

BUILDING HIGHER-ORDER HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS IN A COLLEGE SURVEY CLASS

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While over 99 percent of college faculty state that it is their goal to get students to "develop the ability to think clearly," according to a recent survey conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, those who teach history are among those most committed to this process. Sixty-two percent of history faculty surveyed in 1990 believed that developing students' "effective thinking abilities," or helping students to "acquire general intellectual skills to use in many situations," is the single most important goal of history classes. Ninety-four percent of history faculty list developing effective thinking abilities as an important goal, the highest of any discipline reported. However, of all the skills that history faculty attempt to develop in students, critical thinking about the past is the most slippery to define and difficult to teach. What steps need to be taken to break students out of their accustomed ways of thinking and to consider points of view other than their own? How do we tell students who are used to history as "names and dates" that in some cases historical questions do not have only one correct answer?¹

There is no easy teaching technique to ensure the development of higher-level thinking skills, especially in survey classes that are expected to cover over a century of material in a term. While many history departments have created upper-level research and writing methods classes to teach historical thinking, the survey class in many cases has not had this element of critical thinking structured into it. This placement of teaching historical thinking in only one class (or only upper-level classes) does not serve our students. The goal of history education at the college level should be the development of critical thinking throughout the curriculum. This means that each class within a history program should have an element of historical thinking built in, from introductory surveys to graduate-level classes.

In my own American history survey classes, I have had success in provoking historical thinking among students with exercises based on a series of inexpensive paperback books, the Bedford Series in History and Culture. These books each contain an introductory essay, a series of primary documents, and a chronology of important events around a specific topic in United States or European history. These assignments and activities relating to them have taken up relatively little time in class and have been manageable for students to read and write about, but they have not overwhelmed me with grading. My student ratings in these classes have been high, despite the extra

¹Joan Stark, et al., *Planning Introductory College Courses: Influences on Faculty* (Ann Arbor: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, 1990), 52; *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 1, 2000), 40.

work such assignments involve. These assignments also help address the diversity of preparation and previous coursework found in survey classes, as the papers challenge both novices to history as well as those with some background in the subject, each at their own level.² In this article, I will discuss how I structured my survey class assignments to move students further along in their historical thinking, and how I have changed these assignments to focus more on moving students to the level of thinking required of upper-level history classes. These assignments could also be used in secondary schools, with adjustments for numbers of pages assigned, time given to students to complete the assignments, and length of writing required.³

Critical Thinking in the Context of the History Survey

Before considering how to build critical thinking into history classes, it is important to be specific about the meaning of the term. One useful definition of critical thinking comes from the literature on the development of "reflective judgment," measuring the ability to think through complex problems using logic and evidence. Patricia M. King and Karen S. Kitchener have developed an index of "reflective judgment" that quantifies a student's overall intellectual development. In college, students typically move from a position of "pre-reflective thinking," in which knowledge is "limited to one's personal impressions about the topic (uninformed by evidence)," to a belief that knowledge is the result of a reasonable inquiry using evidence. Thus, students actually lose certainty of knowledge in their college years, passing through stages of relativism in which they may believe that all beliefs are equal in validity.⁴

Students improve their critical thinking skills through tackling "ill-structured problems" that have no easy, straightforward answer. This does not mean that questions presented to students should be vague or poorly thought out on the part of

²In my first survey class taught at EMU, I discovered that I had both first-year and graduate students in the same survey class, giving me a considerable range to address.

³There are currently over 50 works in the Bedford Series, a list of which can be found at <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com>. This selection allows flexibility in designing the assignments, as well as rotation of works each term to prevent paper recycling among students. As the assignments described in this essay are customized to a specific class, they also effectively discourage plagiarism and the purchase of papers from online paper mills. This focus on the Bedford Series is not to imply that other series in the past, such as the Amherst Series, would not be suitable for this type of assignment. However, the Bedford Series is widely available now and affordable (especially when bundled with a survey textbook), making it ideal for this type of writing assignment.

⁴Patricia M. King and Karen S. Kitchener, *Developing Reflective Judgment: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Self-Growth and Critical Thinking in Adolescents and Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 224, 14-15.

the instructor; the question must have depth and complexity, and present the opportunity to think through a series of possible answers. History is full of such problems that cannot be reduced to yes or no answers or to bubbles on a scantron form. For instance, when the Holocaust occurred is a well-structured problem; what Americans could have done to save European Jewry is "ill-structured," provoking a wider range of thought and argument.⁵

This road to reflective judgment is not smooth, however. King and Kitchener, in their interviews of college students, found students often got stuck in a rut of relativism or nihilism. Many believed at times in their development that all opinions were equal, that all arguments were biased, and that there could never be enough evidence to know the answer to a question. However, as students progress in their education, and became producers, as well as critics of knowledge, they begin to see that evidence and arguments can be evaluated. This process is familiar to anyone who has taught classes on writing or has written a dissertation—it is only when called upon to create historical narrative or analysis that one can appreciate the work that goes into creating an argument or marshaling evidence on its behalf.

The Bedford Series in History and Culture

In order to build some critical thinking skills into my survey classes (United States 1492 to 1877 and United States, 1877 to present), I used the Bedford Series in History and Culture.⁶ As mentioned earlier, these books each include an introductory essay and a collection of documents related to the topic. As a series, these books are for the most part balanced, and the documents are chosen well. For example, the Bedford volume on Ida B. Wells's *Southern Horrors* contains background material about Wells and her crusade against lynching and several journalistic works on lynching by Wells. Therefore, the book provides students with several decades of Wells's reportage on lynching, from the 1890s to 1910s, allowing them to assess change and continuity in the phenomenon. Introductions to the volumes provide background material on the historical period that the book covers, as well as on historiographic debates that surround the period in question.

⁵King and Kitchener, *Developing Reflective Judgment*, 11.

⁶I do not mean to imply that the Bedford Series is the only way to build these sorts of assignments. The genre of conflicting interpretations in history has been a part of history teaching for generations. *Problems in American Civilization* published by D.C. Heath, and edited volumes such as Sidney Fine and Gerald Brown, *The American Past: Conflicting Interpretations of Great Issues* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) have also served this purpose. The current D.C. Heath series *Major Problems in American History* serves a similar purpose to the Bedford volumes, though the scope of each volume lends itself far better to upper-level classes. Information about *Problems in American Civilizations* and *Major Problems* can be found at the Houghton-Mifflin website, <http://college.hmco.com/>.

In the survey of American history from 1492 to 1877, I have used *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* and *Declaring Rights: A Brief History with Documents* to give in-depth treatment of events we were studying in class. Students chose which book to write about, thus vastly reducing complaints about the assignment. The students in this class were heterogeneous in every conceivable way—race, class, age, background, and level of study. As is par for my institution, many in the class were studying to become teachers, and several had returned to school as post-baccalaureate students. This assignment became a way for more advanced students to tackle a historical problem at a higher level than they had thus far in the class and for novice students to make a first attempt at a college paper.

This first assignment I wrote (see Appendix I) was designed to provoke in-depth thinking about the historical nature of the events we were studying. Since survey classes must move at a fast clip, names, dates, and facts often become a blur to many students; focusing on one topic allows them to see history as a field with depth as well as breadth. In this first assignment, I did not incorporate any interplay between primary and secondary sources, and the more alert students realized that one could do the assignment by using only the documents, never needing to venture into the introductory essay. To help ease students into the assignment, I spent class time discussing how to write a solid thesis, the guidelines for an acceptable paper, and outlining a paper before writing (see Appendix II). To ease my grading load, I provided a series of questions for students to address, making their papers more focused and easier to grade. I also limited the length to two pages, which would force them to be more concise. I allowed students to turn in rough drafts but did not require it—only a handful took me up on the offer. The paper assignment was well-received by the vast majority of students, though some wrote in their evaluations that the Bedford books were "no fun, very boring books."

The second set of assignments (see Appendices III and IV), written for my winter term honors history survey (1877 to the present), took the earlier assignment a step further. As this honors class was supposed to be more challenging (though not simply through a greater volume of work), I added a Bedford book to the syllabus in the first half of the term—*Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*. Then, in the second half, students could choose from three works to write about—*America Views the Holocaust, 1933-1945: A Brief Documentary History*, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents*, and *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*. While the students' workload in the winter term was substantial, the assignments worked better at forcing students to think about history rather than just summarizing a book's argument. Making drafts of the paper mandatory allowed me to help lost students refocus their papers before the final draft was turned in. This especially helped students sharpen the thesis of their papers, as it took many a full draft to discover what they believed about the topic.

In the first assignment of the term, students analyzed Ida B. Wells's book detailing the hideous crime of lynching in the American South. I had decided to focus on one work in common for the first assignment, to allow us to discuss the book and the paper more extensively in class. Borrowing an idea from another history teacher, I asked students to hypothesize why lynching was so important in the American South: What social function and whose interests did it serve? This is a good example of an "ill-structured problem," as the work of Ida B. Wells contains hundreds of case studies, each of which could lead students into different directions of analysis. My students examined the role of lynching in cementing ties in the white community, in keeping white supremacy alive, and in keeping African-Americans from gaining economic prosperity or social equality. Students needed to back up their arguments with evidence from the primary documents in the book and to assess counter-arguments to their position.

The second assignment of the class (see Appendix V) asked students to locate an historical debate related to their topic in the introduction to the book, then to choose a side in the debate and deploy evidence for their position from the documents. This was more difficult for students to do, as thinking about an historical debate was not what they were used to doing. This assignment also forced them to develop a thesis for their topic, in which they argued their position relative to the historiographic debate they found in the introduction to their book. I found this paper more satisfying to read than the first, as students began to discover where historians disagreed, and then weighed in with their own opinion and evidence. The nature of the three topics—McCarthyism, the My Lai massacre, and America's reaction to the Holocaust—made for some strong historiographic conflicts, which in turn, led to interesting, lively papers on the subjects.

In both papers, I limited the page length to two to three pages, in order to fight off the tendency (especially among honors students) to try to bury the instructor in paper. Keeping these assignments short and developing rubrics to aid in grading them kept the time needed to assess the student essays to a reasonable amount. This allowed me to provide quick and focused feedback to them to help on the next draft or paper. (For an example of one of the grading rubrics, see Appendix VI.) As Barbara Walvoord has pointed out in her book, *Effective Grading*, cutting down the time needed to grade each assignment allows instructors to assign more writing as part of a class, giving students greater opportunity to write and improve their writing during the term.⁷

Adding these assignments to the class without subtracting other work had some negative effects, however. There was too much work for those students who had

⁷Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson, *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

difficulty keeping up with all the class reading: One student wrote on an evaluation, "Bedford books were just very hard to read—too many documents in them." Another suggested I assign only one Bedford book and paper, and a third responded that I should "find something else to write papers on." These criticisms did not significantly affect the overall ratings of the class by the students. However, they indicate that when new assignments are added to a survey class, it is important to remove some work in order to avoid overwhelming students, however painful this is to the instructor.

On my side, structuring class around these Bedford assignments did take more class time than I expected. I carved out some in-class time to teach thesis writing, as well as to give a class session to allow students reading the same book to discuss their papers together. I wrote poorly constructed thesis paragraphs for students to rewrite. I also found that I needed time to talk through my comments on rough drafts with them, and I canceled one lecture to allow time for me to meet with each of them briefly to discuss my comments. Throughout the term, I reserved time to allow students to read and analyze historical documents in class, in order to build the skills necessary for the papers. As a result, I did lose some of the time I had set aside for content in the class so we could focus on the process of historical thinking and writing. However, even though I only made it to 1975 that term, I judged the results well worth it, as students had spent more time sifting through evidence and weighing interpretations, suffering a reduction only in time listening to my lectures.

This shift in how time is used in class can be seen as an opportunity to broaden the kinds of skills taught in history surveys and to add variety to the mix of activities that students are asked to do. While some students will resist these elements as inappropriate for a survey-level class, the vast majority will rise to the challenge, and leave the class with a deeper appreciation of history as a discipline and methodology.

Conclusion

If students are introduced to critical thinking and writing throughout their careers in history, the result will be a deeper understanding of history. While not all students will go on to be history majors, many students can benefit from the critical thinking that goes into historical analysis. Particularly for students going into teaching at the elementary or secondary level, the skills of critical reading of sources, thinking about evidence, and questioning interpretations are vital, as they can pass these skills along to their own students. Finally, whatever their major, students will need to write and back up what they believe in their upper-division classes; if survey classes help prepare them for these challenges, we will earn the gratitude of their future teachers as well. In my ongoing classroom research, it will be necessary to examine pre- and post-test data to assess whether this type of assignment has an effect on overall student learning in history surveys. However, my own early assessment of student written work indicates that, at the least, these types of short, structured assignments based on

primary materials can start students thinking about the issues of argument and evidence that are at the core of the discipline of history.

Appendix I:

Paper for History 123: *Declaring Rights: A Brief History with Documents* or *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*

Choose one of the following topics:

1. After reading *Declaring Rights: A Brief History with Documents*, choose one right in the Bill of Rights. Describe:
 - a. How this right was understood in English law before 1787, such as in the Declaration of Rights;
 - b. How American feelings about this right helped lead to the American Revolution in 1776;
 - c. Why Americans wanted this right to be part of the Bill of Rights;
 - d. How Americans now think about this right—this can be how people today understand this right, how they misunderstand the right, or how the right has changed.

In this paper, give me specific quotations from documents in the book that back up what you are saying.

2. After reading *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*, answer the following questions about the revolt:
 - a. Who was Nat Turner? What led him to revolt?
 - b. What does his revolt tell you about slavery in Virginia in the 1830s?
 - c. How did southerners react to his revolt?
 - d. How did northerners react to the revolt?
 - e. How did Turner's actions help lead to the end of slavery in America? Think about both indirect and direct effects of his revolt.
3. Other options—these topics require my explicit approval before you start on them.
 - a. If you would rather make a short 3-5 minute video documentary about either of these topics instead of writing a paper, please speak to me at office hours or make an appointment as soon as possible.
 - b. If you would rather create a curriculum unit for any level of education based on one of these two topics, please speak to me at office hours or make an appointment as soon as possible.
 - c. If you would rather write on some aspect of historic preservation in early American history, please speak to me at office hours or make an appointment as soon as possible.

Appendix II: Guidelines for writing a History 123 paper

1. Do not plagiarize. See below.
2. Proofread your work. This means more than simply using the spell check feature of Microsoft Word (though that is a good idea to do as a first step). After you are done with a paper, let it sit for at least an hour and then read it over with an eye for grammar or spelling errors.
3. Make sure that there is a thesis in the introduction of the paper, as well as a description of what you will cover in the paper. It is not your job to surprise me in the paper—I should know exactly what you are writing about at the end of the first paragraph.
4. Use evidence from the readings by paraphrase or quotation. A paraphrase is a summary of a passage; a quotation is using the same words as the book, enclosed in quotes and with a reference to where you found this quotation.

Example of a paraphrase: In *Declaring Rights*, Jack Rackove argues that the rights found in the Declaration of Independence were originally found in English law (Rackove, page 2).

Example of a direct quote: Thomas Jefferson, in the "Third Draft of a Constitution for Virginia," wrote "No person hereafter coming into the country shall be held within the same in slavery under any pretext whatsoever." (Quoted in Rackove, page 80).

Please note that both paraphrases and quotes are referenced. Any thought that is not your own in the paper needs a reference. Otherwise you are stealing by plagiarizing the work of an author.

5. You should outline your paper before you write a rough draft. This will let you know if you are confused or ready to write. Make sure that this is a detailed outline, containing all your major points for the paper.

Example:

The Right to a Fair Trial

- A. Right to a Fair Trial in England as found in the 1688 Declaration of Rights
 1. Trial by jury (page 42)
 2. Excessive bail (page 42)
 3. Excessive fines (page 42)
 4. Cruel and illegal punishment
- B. Right to a Fair Trial in Colonial America as found in the Continental Congress, Declaration and Resolves, 1774
 1. Right to a trial by a jury of peers, not an admiralty court (64)
 2. Right to elect and pay judges (64)
 3. Right to be tried in the local area, not England (64)

**Appendix III: Thesis writing exercise for
*Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching
Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900***

Note: I wrote the paragraph below—complete with mistakes—that students rewrote in small groups before discussing the thesis as a whole class.

Transform this paragraph to one with a good introduction, a thesis or argument about why lynching took place, and a piece of evidence, properly cited, that backs up the thesis:

Lynching was a very serious crime. Many people, innocent, guilty, and other, were killed and often beaten up more after they were killed as a result of lynching. Throughout the South, there were many reasons for lynching, such as a desire to make African-Americans just like slaves, but, of course, slavery had been abolished, so it was not exactly like slavery, I think. One case that is an example of this was in New Orleans, where a man was killed by an angry white mob for no reason. The whole city was at the mercy of the mob and the display of brutality was a disgrace to civilization. It was really pitiful. This shows that mobs in the south were out of control. It was as though the people as a group had lost their minds, and just went around killing people.

**Appendix IV: Assignment on *Southern Horrors and Other
Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900***

In a well-written three-page essay, answer the following questions about the writings of Ida B. Wells:

1. According to white southerners, why were African-Americans lynched? How did they justify lynching as a fair way to administer justice?
2. What criticism did Wells have of lynching? Why did she believe it was unjust?
3. As a historian reading Wells's work, what theory do you have about lynching? What political and social function did lynching serve for whites in the South?
4. Using the cases that Wells writes about, find three examples that support your theory and describe how they support your view.
5. How did lynching fit into the larger political and social history of the U.S. after Reconstruction?

Be sure to give references (page numbers) to the book whenever you quote a passage from the book as evidence.

Appendix V: Assignment for *America Views the Holocaust, 1933-1945: A Brief Documentary History*, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents*, and *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*

Using one of the three Bedford books on My Lai, the Holocaust, or McCarthyism, write a three-page paper that:

1. Identifies a major debate or difference of opinion involved with how historians interpret this issue. You should be able to find this in the introduction to the book. Tell me clearly what the difference of opinion is, and who (or what types of people) would take each side of the debate.
2. In the documents section of the book, find at least three documents that you believe help one to decide which side of the debate you identified is correct. Explain what each document tells you, as a historian, and how this document helps resolve the debate you discussed in question 1.
3. Tell me the problems you see in the position you took above. How would another historian, holding opposite views, object to your analysis? For instance, what types of documents, not included in the book, might change your mind about the debate? Be honest here about your level of certainty.
4. If you had to do further research on this subject, what kind of information would you find most valuable to address the historiographic debate you have discussed in the paper. Where might you look for this evidence? It can be written evidence, oral history, etc.—you can use your imagination.

This paper should not be longer than three pages. If it is substantially longer or shorter, tell me and I will help you refocus your writing, as you might be misunderstanding the assignment.

Appendix VI: Rubric used for the rough draft of the papers on *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*

Note: This checklist enabled me to focus on a few key elements of the paper, and to ensure that each paper had a proper thesis, evidence, and historical context about the subjects.

- (1) Paper described the argument of the book.
- (2) Paper accurately described Wells's criticism of lynching.
- (3) Paper contained the student's theory about lynching.
- (4) Paper contained three examples that back up the theory.
- (5) Paper described how lynching fit into the period of history during which it took place.
- (6) Paper had an introduction that previewed the paper and a conclusion that summarized what the paper said.

Bedford Series Books Used in this Essay:

- Aabzug, Robert H. *America Views the Holocaust, 1933-1945: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999).
- Greenberg, Kenneth. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996).
- Olson, James Stuart, and Randy Roberts. *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998).
- Rackove, Jack N. *Declaring Rights: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998).
- Royster, Jacqueline Jones. *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997).
- Schrecker, Ellen. *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994).