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# Learning to Think and Read Like a Historian

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This tutorial will explain the value of studying history and show how learning to think and read like a historian will serve you well in all of your college courses and in your future life as a working person and an educated citizen. In this tutorial, you will learn the following:

- Understand the intellectual, social, and professional benefits of studying history
- Learn how to evaluate information and sources
- Understand and gain experience in historical thinking skills

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## Why Study History?

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At its heart, history is a discipline that seeks to answer a fundamental question: “How did the world, and our place in it, get to be the way they are?” Historians seek to answer that question primarily by looking at the past to learn about how contemporary human concepts and institutions—everything from gender, the family, race, religion, politics, science, government, war, and economic systems—have developed and changed over time. By studying their findings, and learning something about how to ask and answer historical questions yourself, you will gain a greater understanding of humanity, society, and contemporary politics.

In elementary school and high school, history education tends to emphasize “what happened.” In college, the larger purpose of history classes is to teach students to understand the ideas and circumstances that shaped the experiences and actions of the people who lived before us. Each story from the past reveals something about how people lived and tried to make sense of their lives in a world that was vastly different from ours.

By studying cultures and values that are foreign to us, we can gain new insight about how various human groups interacted with one another and the world around them in different ways. We can also see how, despite their vast differences from us and from one another, people in the past

grappled with some of the same issues that we still face, such as how to conduct their relationships, settle conflicts, organize their societies, and allocate resources. Thus, learning about the past provides us with examples of humans' tragic limitations and inspiring capabilities and broadens our understanding of and appreciation for both human nature and human diversity. History establishes our place in the long continuity of humanity. By teaching us to look at the world through the eyes of others, studying history affirms the idea that multiple perspectives and experiences can be equally valid and has the potential to foster the kind of tolerance, respect, and kindness we need in our increasingly diverse society and interdependent world.

While much of the value in history comes from what it tells us about our human past, it is also critically important for making sense of the present. Studying history sheds light on the sources on our contemporary institutions, ideas, customs, values, and dilemmas. Knowledge about the past can help us understand and appreciate the ways in which science, technology, and new ideas about individualism, personal freedom, and democracy have provided us with comforts and opportunities that our ancestors could only have dreamed about. History also proves that our world's current problems have roots that go back decades, even centuries. As a document created by the National Center for History in the Schools so neatly expressed, "History is the 'precondition of political intelligence.' . . . It allows us to undertake sensible inquiry into the political, social, or moral issues that trouble us . . . [and] achieve the informed, discriminating citizenship essential to democratic government."<sup>1</sup>

As the past creates the present, it also shapes everything that is still to come. By teaching us that societies and institutions can change, that people have not always been as they are now, and that long-standing conflicts can sometimes be resolved, history can provide guidance for the future. Historical inquiry and understanding cannot tell us precisely *what* we should do to make constructive change in the world, but, as the historian Peter Stearns has written, it "offers a storehouse of information about how people and societies behave . . . and focuses attention on the complex processes of social change, including the factors that are causing change around us today."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the philosophical reasons for studying history, the discipline also provides us with a wide variety of practical and even marketable skills. Most students who take history courses in college will not become historians, but those who learn from and do well in those courses will have acquired a broad perspective that makes them flexible and also hones their abilities to think, read, and write critically, comparatively, and analytically. Peter Stearns suggests that even though history study does not lead students to a particular job slot, "it prepares them for the long haul in their careers" by encouraging qualities that promote "adaptation and advancement beyond

entry-level employment.”<sup>3</sup> Learning to think and read like a historian, then, not only is intellectually interesting and satisfying but also is a process that nurtures our humanity, enhances our ability to function as productive and responsible citizens of the world, and develops our capacity to succeed in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

## What Does It Mean to Think and Read Like a Historian?

As an academic discipline, history is as much about the methods employed to learn about the past as it is about what happened. Because nobody can travel back in time to answer questions about the past, historians and history students must work to reconstruct it by interpreting the evidence our predecessors have left behind, making use of our existing historical knowledge about the period under investigation, and our informed imaginations to fill in the gaps. At its best, history is, like detective work, a combination of both science and art. To do it well requires a particular set of skills that your history instructors will help you to learn, practice, and internalize. These skills consist of specific ways of reading and thinking about and analyzing the past that will also improve the critical thinking skills that you are honing in college.

### Reading Like a Historian

At this point, you might well be wondering what it means to read like a historian. How can one type of reading differ from another? Don't historians read just like everyone else? In fact, most historians probably do not read just like everyone else. Because they have been trained to examine and evaluate evidence critically, most historians read texts of all kinds with a particular set of questions in mind. Rather than accepting texts at face value, historians read between the lines to understand where a document came from, how its origins affected its content, and whether or not it is trustworthy.

Reading like a historian is valuable in many circumstances, especially now that we are constantly bombarded with information on the Internet and television and in printed publications of all kinds. In our age of new technologies, when anyone can “publish” or broadcast their ideas, the ability to judge the quality and credibility of information is more important than ever. Learning how to read like a historian will not only help you in your history classes, it will also make you an informed and discriminating consumer and citizen who can detect and see through the communications broadcast by unscrupulous scammers, calculating political pundits, and others who bank on their audience's gullibility.

## Thinking Like a Historian

History instructors, like faculty members in other disciplines, place a high value on critical thinking skills. Unlike instructors in other fields, however, historians' work focuses specifically on figuring out what happened in the past, which requires understanding and evaluating change and continuity over time, making appropriate use of historical evidence in answering questions, and developing coherent interpretations and arguments about how and why things occurred. For that reason they teach a slightly modified set of critical thinking skills that are applicable to the types of research and writing they perform. These historical thinking skills consist of four overlapping categories: chronological reasoning, comparison and contextualization, crafting historical arguments from historical evidence, and historical interpretation and synthesis. But although historians use these skills to make sense of the past, their value (as with reading like a historian) is not limited to the field of history. On the contrary, since every area of study has its own history, historical thinking skills will be useful in every course you take in college, and in whatever endeavors you pursue after you graduate.

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## Thinking and Reading Like a Historian

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Now that you know what it means to read and think like a historian, you are ready to try out historical thinking and reading skills yourself. This section of the tutorial will explain four categories of historical thinking skills and guide you through the process of implementing and practicing each one.

### Skill 1: Chronological Reasoning

Chronological reasoning refers to historians' methods for thinking logically about how and why the world changes—or sometimes stays the same—over time. Researchers in all fields of study make arguments based on evidence, but historians are uniquely concerned about the past and its relationship to the present. Chronological reasoning can be broken down into three subskills: causation, which investigates why things change; patterns of change and continuity, which focuses on questions about how the world is different now than it has been in the past, and how and why some of its aspects have seen little change over long periods of time; and periodization, which explores how historians simplify the long and complicated past by breaking it into smaller eras.

**HISTORICAL CAUSATION**

Causation has to do with explanations about how or why changes take place in history. Sometimes there is an obvious connection between an event and its consequences, but more frequently even simple-seeming events are more complicated. Most examples of historical causation involve multiple causes and effects. Events and processes often result from developments in many realms, including social, political, economic, and cultural. Historians cannot test these in laboratories the way scientists or social scientists can, but they can use historical evidence and reasoning to determine which of these are probable causes and effects. Historical causation also involves large processes, multiple causes, unintended consequences, and contingency, as this chart describes:

**Table 1 Historical Causation**

Large Processes	Many changes take place through major processes that are larger than any one person and occur over a long period of time. Industrialization, for example, is a large set of changes resulting from the actions of countless different individuals that became an underlying cause of many other developments.
Multiple Causes	Most events occur due to a combination of factors, not just one. The protests of the 1960s in many places around the world, for example, had multiple causes, including movements for civil rights and decolonization, the rise of the New Left, the Vietnam War, and the postwar baby boom that produced a new youth culture.
Unintended Consequences	Many changes take place accidentally. Factory work was often more monotonous than farmwork or craft work had been, creating demand for stimulants, which was met by the importation of coffee and tea. Trade in coffee and tea provided great wealth for merchants, and transformed the economies and sometimes the political structures of areas where these products were grown. For example, British demand for tea grown in China was one of the main causes of the Opium Wars, in which the British government used military force to keep China open to British merchants trading opium grown in the British colonies for Chinese tea.
Contingency	Events are not preordained, and history could have turned out differently. This is known as contingency. Because we read major events in history already knowing their outcome, we have a tendency to think they were bound to happen, but this is not the case. For example, the initial Spanish conquest of the Incas was very precarious and early on the Spanish might have been defeated.

You can begin to develop the skill of determining causation by asking yourself, whenever some significant change in history is described, what reasons explain the development? If the answer seems simple, keep digging

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because there is bound to be a more complicated and longer-term explanation. Let's imagine, for example, that you have been asked to read the relevant chapter of your textbook to identify the causes of Christopher Columbus's journeys of exploration to the New World. Upon first look, you find that the most obvious and immediate cause was that Columbus, an experienced mapmaker and seaman and a devout Christian who saw himself as a divine agent, believed he could find a direct ocean trading route to Asia and set out to do so.

A deeper investigation quickly reveals a much more complicated story, however. Reading further in the chapter, you discover that the fifteenth-century Renaissance, which led Europeans to reclaim the classical Greco-Roman tradition, led to a greater interest in individualism and worldly concerns such as commercial development. This cultural change contributed to Europeans' adoption of Eastern navigational technologies such as the magnetic compass and astrolabe, which made ocean exploration possible. The Renaissance also led to increased economic competition among Europe's many separate, independent, and highly competitive states, which also contributed to Columbus's actions. A Genoan from the Italian peninsula, Columbus had ambitions to circumvent the city-state of Venice's domination of eastward trade. Seeking to take advantage of the competitive atmosphere, Columbus first asked Portugal to fund his voyages in 1483. When they refused, he turned to the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella in 1486. They also rejected Columbus's request but reversed their decision and decided to provide him with financial backing in 1492. They did so because in part because they had recently succeeded in driving the Muslims out of the Iberian Peninsula and wanted to find a new source of religious converts. They also hoped Columbus's voyages might help to expand their political influence, make them wealthy, and increase their status relative to Portugal and the other European states.

Columbus's journeys, you will conclude, were caused not only by his own interests and ambitions but also by the Renaissance, Europeans' desire for Asian goods, political fragmentation and economic competition among European states, Christians' religious ambitions, and numerous other factors.

#### **PATTERNS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

Historians are interested in both historical changes and persisting patterns, or "continuities." Change is easier to see: when one country conquers another, that event usually becomes part of the historical record. But some things stay more or less the same for long periods of time. Because continuity (such as a network of trade that remains in existence or a religion that remains influential for hundreds of years) is less dramatic than change, and less apt to be purposefully documented, it can be harder to spot.

What counts as continuity depends on the scale of time you are considering. If you were focusing on the last hundred years, for example, you would say that the world's dependence on fossil fuels had been continuous for that period. But in a study of the period 1000–2000, humans' use of coal, oil, and gas for energy would constitute a major change that occurred at the end of the 1800s.

When historians talk about continuity, they are not implying that a particular pattern applied to everyone in the world or even in a particular country or region. Nor are they claiming that absolutely nothing changed in the pattern they're describing. For example, agricultural production has been continuous for thousands of years. But there are exceptions to this broad statement: on the one hand, some people have continued to be foragers; on the other hand, methods of farming have changed substantially with technology. So the continuity of agriculture is a generalization but not a completely unchanging pattern or a pattern that applies to everyone on the planet.

You can develop the skill of identifying continuities by looking for places in your text where the authors directly indicate that a historical pattern persisted over time and explain *why* that pattern persisted. But even when an author focuses on change in history, you can still find continuity by inference, since few things ever change completely. When the text describes a new development, ask yourself what *didn't* change and why. It might be helpful, as you are trying to identify patterns of continuity in a given era, to do the following:

- Draw a timeline to help conceptualize the era and events you will talk about.
- Identify what the situation was at the beginning of the era—a baseline.
- Identify what the situation was at the end of the era—a finish line.
- Try to explain the process of change—how and why did it happen?

### PERIODIZATION

The historical thinking skill known as periodization, which refers to the ways that historians break the past into separate periods of time, is closely related to the identification of patterns of change and continuity. Historians look at patterns of change and continuity to identify major turning points—places where the world looked very different *before* some event than it did *after*—to decide how to break the past into chunks. They then give a label to each period to convey the key characteristics and developments of that era.

As you work to develop the skill of periodization, pay attention to the labels your textbook uses to distinguish the various periods you are reading about. Sometimes the chapters themselves contain a period

label, which shows what the authors have decided is the main story for that era. Some textbooks, for example, name the period 1775–1825 the “Age of Revolution,” recognizing that political revolutions took place in the United States, France, Haiti, and many South American countries during this period. Others speak about the period from 1750–1900 as the age of the Industrial Revolution, conceptualizing the process of industrialization that took place in many parts of the world as a coherent historical period.

To practice the skill of periodization, imagine that you have been asked to write an essay evaluating the idea that World War II, which ended in 1945, represents a major turning point in world history and that post-1945 represents a new historical period we might call the “Global Era.” Here, again, you might make use of a chart that examines change and continuity on the world stage since 1945 to evaluate whether global integration in the post-1945 period is quantitatively and qualitatively different from global integration before 1945. Your chart might look something like this:

**Table 2 Globalization: Change and Continuity since 1945**

	Before 1945	Since 1945
Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nations are autonomous economic units that limit international trade, investment, and migration, and favor high tariffs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creation of World Bank, International Monetary Fund encourage free trade and high levels of international investment</li> <li>Corporations become multinational operations hiring, buying, and selling throughout the world.</li> </ul>
Geopolitics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Britain, France, Germany are major European powers with extensive colonies in Africa, Asia, Middle East</li> <li>United States is major power with economic/political power over Caribbean, Philippines, Central America.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>U.S. global presence expands dramatically through its wealth, use of force in some regions, and “soft power”</li> <li>Soviet Union is one of two global superpowers until 1989 when United States becomes leader of a unilateral world.</li> </ul>
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nationalism and traditions make cultures distinctive; major religions are transregional and influential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Global capitalism and consumption promote global culture and modernity</li> <li>Religious pluralism crosses national borders and presents choices</li> <li>Resurgence of religious fundamentalism causes global conflicts</li> </ul>

Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White supremacist and anti-Semitic ideologies and policies are widespread and influential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Human rights” becomes an international concern/priority</li> <li>• Liberation struggles emerge for women, black, Asian, and other nonwhite populations</li> </ul>
Communications/ Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International travel is slow and expensive</li> <li>• Communications also slow and expensive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Air travel makes global migration, travel, and contact much easier and more common</li> <li>• Communications revolution (TV, satellite, Internet) ease communication and promote common values and interests</li> </ul>

Based on a chart or table like this one, you would confirm that 1945 was, in many ways, a true turning point in world history and that there are many good reasons for conceptualizing the postwar era as a distinct historical period.

### Skill 2: Comparison and Contextualization

The second category of historical thinking skills is concerned with the ways historians make sense of the past by placing the particulars of a historical event or development into some larger framework. For example, historians understand historical events and processes by comparing them to related events and processes to see how they are similar and/or different. In addition, historians recognize that historical evidence, including artifacts, photographs, and speeches, can only be adequately understood by knowing something about their historical context, which is the time and place when they came into existence.

#### COMPARISON

Comparisons help historians understand how a development in the past was similar to or different from another development: the comparison allows them to determine what was distinctive and, therefore, historically significant. For example, scholars have concluded that in the last decades of the nineteenth century the countries of Western Europe shared key features. First, they adopted constitutions of some sort that generally extended voting rights to a larger share of the male population and mass politics emerged. Second, pragmatic leaders expanded the social responsibilities of the government, offering education and some public health benefits, recognizing that these would make people more loyal to their governments. Third, the countries all saw growing popular nationalism, encouraged by new symbols and rituals, such as national holidays, commemorative monuments, and

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flags. Other scholars have extended this analysis to include developments in other countries, and to consider events like the founding of the Confederate States of America in the American South during the Civil War as another example of nineteenth-century nationalism. Through the tool of comparison, we can see how leaders and ordinary people in different regions handled common problems in unique ways.

To practice this skill, imagine that you have been asked to compare and contrast the revolutions in politics that took place in the late 1700s and early 1800s in the British North American colonies, in France, and in Haiti, and to consider whether it is appropriate to group these revolutions together under a heading like the “Age of Revolution.” In this case, you might examine these questions by compiling a list or a table that compares the causes, goals, and outcomes of the three events to form your own conclusions about the aptness of grouping these three together. Your compilation might look something like this:

**Table 3 American, French, and Haitian Revolutions Compared**

Revolution	Causes	Goals	Outcomes
American Revolution (1775–1783)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enlightenment ideas</li> <li>• Perceived attacks by Britain on colonial autonomy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preserve traditional colonial liberties</li> <li>• Popular sovereignty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main beneficiaries are middle-class white men</li> <li>• No significant social revolution</li> </ul>
French Revolution (1789–1815)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enlightenment ideas</li> <li>• Influence of American Revolution</li> <li>• Social conflicts between nobility and monarchy, middle class and aristocracy, and oppression of urban poor and peasantry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radical social and political transformation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main beneficiaries are middle-class white men</li> <li>• Efforts to spread revolution through violence and conquest</li> </ul>
Haitian Revolution (1791–1804)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enlightenment ideas</li> <li>• Influence of other revolutions</li> <li>• Slave uprising becomes larger civil war/conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radical social/political transformation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only successful slave revolt in world history</li> <li>• Inspires other slave revolts</li> <li>• Declaration of racial equality</li> <li>• Greater social conservatism among fearful and horrified whites</li> </ul>

By organizing information about the three revolutions in this way, it is easy to see how they were similar to and different from one another. Based on this information, you would conclude that although Enlightenment ideas about liberty and equality contributed to sparking these revolutions, they unfolded in substantially different ways and resulted in different outcomes.

### CONTEXTUALIZATION

Just as historical events make more sense when they are studied alongside similar events, any event makes more sense when it is examined in *context*. Context refers to the historical circumstances or setting surrounding a particular event. Historians look for major developments in any era to help determine context. They typically think in terms of two levels of context: an immediate (or short-term) context and a broad (or long-term) context.

The easiest way to begin thinking about context is to figure out when a particular event took place or when a document was created. Then read your textbook to discover the major developments of the era, while keeping questions about causation in mind. Ask yourself, “How might these larger events have shaped this event or document?”

For example, most Americans know the story of Rosa Parks, a seamstress who refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man and whose arrest sparked the 1955–1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott. Parks’s act—and the resulting boycott—are often seen as the triggering event of the civil rights movement in the United States. But to understand Parks’s action, and the reason it had such dramatic effects in 1955, you need to look at the immediate context of civil rights activism in the United States in the twentieth century and the broader context of antiracist and anticolonialist struggles in the world. Exploring the historical context shows that Parks was not simply a tired seamstress who couldn’t bear to walk to the back of the bus but a seasoned activist who had long experience working for civil rights through organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and training in civil disobedience through organizations such as the Highlander Folk School. And not only was the civil rights movement in the United States under way long before Parks refused to give up her seat, it influenced and was influenced by older and larger struggles to fight white supremacy and colonial rule in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Contextualization, like causation, helps to explain why events or developments take place and often reveals that things are not as simple as they might seem.

### Skill 3: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence

The third historical thinking skill focuses on using evidence to make historical arguments. The word *argument* reminds us that any attempt to explain

the past requires interpretation, since our understanding of the past is limited. Arguing means making a logical—rather than emotional—case for your interpretation of a particular historical question or controversy. To be convincing, your interpretation has to include supporting evidence. This evidence consists of information you have gathered from primary sources, which are the materials produced during the period being studied, as well as from existing historical studies, which are called secondary sources.

### HISTORICAL ARGUMENTATION

Historians' job is to make arguments about what life was like in the past, or why things changed and why those changes matter. Their arguments are informed by their deep knowledge about the subject and careful reading of primary and secondary sources. But because evidence from the past is often incomplete or difficult to understand, historians inevitably make inferences to fill the gaps in their knowledge. Not all historians make the same inferences, so there are a variety of interpretations of most historical events.

For example, all scholars agree that slavery was a widespread human practice that persisted over many centuries and in many cultures. They recognize that slavery was closely linked to warfare and capture but that it came in many forms, depending on the geographical, cultural, and historical context. They also agree that the origins of Atlantic slavery lay in the Mediterranean world and the growing importance of sugar cultivation after 1450. Initially, Slavic-speaking people from the areas surrounding the Black Sea made up most of the slave labor force on Mediterranean sugar plantations, but after the Ottoman Turks seized Constantinople and cut off the supply of Slavic slaves, Europeans had to turn elsewhere. By the time sugar, tobacco, and cotton plantations became established in the New World, Portuguese traders had already begun to trade in West African slaves.

Where historians disagree is on the question of the relationship between slavery and European racism. Historian David Brion Davis has argued that “racial stereotypes were transmitted along with black slavery itself, from Muslims to Christians.”<sup>5</sup> He suggests that Muslims had drawn slaves from sub-Saharan Africa for many centuries and, in the process, developed a form of racism. Other scholars locate the origins of racism in European culture. Historian Audrey Smedley argues that the English developed race-based stereotypes through their nation's conquest of Ireland. When English people established sugar plantations in the West Indies, she suggests, they transferred their view of the Irish as “rude, beastly, ignorant, cruel, and unruly infidels” to the Africans they enslaved.<sup>6</sup> Still others have taken slightly different positions on the question of whether racism led to black slavery or emerged from it.

To develop this historical thinking skill, ask yourself as you're reading your textbook how historians think they know what they know about a

particular event. What evidence do they provide? Does their language suggest certainty or hesitancy about their interpretation? Do they offer alternative explanations?

#### APPROPRIATE USE OF RELEVANT HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Historians make arguments about the past based on primary-source evidence, which was produced in the era under investigation. In contrast, a secondary source is something about the era under investigation created after the fact. The narrative sections of the textbook, for example, are secondary sources, as are most published history works, biographies, and encyclopedias. Sometimes a source can be both primary and secondary. For example, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's history of World War II is a primary source, because he was directly involved in some of the events he describes. It is also a secondary source, because he uses a variety of historical sources to tell the story of events during the war in which he was not directly involved.

In the last few decades, historians have moved beyond relying exclusively on written primary sources by turning to visual sources—paintings, photographs, architecture, artifacts, and so on—and evidence from other fields of knowledge. They even use evidence contained within the human body, such as DNA. For example, by using scientific and medical information, historians have come to see the historical role of diseases, such as the Black Death, which killed about one-third of the European population over just a few years in the middle of the fourteenth century.

In assessing primary sources, you need to begin with a careful examination of the source itself. But understanding evidence requires you to draw upon all of your skills of reading like a historian. Primary sources are creations from a particular time and place, so you also have to consider the information that you know or can find out about the broader conditions in which the source was created—that is, the *context* of the source. Primary sources are created by a specific individual or group, called the *maker*, or in the case of written sources, the *author*. Even if they are eyewitnesses, people construct different accounts of the same event, which are shaped by their attitudes, ideas, and beliefs, often termed their *perspective* or *point of view*. Primary sources are also often created for someone else, so determining the purpose and intended audience of a source is essential to your understanding of it.

#### Skill 4: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis

Since history requires making inferences about the past, it's inevitable that different scholars will come to different conclusions. It can be very helpful then to study different historical interpretations of a particular event or

movement over time, as interpretations often change. The final skill component—synthesis—is the culminating historical thinking skill because it requires you to integrate all the other skills in creating your own argument.

### INTERPRETATION

Historians interpret both primary and secondary sources, evaluating points of view and considering context to create their own interpretations. Your textbook will occasionally refer to areas of study in which historical interpretations have changed dramatically over time. Interpretations of Christopher Columbus by historians of the 1890s, for example, called him a “pioneer of progress and enlightenment.” However, by the 1990s, some historians saw Columbus as a “perpetrator of genocide.” Similarly, in the past, historians emphasized the ways in which oppressive systems victimized subordinate groups, but more recent scholarship has aimed to reconcile the ways in which subordinated people—slaves, workers, peasants, women—have been able to act in their own interests despite the oppressive conditions they endured. You can watch for these discussions as you read your text and learn more about historical debates over the course of the term.

As you become more familiar with the process of historical interpretation, you can begin to analyze different historical interpretations yourself and to identify patterns of change and continuity within historians’ works. Analyzing secondary sources shares some things in common with analyzing primary sources. As with primary sources, it is important to become familiar with the origins of a secondary source before you jump into it. What can you find out about the background and credentials of the historian who wrote it? Why and when did he or she write it? Think about the social, generational, political, geographic, and cultural factors that might have influenced the author’s viewpoint and shaped (or distorted) his or her conclusions. Consider the period during which the piece was written. If, for example, it is a book by an American scholar about the history of slavery, think about whether it was written before, during, or after the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In many cases, knowing something about a historian’s context can help you understand his or her argument better—in the same way that understanding the context of the author of a primary source helps you understand the primary source. Sometimes this information can help you identify the prejudices or limitations of a particular interpretation.

### SYNTHESIS

Synthesis is a culminating skill that reflects your ability to make persuasive arguments of your own based on evidence. It draws on all the other histor-

ical thinking skills—causation, continuity and change, periodization, comparison, contextualization, interpretation, historical argumentation, and appropriate use of historical evidence—and involves two other elements. The first element is the ability to draw on evidence outside the field of history. This might come from the social sciences such as archeology, anthropology, economics, or sociology, or it might come from the humanities, such as art history or literary studies, or it might come from the natural sciences such as biology or chemistry. The second element is the ability to apply insights from historical evidence to a new setting. This is a creative form of comparison. You might link some moment in the past to a contemporary issue, such as connecting growing ethnic diversity in Western countries to their long history of colonialism and imperialism. In doing so, you would be using the past to shed light on the present. You will have taken a major step in historical thinking, as making connections is a key part of what historians do.

Your textbook itself is an excellent example of historical synthesis. Historians who write textbooks do so by consulting vast numbers of secondary sources, interpreting the ways they fit together, and combining them to produce a comprehensive and synthetic work. As you read your book over the course of the term, notice the ways that the authors organize their writing around the historical thinking skills discussed above. Many chapters begin with a question or questions about *causation* or *change over time* that the author or authors answer by making a *historical argument* using many types of *relevant historical evidence* from primary and secondary sources, some of which they borrow from other fields such as sociology, biology, economics, or art history. All textbook authors organize their textbooks by adopting a *periodization* of the events they present; *compare* developments in one region of the world to those in another; and *contextualize* events and evidence and *interpret* their larger historical impact and significance.

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## Conclusion

As you now know history is more than just a long list of facts, more than the story of “what happened” in the past, and more than the combination of facts and narratives presented in your textbook. You might find it reassuring to learn that history is so much more complex than you previously thought, or you might find it daunting. Surely it is more challenging to wrestle with analyzing sources, considering change and continuity, asking questions about causation and periodization, and comparing and synthesizing interpretations than it is to memorize lists of names and dates and events. But the challenges inherent in learning history are also what make it interesting and rewarding. It is far more satisfying to discuss and debate

questions about meaning, significance, and interpretation than it is to rattle off information about wars and empires or popes and presidents. Nevertheless, the rewards that come with the work of historical thinking are more than just an intellectual exercise. Whether you are taking a college history course because you love history or because you are meeting a requirement, your engagement with the course material and the methods used by historians to understand and explain the past have the potential to enhance your understanding of yourself and your world, expand your analytical capabilities, and, by doing so, add to your inventory of marketable professional skills.

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## Notes

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1. National Center for History in the Schools, "Significance of History for the Education Citizen," UCLA Department of History, accessed June 30, 2015, from <http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/history-standards/preface/significance-of-history-for-the-educated-citizen>.
2. Peter N. Stearns, "Why Study History?" American Historical Association, [https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/archives/why-study-history-\(1998\)](https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/archives/why-study-history-(1998)).
3. Ibid.
4. David Brion Davis, *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 13.
5. Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).