

The Modes of Historical Thinking

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Fact-Based History

- Example: “The US declared independence in 1776. The Constitution was ratified in 1789.”
- Treats history as merely the collection and recitation of facts
- Encourages memorization but not necessarily comprehension
- Is easy to teach
- Is hard to learn

A Hierarchy of Questions

- 1) Continuity and Change
- 2) Causation
- 3) Evidence
- 4) Character
- 5) Context

Continuity and Change

- It's all about the points of comparison
- Sample focus question: "How did the Constitution differ from the Articles of Confederation?"
- Possible answer: "It drastically strengthened the central government, allowing the US to effectively tax, negotiate treaties, and facilitate commerce."

Continuity and Change

- It's all about the points of comparison
- Alternate focus question: "How did home rule differ from imperial rule?"
- Possible answer: "It dramatically weakened the central government, limiting its power to collect taxes, establish tariffs, make wars, and enact bold policies."

Causation

- Asking not just "What?" but "Why?"
- Sample focus question: "Why did the US seek independence?"
- Standard answer: "Colonists sought independence to escape British taxes and to establish representative government."

Causation

Important causes are often numerous. Other possible answers:

1. The colonial leaders were heirs to a republican political tradition.
2. The national market created by non-importation promoted national unity.
3. Colonial leaders were increasingly indebted to British merchants and wanted out.

Causation

Ways to deal with complexity of causation:

1. Acknowledge it (with advanced students)
2. Narrow the question. Sample: "What *political events* led colonists to seek independence?"
3. Break the question down:
 - "Why did colonists rebel *together*?"
 - "Why were republican ideas so popular?"
 - "What benefits did independence offer?"

Causation

Sidebar: Necessity and Contingency

- *Necessary*: Given a certain set of causes, this event *had* to happen the way it did.
- *Contingent*: Given a certain set of causes, this event might *not* have happened or could have happened *differently*.

Causation

Sidebar: Necessity and Contingency

- Sample focus question: "Could the same authors have written the Constitution differently?"
- Possible answer: "The basic principles of representative government were necessary, but the particularities of the 3/5 clause might have turned out differently."

Evidence

- History, more than other disciplines, is concerned with the quality of evidence. To think historically is to think about evidence.
- Sample focus question: “How good is our evidence on the writing of the Constitution?”
- Possible answer: “Not good. The debates were in secret; our best forms of evidence are Madison’s notes and the ratification debates.”

Evidence

- Evidentiary questions can open up important historical issues.
- Example: James Madison’s notes.
- Madison as actor in convention as well as reporter.
- Madison’s suppression of the notes and opportunities for revision.

Character

- Asks broad questions about qualities and consequences of event
- Sample focus question: “Was the Constitution conservative or revolutionary?”
- Requires the student to think big.
- Rarely just a single answer.

Character

- Sample focus question: “Was the Constitution conservative or revolutionary?”
- Possible answer: “By establishing republicanism as the basis of government, it set the precedent for future liberation.”
- Possible answer: “By tying the free North to the powerful, slaveholding South, it gave national power to planters and maintained both slavery and the rule of propertied elites.”

Context

- Asks still broader questions, not just about the event but about the time.
- Treats the past as, potentially, a foreign country.
- Avoids presentism.
- Looks for big trends in politics, ideas, culture, and economics.

Context

- Sample focus question: “How did the cultural context of the colonies in the 18th century shape the Constitution?”
- Possible answer: “The erosion of patriarchy as the population expanded and sons pursued new economic opportunities further West shook the old chain of authority that extended from son to father to governor to king.”

Context

- Sample focus question: “How did the economic context of the colonies in the 18th century shape the Constitution?”
- Possible answer: “The growing might of the British empire and the increasing ease of transoceanic travel meant a tighter integration of the colonies into the empire, provoking colonists to react by establishing republican government as a check on imperial control.”

Context

- Sample focus question: “How did the political context of the colonies in the 18th century shape the Constitution?”
- Possible answer: “The recent discovery of numerous slave conspiracies and the attempts of the British to use abolition as a military tactic encouraged planters to assure their rights to own slaves against any government power, including their own government.”

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