Getting Students to Think Like Historians
By Jeffery D. Nokes

It isn't too surprising that students have no inkling about the work of historians. Their experience in history classrooms doesn't look anything like an hour in the life of a historian. And in this regard, history is different than other subjects. In most classrooms, particularly secondary classrooms, students experience a taste of the work of practicing professionals. In science, students do labs, working with chemicals, thermometers, beakers, microscopes, and other scientific equipment. In math, students work with numbers to develop proofs and solve math-based problems, reasoning as a mathematician. In gym class, they compete in athletic contests, with the same equipment, structure, and rules that professionals follow. In English, they write prose or poetry. In woodshop, they employ the tools of professionals to build useful items.

However, in history class, students typically read textbooks, listen to lectures, or watch documentary videos—activities that are nothing like the labors of historians. In no other content area is the work of students more different than the work of practicing professionals than in history classrooms.

Disparate Teaching Approaches

Let's jump into a hypothetical history classroom for a moment to get a glimpse of what I am talking about. Mr. Sampson is a highly respected teacher whose students do very well on the Advanced Placement United States history exam every year. He is teaching a lesson on the causes of World War I. "I want to introduce you to a trick for remembering the causes of World War I," he begins. "Think of the long range causes as the MAIN causes of the war. The word MAIN will help you remember them." He continues lecturing about M, militarism; A, alliances; I, imperialism; and N, nationalism. "I've prepared a chart for you to complete as you read your textbook about the causes of the war. In the row with the M, you'll list examples of militarism that you find in the chapter. In the A, I, and N rows you will list examples of alliances, imperialism, and nationalism."

Mr. Sampson, an experienced teacher, has found a successful way to help students manage information from both his lecture and the textbook, increasing the likelihood that students will remember these facts on the AP test in a few months. From one perspective, Mr. Sampson has taught a great lesson.
However, to be honest, Mr. Sampson's lesson did not promote historical thinking but merely helped students manage and remember information. His content may be history, but the process of using a trick to aid memory would be equally suited for learning any list of facts related to any content area. This type of history instruction revolves around information management—lectures, textbooks, or documentary videos that convey information. Students record information in outlines or on worksheets. Activities provide opportunities to review information. Study sessions are a chance to rehearse information with peers. And dreaded history tests require students to demonstrate their ability to remember the information that the teacher has chosen to assess. Mr. Sampson's MAIN trick will help students remember information about the causes of the war for a month or two or maybe even a year, but it does little to foster historian-like thinking.

Now let's step into another hypothetical classroom. Mrs. Gomez's class also studies the events leading up to World War I. "Today we are going to explore the concept of imperialism, one of the causes of war," she begins. She defines imperialism for the class and gives examples of European empires of the early 20th century. Changing gears, she poses a question: "How did European nations justify imperialism?" She explains, "This is a question that a historian might consider. Today we'll look at a number of documents to try to understand the debate over imperialism. Did Americans feel justified in getting caught up in imperialistic energy?"

Projecting an image of a political cartoon on the screen, she continues. "The first document that we'll look at is a political cartoon that I found in an online archive." Mrs. Gomez's lesson continues with students looking at political cartoons, letters, treaties, and other documents from the early 1900s, each presenting a different view of imperialism. Under Mrs. Gomez's guidance, the students consider each document's source, intended audience, purpose, and historical context. She promotes a healthy skepticism as students question the validity of each piece of evidence. In the end, students debate the legitimacy of colonial claims of helping colonies. They also debate the reliability of the different, sometimes conflicting, pieces of evidence.

Mrs. Gomez's lesson is fundamentally different than Mr. Sampson's. In her class, students engage with the evidence that historians employ. They employ the same cognitive tools—ways of thinking about evidence—that historians use. And their purpose is to answer the kinds of questions that historians would debate. Students are not simply working to remember the history others produced, but are discovering it for themselves.
Now, consider which skill set is most needed in our modern world: the ability to remember the causes of World War I, or the ability to read like a historian—evaluating each source, remaining skeptical of information, and cross-checking facts with additional evidence—coupled with a deep understanding of imperialism.

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Jeffery D. Nokes is an assistant professor in the history department at Brigham Young University and the author of the recently released book, *Building Students' Historical Literacies: Learning to Read and Reason with Historical Texts and Evidence*. 