intellectual humility, intellectual courage, intellectual integrity, intellectual empathy, intellectual autonomy, intellectual perseverance, confidence in reason, and fairmindedness. The opposing traits are these: intellectual arrogance, intellectual cowardice, intellectual hypocrisy, intellectual narrowmindedness, intellectual conformity, intellectual laziness, distrust of reason, and intellectual unfairness. Let us consider each of these in order. They are crucial to the character of the fairminded historical thinker. They are antidotes to egocentric and sociocentric thinking.



## Assumptions

All reasoning is based on assumptions  
—beliefs we take for granted.

**Primary intellectual standards:** (1) clarity, (2) justifiability, (3) consistency

**Common problems:** (1) unclear, (2) unjustified, (3) contradictory

**Principle:** Reasoning can be only as sound as the assumptions on which it is based.

Skilled Reasoners	Unskilled Reasoners	Critical Reflections
are clear about the assumptions they make.	are often unclear about their assumptions.	Are my assumptions clear to me? Why precisely am I assuming in this situation? Do I clearly understand what my assumptions are based upon?
make assumptions that are reasonable and justifiable, given the situation and evidence.	often make unjustified or unreasonable assumptions.	Do I make assumptions about the future based on just one experience from the past? Can I really justify what I am taking for granted? Are my assumptions justifiable given the evidence?
make assumptions that are consistent with each other.	make assumptions that are contradictory.	Do the assumptions I made in the first part of my paper contradict the assumptions I am making now?
constantly seek to figure out their assumptions.	ignore their assumptions.	What assumptions am I making in this situation? Are they justifiable? Where did I get these assumptions? Do I need to rework or abandon them?