

Historical Analysis and Interpretation



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Education Designs

Historical Thinking

- The five dimensions of historical thinking are interactive and mutually supportive.
- Initiate historical thinking by challenging students to enter into the historical record and use sound historical perspectives in the analysis of problems.
- Written history is a dialogue among historians about what happened, why it happened, how it happened and its importance.



Textbooks: The Necessary Evil

- “Is this the right answer?”
- “Am I on the right track?”
- “But that’s not what it says in the book.”
- Students often have the need to find the one right answer or the one authoritative interpretation, which textbooks often provide.
- Textbooks often lay out history as a succession of facts; but what facts do they include and why?



Conquering the questions and getting students to think historically

- Have students read historical narratives created by others to gain insight into interpretation, explaining connections, change, and consequences.
- Students must analyze the assumptions and assess the strength of the evidence presented.



What facts did the author include or choose to omit?

- “...there is no such thing as a pure fact, innocent of interpretation. Behind every fact presented to the world- is a judgment. The judgment that has been made is that this fact is important, and that other facts, omitted, are not important.” Howard Zinn: [A Peoples History](#)



How do we get students to analyze and interpret history?

- One must use primary and secondary sources, presenting alternative accounts of the past.
- Students must examine the interpretative nature of history.
- What lens is the historian using to color their narrative of history? i.e. Economic, Social, Political, Cultural
- Who disagrees with them and why?



Students must go beyond the surface

- Students must use analytic skills to compare ideas, beliefs, or opinions held by the subject of the document or narrative at a particular time or comparing continuity and change over time.



Historical Analysis Allows:

- Students the skills necessary to assess the authority of historical records.
- Students to judge the adequacy of the historical evidence upon which the historian has based their argument.
- Students to determine the soundness of the arguments historians have made from the evidence.
- Students to differentiate between opinions and informed hypotheses.



Historical Causality

- How change occurs in society.
- How human intentions matter.
- How ends are influenced by the means.
- NOTHING'S more dangerous than a simple, MONOCAUSAL explanation of the past or present.



Historical Thinking Pitfalls

- Historical analysis and interpretation can warn students of the common problems of lineality and inevitability.
- Lineality- drawing straight lines between the past and the present, as if the events of the past were destined to become its future outcome.
- Inevitability- that the way things are is the way they had to be, and mankind lacks the free will and the ability to make a choice.



Historical Thinking Pitfalls cont'd

- Unless students can believe history could have turned out differently, they may accept the idea that the future is also inevitable and the human involvement and individual action cannot change it.
 - This attitude can breed civic apathy and cynicism
 - “restore to the past the options it once had”



Students engaging in Historical Analysis and Interpretation are able to:

- **Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas,** values, personalities, and institutions by finding likenesses and differences.
- **Consider multiple perspectives** of various people in the past by showing their differing motives and interests, hopes and fears.
- **Analyze cause-effect relationships** keeping in mind **Multiple Causation**, including
 - **Importance of the individual**, the influence of ideas, and the **role of chance**.



Students engaging in Historical Analysis and Interpretation are able to:

- **Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues** that transcend regional and temporal boundaries.
- **Distinguish between unsupported opinion and informed hypotheses** grounded in historical evidence
- **Compare competing historical narratives.**
- **Challenge arguments of historical inevitability** by showing examples of how different choices could have led to different consequences.



Students engaging in Historical Analysis and Interpretation are able to:

- **Hold interpretations of history as tentative**, subject to change as new information is uncovered.
- **Evaluate major debates among historians** concerning alternative interpretations of the past.
- **Hypothesize the influence of the past**, including both the limitations and the opportunities made by past decisions.



“Without consideration of the future, the past is reduced to nostalgia. Yet without the past, the future does not benefit from the human laboratory of past experiences.”



Fred Drake and Lynn Nelson
(2004)

Hierarchical Primary Sources



Using the First-, Second-,
and Third-Order Approach

Types of Primary Sources

- Print Documents
- Electronic Media
- Folklore, Folkways, and Mythology
- Images
- Material Culture



First-Order Document

- A First-order document is the essential primary source, it is the focal point of your lesson.
- One should lead a discussion of this document based on a broad, open-ended question.
- In your first order document, you are providing the intellectual direction of your lesson.



Second-Order Documents

- Second-order documents are those primary sources that support or challenge the first order document.
- Between three to five documents are recommended, which may be textual, images, or artifacts.
- 2nd order docs. should serve one of two purposes- to corroborate or to contrast the ideas found in the 1st order document.
- This builds, in your students, a more nuanced understanding of the past.



Third-Order Documents

- Third-order documents are primary sources students eventually find themselves.
- Students must find third-order documents that relate to your first-order document.



Criteria for Choosing a First-Order Document

- Choose your document based on:
 - Its historical value,
 - Its potential contribution to your students' historical knowledge, and
 - Its potential to help them develop their historical thinking.
- The source should represent the heart of a historical issue or period in history.
- It determines the intellectual direction of subsequent discussions.

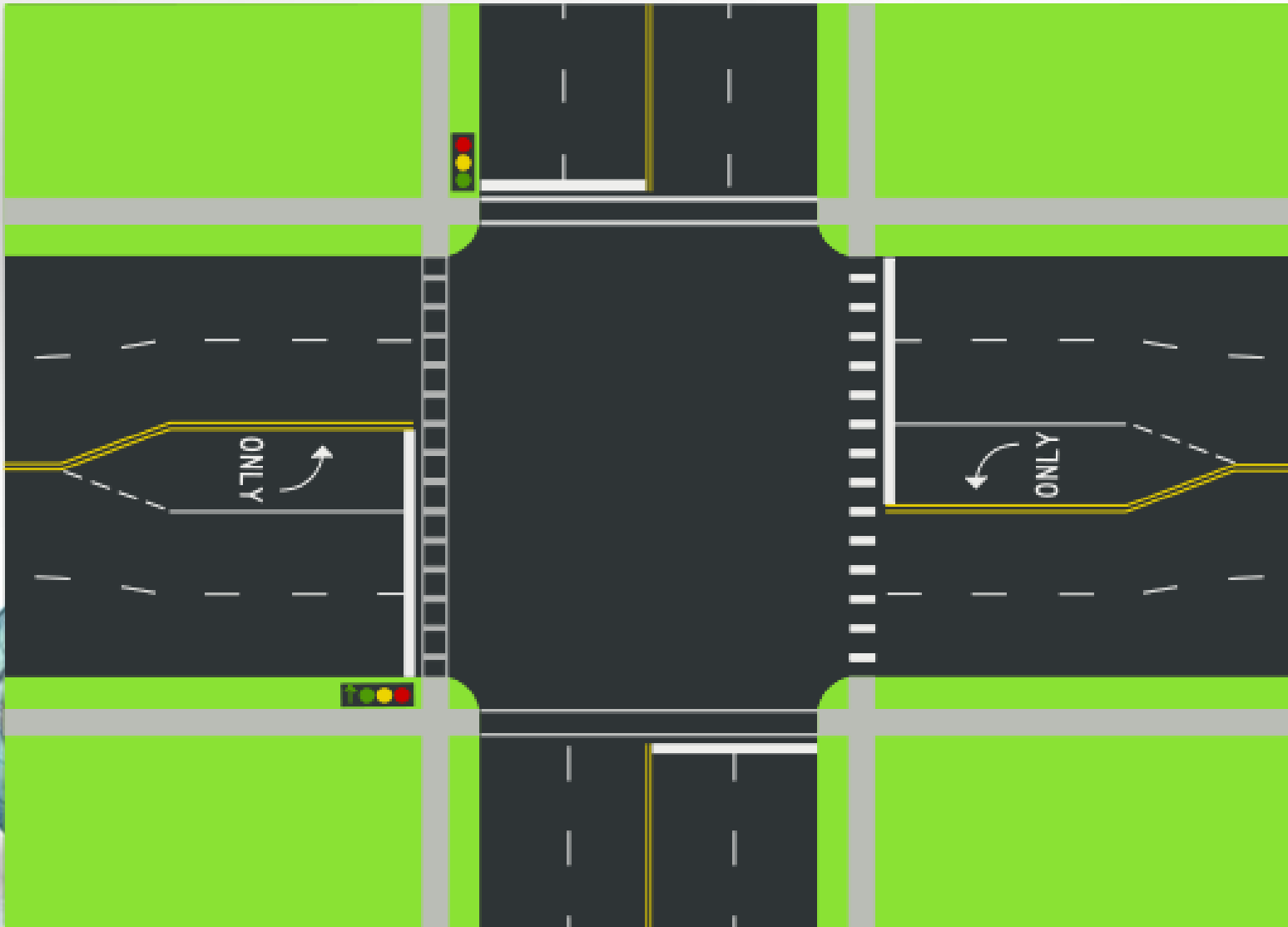


Criteria for Second- and Third-Order Sources

- The criteria for second and third-order documents are similar to first-order documents.
- The purpose of second-order documents is to make sure they support or challenge the first-order document.
- Create a list of potential sources for your third-order documents.



Teaching Historical Analysis and Interpretation using “The Intersection”



Using “The Intersection” as Historical Accident Reconstruction

- Using the intersection is a way of demonstrating the idea that people make choices and that their actions have consequences.
- This method also demonstrates the consequences of the action or inaction relative to the other people waiting to enter the intersection.
- It presents historical events as a problem to analyze the various sides and understand their relative positions.



Setting Up the Intersection

- Using an historical event, each “side” is at the intersection with non-working lights, and they have decisions to make.
- Have your students consider the full range of these decisions for each side.
- Place the historical figures or groups at different non-working lights.
- There should be at least three sides.




Setting Up the Intersection

- Assign them colors corresponding to their positions on the issue.
 - Green: the side that wants things to change. (go)
 - Red: the side that wants things to remain the same. (stop)
 - Yellow: those trapped at the light on caution.
- “History is about intersections, intersections are about choices, and choices influence struggle.”

Y. Williams



What This Method Teaches Your Students

- Students entire lives are about intersections.
- It shows the choices they make impact others even if they're not aware of the consequences.
- Allows students to hypothesize what would happen if different choices had been made.
- Allows students to develop a sense of historical empathy.
-  The “Intersection” can help you engage almost all of the Bradley Commission’s 13 Habits of the Mind (1995).

The Lesson

- Select a primary source that represents all views or several sources that illustrate various positions of each group.
- Students should read the documents and then prepare a list of reasons explaining their position.
- Have each group present its position and have students debate them. You can switch sides and have them argue different views.



The Lesson

- As a culminating activity your students can write journal entries from the perspective of one of the people or groups involved in the “accident” and tell how that person’s life has been affected .
- Also, you may have a directed discussion about how making different decisions at the intersection could have affected the outcome.



Ways to Differentiate

- The “Intersection” method can be modified for students in grades 5-12.
- Elementary and middle school teachers can use this method with paraphrased or summarized documents.
- The historical issue that is the basis of the intersection can be simplified for younger students.

