

What Does It Mean to Think Historically?

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Change over Time

The idea of change over time is perhaps the easiest of the C's to grasp. Many Europeans celebrate many of the same holidays that they did three or four hundred years ago, for instance, often using the same rituals and words to mark a day's significance. Continuity thus comprises an integral part of the idea of change over time. At any educational level, timelines can teach change over time as well as the selective process that leads people to pay attention to some events while ignoring others. In our U.S. survey class, we often ask students to interview family and friends and write a paper explaining how their family's history has intersected with major events and trends that we are studying. By discovering their own family's past, students often see how individuals can make a difference and how personal history changes over time along with major events. As historians of the American West and environmental historians, we often turn to maps to teach change over time. The same space represented in different ways as political power, economic structures, and cultural influences shift can often put in shocking relief the differences that time makes. Such photographers begin with a historic landscape photograph, then take pains to re-take the shot from the same site, at the same angle, using similar equipment, and even under analogous conditions. While suburbs and industry have overrun many western locales, students are often surprised to see that some places have become more desolate and others have hardly changed at all.

Context

Some things change, others stay the same—not a very interesting story but reason for concern since history, as the best teachers will tell you, is about telling stories. Good story telling, we contend, builds upon an understanding of context. Given young people's fascination with narratives and their enthusiasm for imaginative play, pupils (particularly elementary school students) often find context the most engaging element of historical thinking. Working with primary sources, they discover that the past makes more sense when they set it within two frameworks. In our teaching, we liken the first to the floating words that roll across the screen at the beginning of every *Star Wars* film. This kind of context sets the stage; the second helps us to interpret evidence concerning the action that ensues. Texts, events, individual lives, collective struggles—all develop within a tightly interwoven world. Historians who excel at the art of storytelling often rely heavily upon context. Imaginative play is what makes context, arguably the easiest, yet also, paradoxically, the most difficult of the five C's to teach. Elementary school assignments that require students to research and wear medieval European clothes or build a California mission from sugar cubes both strive to teach context. The problem with such assignments is that they often blur the lines between reality and make-believe. The picturesque often trumps more banal or more disturbing truths. Young children may never be able to get all the facts straight. In our own classes, we have taught context using an assignment that we call "Fact, Fiction, or Creative Memory." In this exercise, students wrestle with a given source and determine whether it is primarily a work of history, fiction, or memory. We have asked students to bring in a present-day representation of 1950s life and explain what it teaches people today about life in 1950s America. Then, we have asked the class to discuss if the representation is a historically fair depiction of the era. We have also assigned textbook passages and Don DeLillo's *Pafko at the Wall*, then asked students to compare them to decide which offers stronger insights into the character of Cold War America. Each of these assignments addresses context, because each asks students to think about the distinctions between representations of the past and the critical thinking about the past that is history. Moreover, each asks students to weave together a variety of sources and assess the reliability of each before incorporating them into a whole.

Causality

Historians use context, change over time, and causality to form arguments explaining past change. While scientists can devise experiments to test theories and yield data, historians cannot alter past conditions to produce new information. Rather, they must base their arguments upon the interpretation of partial primary sources that frequently offer multiple explanations for a single event. Historians have long argued over the causes of the Protestant Reformation or World War I, for example, without achieving consensus. Such uncertainty troubles some students, but history classrooms are at their most dynamic when teachers encourage pupils to evaluate the contributions of multiple factors in shaping past events, as well as to formulate arguments asserting the primacy of some causes over others.

After arming students with primary sources, we ask them to argue whether monetary or fiscal policy played a greater role in causing the Great Depression. After giving students descriptions drawn from primary sources of immigrant families in Los Angeles, we have asked students to take on the role of various family members and explain their reasons for immigrating and their reasons for settling in particular neighborhoods. Neither exercise is especially novel, but both fulfill a central goal of studying history: to develop persuasive explanations of historical events and processes based on logical interpretations of evidence.

Contingency

Contingency may, in fact, be the most difficult of the C's. To argue that history is contingent is to claim that every historical outcome depends upon a number of prior conditions; that each of these prior conditions depends, in turn, upon still other conditions; and so on. The core insight of contingency is that the world is a magnificently interconnected place. Change a single prior condition, and any historical outcome could have turned out differently. Lee could have won at Gettysburg, Gore might have won in Florida, China might have inaugurated the world's first industrial revolution. Contingency can be an unsettling idea—so much so that people in the past have often tried to mask it with myths of national and racial destiny. Two centuries later, American ideologues chose to rationalize their unlikely fortunes—from the purchase of Louisiana to the discovery of gold in California—as their nation's "Manifest Destiny." Historians, unlike Bradford and the apologists of westward expansion, look at the same outcomes differently. They see not divine fate, but a series of contingent results possessing other possibilities. Contingency demands that students think deeply about past, present, and future. It offers a powerful corrective to teleology, the fallacy that events pursue a straight-arrow course to a pre-determined outcome, since people in the past had no way of anticipating our present world. Contingency also reminds us that individuals shape the course of human events. Contingency can be a difficult concept to present abstractly, but it suffuses the stories historians tend to tell about individual lives. Futurology, however, might offer an even stronger tool for imparting contingency than biography. Mechanistic views of history as the inevitable march toward the present tend to collapse once students see how different their world is from any predicted in the past.

Complexity

Moral, epistemological, and causal complexity distinguish historical thinking from the conception of "history" held by many non-historians. Re-enacting battles and remembering names and dates require effort but not necessarily analytical rigor. Making sense of a messy world that we cannot know directly, in contrast, is more confounding but also more rewarding. Chronicles distill intricate historical processes into a mere catalogue, while nostalgia conjures an uncomplicated golden age that saves us the trouble of having to think about the past. Our own need for order can obscure our understanding of how past worlds functioned and blind us to the ways in which myths of rosy pasts do political and cultural work in the present. Reveling in complexity rather than shying away from it, historians seek to dispel the power of chronicle, nostalgia, and other traps that obscure our ability to understand the past on its own terms.