

## Handout 2: Historical Thinking Skills

### Session: History and Historical Thinking

What if we consider that “the past is a foreign country”<sup>1</sup> and that history is a means to explore the past? Given that we can never go back to the past, *thinking historically* requires you to imagine what the past may have been like. Apart from imagination, however, how can one think historically? Let’s start by considering the different methods historians use to build their historical interpretations of the past:

#### 1 Chronological Reasoning

This kind of reasoning is inference based on the chronological sequencing of past events. Related to **historical causation**, historians employ chronological reasoning to understand if and how events cause and/or affect other events. They then determine their degree of magnitude in terms of **direct/short-term** and **indirect/long-term** causes and **direct/short-term** and **indirect/long-term** effects. By the closer examination and analysis of the sequence of events, historians identify patterns of **continuity and change** over time and break the past down into periods of time, or periodization. Periodization enables historians to consider each historical era based on **specific turning points** (for example, the rise and fall of the Ottoman Empire, the collapse of the Soviet Union, etc.). As a form of chronological reasoning, a timeline may seem to be an “objective” depiction of a series of events, but it is important to remember that it is a tool or a method historians use to represent a particular time in the past through a selection of events (dates of certain incidents) that they consider relevant to understand that time.

#### 2 Comparing Historical Sources Across Time and Space

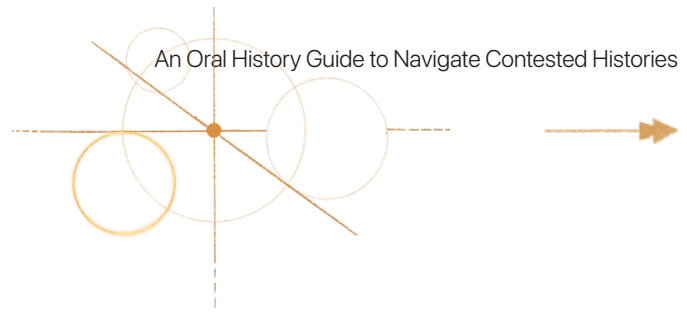
Through **comparison, contextualization and critical analysis**, historians assess and evaluate the reliability and usefulness of historical sources. They begin by subjecting their sources to the **6W questions** (WHO is the author of the source, WHAT kind of source is it, WHERE is it from, WHEN was it created, WHY was it created - its intended purpose, and for WHOM was it intended?). They ask: how sources compare to other sources by either refuting or corroborating them; how newly discovered or different kinds of sources add new context to history; how do they change the understanding of an historical event or time (such as a war, a significant figure, or even everyday life)?

#### 3 Formulating a Research Question

The basic approach historians use to understand a certain aspect of the past is through formulating a broad, open-ended research question. There are many reasons why an historian may choose a particular area of inquiry, but foremost among them is the historian’s personal curiosity and passion for the topic and that their question has not yet been addressed. In this sense, their research is an original and meaningful contribution to the historical record that uncovers new findings and builds on previous interpretations

<sup>1</sup> Title of book by David Lowenthal. *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).





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of the past. Moreover, historians formulate research questions that are broad and open-ended enough to allow for a diversity of relevant historical sources and their accompanying perspectives. After all, historians have a question, but they do not yet know what kind of answer or conclusion they will reach. In order to approach broad, overarching questions, historians start by breaking them down into smaller specific questions that become the basis of their research plan. Creating such a plan or a blueprint is a skill inherent and central to the discipline of history as a form of inquiry-based research.

#### 4 Interpretation and Synthesis (Historical Narrative)

Applying the above mentioned approaches and associated skills, historians create a new interpretation and synthesis of the past. Included in this synthesis is methodologically grounded research and evidence-based analysis within a chronologically coherent narrative. In this synthesis, moreover, historians distinguish between sources and interpretation, between facts and interpretations, and ask questions about the ambiguity of facts versus perspectives. At the end of the day, this synthesis, or reconstruction, presents the historians' response to their research question and represents a new interpretation of the past as an original contribution to the historical record.

Adapted from: [Historical Thinking Skills](#) [Historical Thinking Skills | AHA](#)

