

Social Studies Skills:

The Tools of How to Study History

(Suggested use: Unit 1 or the first 2 – 3 weeks of school. Use this as your guide, reference it now and then or don't use it at all. Just don't burn it....a tree has given its life for this! ☺)

Written By: Your colleagues in the Social Studies Department

The Definition of "History": Pre-history is the period of time **before** written language.

History is the **written record** of past events and the individuals involved in an attempt to understand from where they came in order to know where they are going.

History is passed on in many forms: written expression, pictures, stories, letters, family histories, diaries, etc.

History is a Social Science, yet it is still a Science. As in Biology and Chemistry, theories need to be proven. With the exception of experimentation, historians use the same method that a traditional "scientist" would use: a hypothesis is formed, evidence is gathered (i.e. primary and secondary documents, which consist of views of past historians, government records, diaries, letters, etc.) and conclusions are drawn.

When studying History, there are different categories to consider: Cultural, Political, Geographic, Diplomatic, Social, Intellectual and Economic.

The Tools of Studying History:

1. Chronology
2. Gathering primary and secondary sources
3. Critical thinking
4. Cause and effect
5. Analyzing bias, tone, point of view
6. Inference
7. Defining terms and knowing historical vocabulary
8. Geography

1. Chronology:

Chronology is a systematic ordering of events that occur in pre-history and history. Understanding time, continuity, and change involves being well-

informed about what things were like in the past and how things change and develop over time. Knowing how to read and reconstruct the past helps students gain a historical perspective. Students will use their knowledge of history to make informed choices and decisions in the present.

Examples:

1. Timeline (A timeline represents a span of time in which certain events are listed. By reading a timeline, one can see, at a glance, when the events occurred and how many years separated them.)
2. Selection and discussion of pivotal dates (i.e. 1620, 1763, 1776...).
3. Selection and discussion of significant periods (i.e. Enlightenment, Great Awakening, Renaissance...)
4. Require students to learn the Presidents in the order of their presidencies.

Reference: p. 1018

Attached sheet: "Common Chronological Terms"

2. Primary and Secondary Sources

A primary source is an actual account of an event, or a reaction from an event, and they are not derived from other sources; it is actually experienced or witnessed by the person. Some examples of primary sources are eyewitness accounts of an event, the text of a law or treaty, letters, diaries, official documents, speeches or interviews, autobiographies, songs and audio recordings, advertisements and posters. Using primary sources in the classroom helps to transform the study of history from a passive process to an active one.

A secondary source is derived from a primary source. An American history textbook is a secondary source of historical information. If the primary source is described as eyewitness evidence, the secondary source is hearsay evidence. Just as eyewitness testimony carries considerably more weight in a court of law than does hearsay evidence, so the historian must rely primarily on primary sources in determining what happened in the past.

Reference: p. T12 – T19, T46, 1026 – 1027

3. Critical Thinking

Critical thinking involves the act of questioning, analyzing, comparing and contrasting, determining point of view, and synthesizing using evidence and observation in order to make informed and reasoned judgments.

Reference: p. T40 (chart), 1009, 1014, 1015, and 1029

4. Cause and Effect

All history is based upon the action of cause and effect. Thus, as a result of certain acts or actions, events or outcomes occurred.

Example: When the Germans invaded Poland, the Allies declared war on Germany.

Reference: p. 1017

5. Analyzing bias, tone, point of view

A fact is something that has actually happened or something that can be proved through evidence, observation or testing. Since it is impossible to experience, test and observe all the events of history, you count on experts to present the facts to you. Once you have checked the credibility of the authors and their evidence, you can generally rely on the information presented.

An opinion is an expression of a belief or judgment. Some opinions are openly stated and labeled as such: "I think that..." or "It seems to me that...". Other opinions are simply presented as if they were facts that everyone should acknowledge.

As you study history, you learn to distinguish between the facts and the opinions and beliefs of men and women. Unfortunately, it is often opinions that influence events and bring about change.

Bias: A personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment. We are all biased. Gender, social class, country, etc. influence us. The goal is to learn to recognize bias both in ourselves and in the history we study.

Example: Is the speaker or writer being sarcastic or using satire?

Tone: Expressive of a mood or emotion.

Point of view: The particular focus one takes when considering a problem or situation. It also involves determining the point of view of the author or the historic figure.

Political cartoons deliberately choose a point of view and then present it in an exaggerated way to emphasize their point. Other points of view are left out.

Whereas *fact* and *opinion* refer to the content of words, *point of view*, *tone* and *bias* refer to the speaker's state of mind. It is up to you, as a student of history, to detect these ways of presenting information.

Reference: p. 1013 (cartoons), 1016, 1021, 1022

6. Inference

Inference is an important skill used by historians. It aids the student in their overall understanding of history.

When students use inference, they process the facts surrounding an event or individual and make certain informed conclusions based on those facts.

Example: When a person attends a political rally and is wearing a T-shirt with an elephant on it waving an American flag and a pin that says "GOP" (Grand Old Party), the observer might infer he/she is a Republican.

Reference: p. 1011, 1019

7. Defining terms and knowing historical vocabulary

The ability to define historical ideas, terms and vocabulary, within their historic content, is an important skill.

Example: The NAACP stands for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. African-Americans were called and called themselves "colored people" at one time. However, today we refer to "colored people" as African-Americans.

Reference: p. T30, T40 (chart)

8. Geography

History is the experience of human beings in time, but that experience also takes place in a geographic location. Geography describes and maps the Earth but it also studies the changing relationship between human activities and the surrounding environment.

Reference: p. T48 – T49, 64 – 91, 1025

COMMON CHRONOLOGICAL TERMS

B.C. "Before Christ." The number in a B.C. date tells how many years before the birth of Jesus an event occurred. Note that B.C. numbers become smaller as dates fall closer to the birth of Jesus.
(Example: Egypt's King Tutankhamon lived from 1355 B.C. until 1339 B.C.)

A.D. "Anno Domini," meaning "in the year of the lord." The number in an A.D. date tells how many years after the birth of Jesus the event occurred. Unlike B.C., A.D. appears before the number of the year.
(Example: The Normans invaded England in A.D. 1066.)

decade 10 years. (Example: The 1930's was a decade of economic depression in many parts of the world.)

century 100 years. Note that the 500's was the sixth century, the 1900's is the twentieth century, and so on. (Example: The fall of China's Han Empire in A.D. 220 was one of the most important events of the third century.)

millennium 1,000 years. (Example: On January 1, 2001, people will celebrate the start of a new millennium.)

age/era Broad time period with a shared pattern of life. Ages and eras usually do not have definite starting or ending points. (Example: During the Stone Age, which began some 2.5 million years ago and ended around 3500 B.C., people made many of their tools from stone.)

