

# Historical Literacy

*Historical Literacy*

Jeffery D Nokes

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With the inclusion of “historical literacy” in the Common Core State Standards initiative, it is essential that there is a generally accepted understanding of the term. This paper briefly reviews landmark studies and current research on the concept of “historical literacy” in order to provide a comprehensive definition.

1. Historical literacy for secondary and elementary students suggests the ability to negotiate and create the types of texts that historians use and produce. Students’ historical literacy allows them to construct interpretations of the past with increasing sophistication. (Draper, Broomhead, Jensen, Nokes, & Siebert, 2010; Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).
2. Historical “texts” include all resources and evidence historians and archeologists use to research the past, such as primary sources, government documents, oral histories, artifacts, photographs, movies, numerical data, artwork, music, fashions, secondary sources produced by other historians, etc. Additionally, historical texts include the resources that historians produce such as charts, maps, diagrams, monographs, documentary videos, journal articles, web sites, textbooks, etc. Further, historical texts include texts produced by amateur historians, such as historical fiction, movies set in historical time periods, popular books and magazine articles, etc. (Nokes, 2010b). Historical literacy is the ability to work effectively with historical texts.
3. Historical literacy does not require an encyclopedic knowledge of historical facts from every era or global location (Wineburg, 2004). Such breadth of knowledge is not possessed by historians and should not be the ultimate aim of history instruction. Instead historical literacy implies the possession of the skill set necessary to read, reason, write, and learn with historical evidence. Factual and conceptual knowledge facilitates historical literacy and factual and conceptual knowledge grows when students practice historical literacy.
4. Historical literacy requires an appropriate epistemic stance, or way of understanding how knowledge is constructed within the discipline of history (Reddy & Van Sledright, 2010). Teachers must begin the building of historical literacies by helping students develop a more mature understanding of the nature of historical inquiry. They should work to move students from an *objectivist stance*—the belief that history is “the past” with a single historical narrative. They must avoid promoting a *subjectivist stance*—the belief that since history is subject to interpretation any narrative is equally valid. Instead history teachers must help students develop a *criticalist stance*—recognizing that using appropriate tools allows historians to construct defensible interpretations of the past (Reddy & Van Sledright, 2010); that students can learn about the past by “working it out from sources” (Ashby, Lee, & Shemilt, 2005, 94).
5. Historical literacy requires the use of historians’ heuristics or strategies for working with historical evidence. Such heuristics include *sourcing*—using a document’s source to

interpret its content; *corroboration*—comparing and contrasting the contents of multiple sources; and *contextualization*—attempting to place oneself in the time and place of the document’s creation and comprehending it with that context in mind (Wineburg, 1991). Additionally, historians engage in close reading, fill in gaps in the evidence with logical inferences, remain skeptical about interpretations, and allow room for new evidence that is constantly being uncovered. They are adept at using evidence in persuasive writing and speaking.

6. Historical literacy requires an understanding of “second-order” concepts or metaconcepts—ways of thinking about history that transcend any specific time or place (Lee, 2005). For example, students should understand metaconcepts such as *change, time, cause, effect, evidence, and account*.
7. Historical literacy requires *historical empathy*, the understanding that the ideas, beliefs, and values of people in the past influenced their decision making (Lee, 2005, 46). Historical empathy allows history students to understand that historical people’s actions made sense to them, given their understanding and values.
8. Historical literacy requires teachers and students to avoid reductionist thinking that oversimplifies the complexity of the past (Barton, 1996). Reductionist pitfalls include *dualistic thinking*—labeling a policy as good or bad and missing the subtleties of both its advantages and disadvantages; *categorization and labeling*, which can lead to stereotyping or missing historical exceptions; *personification of groups*, incorrectly giving nations, for instance, the traits of individuals; and *ignoring minority perspectives*.
9. Historical literacy allows students to independently construct interpretations of the past based on historical evidence. Teachers facilitate historical literacy by designing activities and assessments that allow students to construct their own interpretations rather than simply requiring students to remember the interpretations constructed by others (Nokes 2010a). Additionally, historical literacy allows students to use evidence to persuasively defend in writing or speech their independently constructed interpretation.
10. The objective of historical literacy instruction is not necessarily to produce mini-historians, but young people and adults who are able to negotiate and create the complex texts of the Information Age. Young people respond to historical literacy instruction by demonstrating improved critical literacy skills (Van Sledright, 2002) and improved historical content knowledge (Nokes, Dole, & Hacker, 2007).

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