



A GUIDE TO ESSAY WRITING

VOL. 5

A TEACHER'S GUIDE
TO HISTORICAL
INQUIRY

BY LINDSAY GIBSON AND JAMES MILES

WHAT IS INQUIRY?

INQUIRY IS A PROCESS THAT INVOLVES ASKING QUESTIONS, ANALYZING EVIDENCE AND INFORMATION, AND ARRIVING AT REASONED CONCLUSIONS IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH TRUTH, SEEK INFORMATION, OR DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING. INQUIRY IS CENTRAL TO HISTORY: THE WORD “HISTORY” COMES FROM THE GREEK WORD ἵστορία OR *HISTORIA*, WHICH MEANS INQUIRY, OR KNOWLEDGE ACQUIRED THROUGH RESEARCH.¹

BENEFITS OF HISTORICAL INQUIRY

For more than a century, historians and educators have encouraged the use of historical inquiry in teaching history because of its potential benefits.

Makes history more meaningful and relevant: Many students are bored by the study of history because they are treated as passive recipients of historical knowledge rather than as active inquirers. Inviting students to investigate authentic historical questions, topics, or issues that are important and relevant to them, and formulate their own conclusions and interpretations, is more likely to engage their interest and curiosity. Inquiry approaches also have the potential to motivate and better reach learners who are not always successful in traditional classroom settings or who have traditionally been excluded from official curricula.

Clarifies how historical knowledge is created: Most of the historical sources that students interact with when learning history are the end products of inquiry — secondary sources including textbooks, maps, charts, reports, documentaries, lectures, and films. Rarely are students asked to consider how these products were created, or to construct their own interpretations after analyzing historical evidence. History is a highly interpretive discipline based on incomplete evidence, not a body of knowledge that provides an objective window into past realities. It is difficult for students to understand both the nature of the discipline and the substantive knowledge (e.g., generalizations, facts, and substantive concepts) if they do not understand that history consists of constructed accounts that need to be analyzed and assessed. Thus, historical inquiry is both the means of deepening the understanding of history, and the discipline’s end, where instruction is focused on helping students use the procedural methods of the discipline to make sense of the past.

Promotes deeper understanding: Socio-constructivist learning theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge in complex and interactive ways as members of social groups situated in specific contexts. Given that historical inquiry asks students to investigate authentic problems and questions in collaboration with others, researchers contend that it promotes deep learning of the substantive knowledge and procedural knowledge (e.g., strategies, methods, and procedural concepts) they encounter in history classrooms and the transfer of this knowledge to different contexts.

Strengthens citizenship competencies: There has been a shift toward civic education in democratic states that focuses on an activist and participatory conception of citizenship. Participatory citizenship is defined in terms of civic competencies — knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions needed to participate in civic life, including being “knowledgeable about contemporary society and the issues it faces; disposed to work toward the common good; supportive of pluralism; and skilled at taking action to make their communities, nation, and the world a better place.”² In addition to using historical inquiry to deepen students’ understanding of the subject matter,

1. Janda and Joseph, “On Language, Change, and Language Change—Or, of History, Linguistics, and Historical Linguistics,” 163.

2. Sears, “Historical Thinking and Citizenship Education: It Is Time to End the War,” 353.

the ultimate goal of an inquiry approach is to nurture students' ability to do inquiry in self-regulated ways that can contribute to the development of civic competencies. This includes making sense of competing perspectives and viewpoints, using a "discerning eye" to evaluate arguments and the evidence and reasons they are based on, and reaching informed, evidence-based decisions.

More interesting for teachers: History teachers who regularly use inquiry approaches report that it makes history teaching more interesting, fun, and rewarding. Using inquiry approaches can introduce greater variety and flexibility into teaching practice and has the potential to change teachers' relationships with students by providing more opportunity to interact with students individually and in small and large groups. This also enables teachers to provide specific and descriptive feedback about students' learning in relation to the topic under investigation, check in with students more often, and get to know them better.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HISTORICAL INQUIRY

There are many misconceptions about what historical inquiry is and how to do it effectively, which prevents teachers from using inquiry more regularly to teach history.

Inquiry takes too long. One of the common misconceptions about historical inquiry is that it can only be used for large-scale projects that take weeks or months to complete, have wide scopes, and demand an in-depth treatment of historical content. In fact, the scale of the inquiry is determined by the quantity and complexity of background knowledge students need to complete it, the quantity and complexity of historical sources consulted, and the type of product or performance students use to represent and communicate their findings. As the sample inquiry tasks in the table below illustrate, teachers can plan inquiries of different scales and scopes that can be completed in one or more lessons, a unit, or an entire course. In this way, larger inquiries can be seen as the culmination of a series of smaller inquiries that collectively build students' knowledge and competencies. Teachers with limited time can reduce the scope and scale of an inquiry so it can be completed in a brief amount of time. Moreover, students and the teacher can pursue more challenging inquiries as they gain experience and expertise with shorter inquiries.

TABLE 1: VARYING SCALES OF INQUIRY TASKS

| Scale | Inquiry Tasks |
|--|---|
| Classroom activity (5–30 minutes) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » What is the cartoonist's implied message about Sir John A. Macdonald's attitude to First Nations? » Offer a plausible explanation of the 5Ws of the historical photograph. |
| Single lesson | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Is the White Paper introduced by Pierre Trudeau's government in 1969 a historically significant event? » Is C.W. Jefferys' illustration of Jacques Cartier's crew praying for relief from disease accurate given the description in Cartier's account? |
| Multiple lesson sequence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Using the sources provided, decide who was responsible for causing the 1935 Regina Riot. » Is the textbook account of the signing of the Numbered Treaties justifiable given the oral histories and other sources you analyzed? |
| Unit long | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » To what extent have women's rights improved since the Second World War? » Which five consequences of the Great Depression had the greatest impact on people's lives? |

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Course | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » To what extent was Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s 1904 prediction that “For the next 100 years, Canada shall be the star towards which all men who love progress and freedom shall come” accurate? » Select 10 visual images that highlight the greatest successes and failures in Canadian history over the last 150 years. |
|---------------|---|

Inquiry should be student directed. Another misconception is that independent inquiry is more authentic and preferable to structured inquiry. It is unrealistic to expect students with little or no experience to successfully complete independent inquiry with minimal teacher support. Unguided or discovery-based inquiries can reinforce misconceptions and inaccuracies and often result in shallow and naïve understandings. Effective inquiry is not defined by the degree to which inquiry is teacher or student directed, but by the quality of thinking that students exhibit. If students are going to learn how to do historical inquiry, then teachers need to explicitly teach the metacognitive strategies, dispositions, and specific knowledge that students require to construct sound historical understanding.

Scaffolding is the planned and unplanned instructional support that teachers provide to help learners build increasingly sophisticated understandings of substantive concepts, disciplinary concepts, and metacognitive supports that help students connect existing knowledge with new ideas and manage their thinking throughout the inquiry. There are various ways to scaffold students’ understanding during historical inquiry, including introducing simplified tasks and increasing complexity over time, problematizing common assumptions, and employing cognitive apprenticeship. In a cognitive apprenticeship approach, teachers introduce and revisit key procedures and strategies by modelling, using guided practice in small groups, and inviting independent practice.

Rather than viewing inquiry as student directed or teacher directed, we conceptualize inquiry on a continuum, as illustrated in the table below, that ranges from teacher directed to student directed for each of the five elements of inquiry. If students have little experience or expertise doing historical inquiry, teachers can direct all elements of an inquiry and provide the scaffolding students will need to complete the inquiry. Teachers can also invite higher degrees of student direction for the elements of inquiry that students are able to complete without support, while including more teacher direction for aspects that students need more support with. Teachers who are inexperienced, unclear, or uneasy about inquiry can begin with largely teacher-directed inquiries and, as they become more comfortable, can experiment with inviting students to assume responsibility for different aspects of the inquiry.

TABLE 2: A SCAFFOLDING FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE HISTORICAL INQUIRY

| Elements of Historical Inquiry | Scaffolding Continuum | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| | Teacher directed | Shared | Student directed |
| Selecting and contextualizing the historical topic | Teacher selects the historical topic and provides substantive knowledge important for contextualizing the topic. | Students select a historical topic from a list of teacher-provided options. Teacher provides some substantive knowledge, and students identify additional substantive knowledge important for contextualizing the topic. | Students select the historical topic and identify the substantive knowledge important for contextualizing the topic. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Asking historical inquiry questions | Teacher provides historical inquiry question. | Students select historical inquiry question from teacher-provided options, or students develop historical inquiry questions with teacher support. | Students develop their own historical inquiry questions. |
| Identifying historical evidence | Teacher identifies the historical evidence. | Students select historical evidence from teacher-provided options, and/or students identify additional evidence with teacher support. | Students identify their own historical evidence. |
| Analyzing evidence and drawing conclusions | Teacher provides methods, tools, and instruction to help students analyze evidence and draw conclusions. | Students select methods and strategies for analyzing evidence from teacher-provided options, or teacher provides some instructional support to help students analyze evidence and draw conclusions. | Students identify methods and tools to analyze evidence and draw conclusions. |
| Representing and communicating findings | Teacher selects the product or performance students will use to represent and communicate their findings with others. | Students select the product or performance they will use to represent and communicate their findings with others with teacher support or from provided options. | Students select the product or performance they will use to represent and communicate their findings with others. |

Inquiry should be independent. Historical inquiry is often envisioned as a solitary process, where students conduct research on topics of personal interest. Research has illustrated that collaboration among students has the potential to foster important civic values and dispositions, assist learners in constructing knowledge as members of social groups, enable students to practice and internalize sophisticated ways of thinking, and offer peer support and distribution of cognitive demands and risks. Teachers can support collaboration in their classrooms in the following ways:

- » Regularly provide opportunities for students to share and build knowledge in different sized groups (e.g., pairs, small groups, large groups).
- » Explicitly teach students the knowledge, dispositions, and strategies to support working collaboratively. This includes discussion protocols, establishing defined roles and responsibilities during group work, strategies that ensure all voices and perspectives are heard, and tools for collaborative decision-making such as establishing consensus.
- » Establish clear expectations for group work and model the behaviours that students are expected to practice in their social interactions.
- » Utilize a variety of self, peer, and teacher assessments to assess the important dispositions and strategies that students are expected to learn.

Historical inquiry requires teachers to redesign everything. Many teachers mistakenly believe that implementing inquiry requires redesigning everything from scratch and discarding all the existing lessons and resources they have created or acquired. We suggest a more practical two-pronged approach: adapt existing lessons, activities, and projects for use in inquiry activities, and gradually build a library of new inquiry-based lessons, activities, and primary and secondary sources over time.

1. Adapt existing resources. All existing lessons, activities, and projects can be converted into inquiry activities. For example, rather than completing knowledge recall questions about information in the textbook or other secondary sources, invite students to “read against the text” in one of the following ways:
 - » assess the justifiability or accuracy of descriptions, explanations, or conclusions offered in textbooks or other secondary sources (e.g., painting, book, documentary, dramatic film) in light of additional sources provided to students;
 - » analyze the images and topics included in a textbook chapter to make inferences about which events, people, and developments are judged to be historically significant by the textbook authors;
 - » suggest revisions to the content and images included in a textbook to make it more inclusive of different perspectives and groups;
 - » identify the most important continuities and changes in daily life for people in two time periods featured in a textbook.
2. Assemble accessible materials. Many organizations produce learning resources, lessons, and activities that use inquiry to teach about important topics or events in history. Many of these resources include reproducible activity sheets, accessible primary and secondary sources, and teacher instructions. Teachers can adapt them to meet students’ needs and curriculum requirements, or use the resources as templates to design inquiry activities that utilize similar questions but different topics. In the section *Identifying historical sources* we introduce strategies for making primary and secondary sources more accessible for students. We suggest visiting [The Canadian Encyclopedia](#) and [Historica Canada’s Education Portal](#) for education guides, lesson plans, and research resources.

FIVE ELEMENTS OF HISTORICAL INQUIRY

In this section we describe the five elements of historical inquiry: selecting and contextualizing the historical topic, asking historical inquiry questions, identifying historical evidence, analyzing evidence and drawing conclusions, and representing and communicating findings. Taken together, these five elements constitute a full instructional planning arc, from posing the historical question to sharing the results. Although the elements are organized in a linear developmental sequence, we want to emphasize that historical inquiry is not a linear process. Teachers can start with any of the five elements when planning a historical inquiry and move back and forth between different elements throughout the planning process.

Selecting and contextualizing the historical topic. When selecting topics for historical inquiry it is important that they are central to the curriculum, meaningful for students, and historically significant. It seems an obvious point, but the historical topics selected for inquiry should focus on themes, issues, concepts, events, people, or learning outcomes that are central to the curriculum. Selecting historical topics that are meaningful for students is a difficult task given that many of the events studied in history class occurred in time periods and locations far removed from students’ daily lives. While it might be impossible to make every historical inquiry topic relevant and meaningful for each student, students are often more interested in topics that are relevant to their personal interests, family history, identity, and experiences out of school. Allowing them to investigate an aspect of the topic that interests them will make the topic more meaningful, too. Historical inquiry topics should also be historically significant, focusing on historical events, people, or developments that had deep consequences for many people over a long period of time and highlighting an enduring or emerging issue in the past or in contemporary life.

Contextualization refers to the knowledge of events, structures, themes, concepts, and chronology needed to understand a historical event and situate it in time and space. Many teachers assume that contextualizing must be

“front loaded” at the beginning of an inquiry. However, providing all the important contextual knowledge at the beginning of an inquiry can overload and overwhelm students. It is often advisable to introduce some contextual knowledge at the outset to get students started and provide additional knowledge as they require. Furthermore, the teacher need not directly present contextual information. Students can acquire contextual knowledge through a preliminary inquiry. For example, in order to determine the historical significance of a person, students need to know what the individual has done. They might develop this prior knowledge by drawing conclusions about the person’s most important accomplishments and failures from a variety of secondary and primary sources. Armed with this knowledge, students are then in a position to assess the person’s historical significance.

Asking historical inquiry questions. Questions are at the heart of inquiry because they activate an investigation, provide purpose and direction for learning activities, promote deeper understanding and engagement with the subject matter, and invite thinking. In order for inquiry questions to provoke, drive, and sustain critical thinking, they need to meet three criteria:

- » **Authentic:** Students are engaged by questions that are authentic and focus on controversial issues that are debated in society or by scholars. News websites often publish articles about history that can be used to frame historical inquiry questions. For example, the June 28, 2019 *National Post* article “A century after the Treaty of Versailles, its anniversary passes largely unobserved” could be used to frame an inquiry question that asks students to decide if the Treaty of Versailles deserves greater recognition in Canadian school curricula.
- » **Manageable:** Inquiry questions must be manageable for students given the time available, the students’ abilities, the accessibility of historical sources, and expectations for the products and performances with which students will represent and communicate their findings.
- » **Invite reasoned judgment:** Research indicates that evaluative questions promote deeper historical reasoning than explanatory or descriptive questions. Descriptive questions (e.g., describe the causes of the First World War) and explanatory questions (e.g., explain the causes of the First World War) can easily be converted into evaluative questions (e.g., which of the causes were most important?). This highlights the difference between “re-search” questions that merely require students to locate ideas, facts, and conclusions that others have already arrived at, and genuine inquiry questions that require reasoned judgment after considering plausible options.³ Converting research questions into inquiry questions is not as simple as asking students, “What do you think?” “Explain your answer,” or “Give reasons for your opinion.” Instead the questions need to include evaluative phrases that invite students to judge between two or more plausible alternatives. To illustrate this distinction, below are four examples of research questions and inquiry questions.

TABLE 3: RESEARCH AND INQUIRY QUESTIONS

| Research Questions | Inquiry Questions |
|--|--|
| What were the accomplishments and failures of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada’s first prime minister? | Should John A. Macdonald be celebrated as Canada’s <i>greatest</i> prime minister? |
| What are the similarities and differences between Canada in 1900 and today? | Was Canada in 1900 <i>more similar</i> or <i>different</i> when compared with Canada today? |
| What were the consequences of the Great Depression? | What consequences of the Great Depression had the <i>greatest impact</i> ? |
| Why were enemy aliens in Canada interned during the First World War? | Was the internment of enemy aliens in Canada during the First World War <i>ethically justifiable</i> ? |

3 Stipp et al., *Teaching Historical Thinking: Revised and Expanded Edition*.

- » Focus on a historical thinking concept: Over the last three decades, scholars have conceptualized the structure of historical thinking using the notion of “second-order historical concepts,” which are defined as disciplinary concepts that shape “the way we go about doing history.”⁴ Peter Seixas designed his influential framework of six second-order historical thinking concepts to be intelligible to teachers and students, yet generative enough to guide investigations of fundamental challenges encountered when doing history.⁵ The six historical thinking concepts Seixas outlined are a useful, possibly essential way to frame historical inquiry questions because they address some of the most important issues for understanding history and require students to apply historical thinking concepts to historical content. Table 4 provides examples of how the six historical thinking concepts included in Seixas’s model can be used to frame inquiry questions.

TABLE 4: FRAMING INQUIRY QUESTIONS USING HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPTS

| Historical Thinking Concept | Historical Inquiry Question |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Historical significance | Should all Canadian students study the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike? |
| Evidence and interpretation | Is the textbook account about the threat Japanese Canadians posed to security during the Second World War justifiable? |
| Continuity and change | Have women’s rights improved, stayed the same, or declined in the last 100 years? |
| Cause and consequence | What causes best explain why the North American bison was nearly extinct on the Canadian prairies by the 1880s? |
| Historical perspectives | Did most Canadians support the outbreak of the First World War? |
| Ethical judgment | Was the Canadian government justified in passing the <i>War Measures Act</i> that suspended civil liberties during the October Crisis of 1970? |

Identifying historical sources. Though thousands of primary and secondary sources are available online for free or minimal cost, identifying and adapting sources that are accessible for students is a significant challenge for many teachers. Accessibility is a particularly significant issue for students who are struggling readers. The primary and secondary sources provided to students are often too long, too difficult, or too boring. Moreover, many students are not provided with the knowledge needed to analyze different types of sources, or they are asked to complete decontextualized activities with little overall purpose.

We suggest three criteria to guide teachers in identifying and adapting primary and secondary sources.

- » Provide sufficient and relevant evidence: The primary and secondary sources used in an inquiry need to provide students with ample relevant evidence to respond to the question being asked. Too often the sources included with learning resources are neither sufficient nor germane to the inquiry question. When doing inquiry, multiple sources are often needed. Primary sources should not be privileged over secondary sources, as both types have benefits and limitations depending on the question and focus of the inquiry. For example, while paintings and photographs created at the time an event occurred may not be as helpful as secondary sources for describing people’s reactions to an event, they may be excellent sources for examining daily life.

4 Lee and Ashby, “Progression in Historical Understanding among Students Ages 7-14,” 199.

5 Seixas, “Benchmarks of Historical Thinking: A Framework for Assessment in Canada”; Seixas and Morton, *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*.

- » Accessible for students: Primary and secondary sources can be made more accessible for students through the processes of focusing, simplifying, and presentation. Focusing involves excerpting sources to include only the evidence that is most relevant to the historical question being investigated. Simplifying involves transcribing difficult-to-read text into easier-to-read fonts, providing simplified vocabulary in text or in the margins, offering contemporary spelling and punctuation, and in extreme cases reordering complicated syntax to make more straightforward sentences. Presentation, which focuses on ensuring that sources will not be daunting for students, includes writing in larger font, reducing documents to less than 250 words, and providing white space to make them look less intimidating. As students become more accustomed to working with different types of sources, teachers can decrease the amount of adaptations they make to primary and secondary sources.
- » Represent different perspectives: While it is impossible to provide students with evidence that represents all perspectives on a topic, for most historical questions it is important that students investigate more than one perspective (except those instances when the focus of the inquiry is one source or perspective). For example, an inquiry that focuses on Canadians' reactions to the outbreak of the First World War might include the perspectives of farmers' organizations, soldiers, women, labour organizations, pacifists, politicians, popular media, religious leaders, and ethnic minorities.

Analyzing evidence and drawing conclusions. Inquiry requires that students understand the historical thinking concepts and investigative methods (e.g., strategies for analyzing charts, photographs, and text documents) that will help them analyze the evidence and draw plausible conclusions about the inquiry question. When scaffolding students' understanding of historical thinking concepts, it is essential to introduce them to important aspects of the concept(s) in question, provide opportunities for them to apply the concepts to different topics and sources, and provide data charts and other thinking tools that help them organize their thinking. For example, before students assess the most important causes of the Great Depression, they should be introduced to criteria for identifying important causes and practice applying the criteria in relatively simple examples.

Drawing conclusions in history involves making logical assertions and claims about the past that are supported by sound arguments and well-evaluated evidence. It also involves considering other possible interpretations and counterarguments. The arguments and evidence used to support a claim or thesis is what counts in history, and historical conclusions are never definite, only more or less plausible.

Representing and communicating findings. Representing and communicating findings means deciding on the most effective ways to portray historical conclusions and share them with different audiences. This can be as simple as inviting students to share conclusions with a partner during a class discussion or to create more challenging and time-consuming products (e.g., essays, narratives, models, posters, political cartoons, graphic novels, blogs, interviews, or documentary films) and performances (e.g., role-playing, debates, tableaux, oral presentations, or town hall discussions). Each type of product or performance has benefits and challenges, and teachers and students should consider the following when deciding which to use:

- » What is being assessed? (e.g., substantive and disciplinary knowledge, historical inquiry abilities, logic and argumentation, reading and writing).
- » How much time will it take to complete the task and how much time is available?
- » Is the product or performance authentic and meaningful for students?
- » Do students have, or are they able to acquire, the knowledge and skills required to create the product or performance? For example, asking students to produce a video requires them to learn how to film, edit, and produce a video, which may or may not be feasible given the time available or access to resources.

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