
Think-Aloud

Learning to think like a historian

“An Unnatural Act”

Some have called thinking like a historian an “unnatural act.” In fact, every discipline has its own “unnatural” approach to reading and analyzing texts that soon become second nature. You will take many courses in your time as an undergraduate student and much of the information I teach you will be lost. However, the cognitive skills you develop in this course will, I hope, remain with you.

My pedagogy, thus, puts a premium on learning to think like a historian. For that reason, I provide a syllabus and a “Think-Aloud” sheet, which I consider almost as a second, or supplemental, syllabus. First, I will clarify what I mean by thinking like a historian in this section. Next, I will outline the six cognitive skills I hope you develop throughout this course. Finally, I will explain what a “think-aloud” is, its intended purpose, how to approach the exercise, and the way I integrate think-aloud’s into the classroom space.

What does it mean to think like a historian? In order to answer this question, let us consider what a historian does. Historians read primary and secondary sources in order to answer a question about the past. A historian *does not* simply seek to fill a gap in a timeline. This would imply that once all the gaps were filled, the work of a historian is over. *Historians make arguments.* In fact, historians who read the same primary sources often produce entirely different arguments about the past. A historian’s arguments are largely influenced by various methodologies, produced by schools of thought.

Now that we are more clear about what a historian does, we may consider how they think. A historian begins by reading sources and relating them to other sources, making **connections** and **inferences**, in order to answer a historical **question** (like, “When did most Persians in the Middle East convert to Islam?”). She cannot make definitive statements (“We know that by such-and-such year, most people in the Middle East had converted”); instead, she must qualify her statements by explaining her inferences (“Based on these documents, it appears that by such-and-such year, most Persians had Arabic names, which means that by that generation most had converted”).

Some other historian may come along and disagree with her reading of those **sources**, however (“Those documents were written by the descendants of the generation in question and likely hoped to increase their credibility by portraying themselves as early converts; therefore, it is likely that most had not converted by that point”). Thus, in history there are

alternative perspectives, sometimes based on the same sources. Historians debate with each others' readings of sources. Thus, the notion of a definitive history, like those presented in textbooks, is not an accurate representation of the field. We, as historians, must accept **limits in our knowledge**, which allow us to return to the same documents time and time again for further consideration. Therefore, a historian's work never ends, even when all the records are found and all the gaps in the timelines are filled. As novice historians, it is your responsibility in this class to ask yourselves serious questions about secondary sources — does this argument make sense? do I agree with this historian's reading of the primary sources? — and make connections between various primary and secondary sources.

The Six Cognitive Skills

What exactly is historical thinking — or, better yet, what does it mean to think like a historian? How does an instructor teach students to think in this way? Historians engage important cognitive skills, which require development among students who recently matriculated into university. Too often, history classes stress *knowledge* rather than *thinking through knowledge*.

In order to clarify what I intend students to learn, I have outlined in detail the six cognitive skills this course develops and their relationship to the discipline of history. These skills include questioning, making connections, sourcing, making inferences, considering alternative perspectives, and understanding the limits in knowledge (both within the discipline and one's own limits).

Questioning	By providing students with the tools to both think deeply about a text (“does this argument make sense?”) and develop their own ideas (“if this argument does not make sense, then what does?”), students will learn to ask educated questions. This is a skill they will use outside the classroom as discerning voters, sentient of biases and critical of authority.
Making Connections	For a historian, making connections between texts — whether primary sources or secondary sources — is imperative to the process of writing history and developing an argument. I design a syllabus to allow for students to make their own connections and discoveries.
Sourcing	Students must learn to reflexively ask themselves, “How do we know that?” when reading a secondary text and “Why was this text/ film/ image produced?” when analyzing a primary source. A corollary of questioning, this is also enormously important to a student's intellectual growth as they become immersed in public and political discourse.
Making Inferences	Teaching students to make <i>educated</i> inferences based on pieces of information that do not present a complete story offers them a glimpse into the work done by historians (the behind the scenes chaos, as it were) in order to produce a neat and organized history.

Alt Perspectives

Students must learn that history is not simply a collection of data (names, dates, and events) that produce an unchallenged narrative. In fact, the discipline is built on arguments, influenced by various methodologies and schools of thought. Deeply connected to “making inferences,” students learn there exist many competing perspectives, as historians voice disagreement with the inferences made by other historians.

Limits in Knowledge

In teaching the limits in source material and the inferences experts in a field must make in order to offer a cohesive (if incomplete) history, students must learn that there are practical limits in historical knowledge and limits in their own knowledge, as well.

“Think-Aloud” Activities

“Think-Aloud” exercises allow the instructor to gauge a student’s ability to think historically. In a think-aloud activity, I ask students to read a primary source document related to history with which students are familiar. I then ask them to record their thoughts immediately after their reading of the document. Please listen to **Recording 1** modeling this before you record your own think-aloud.

Recording 1

1. What cognitive skills did Defne use in reading the text? Explain how she used them and to what end.
2. Why is her approach to the source particular to historians? How else may one, perhaps in a different discipline, read this text?

We will talk more in detail about Defne’s think-aloud in class. For now, consider how you would read the source differently, cognizant of the skills outlined above and their utility to unearthing some historical knowledge.

In the classroom, students will conduct think-alouds almost on a daily basis with partners as they work through various primary and secondary sources. Reading a textbook is simple and provides students with the confidence to make definitive statements about the past. Reading primary sources, however, challenges our perception of history as a fixed reality that we may grasp. This classroom provides students a glimpse into what it is like for historians to piece together a seemingly complete picture of the past based on incomplete information and often problematic documents.

Think-Aloud

Exercise 1

Please read the following document and record your thoughts immediately after. Do not worry about your recording being unpolished. Pauses, stutters, changes in directions of thought, etc are all important in understanding how students process information.

Introduction: Herodotus, a Greek historian, is considered the Father of History. Written in the fifth century BCE, *The Histories*, which investigated the origins of the Greco-Persian Wars, represents one of the most famous works of history and literature in the Western world.

Herodotus, *The Histories*

Book II

This, it is said, was the first outrage which Cambyses committed. The second was the slaying of his sister, who had accompanied him into Egypt, and lived with him as his wife, though she was his full sister, the daughter both of his father and his mother. The way wherein he had made her his wife was the following: It was not the custom of the Persians, before his time, to marry their sisters---but Cambyses, happening to fall in love with one of his, and wishing to take her to wife, as he knew that it was an uncommon thing, called together the royal judges, and asked them, whether there was any law which allowed a brother, if he wished, to marry his sister? Now the royal judges are certain picked men among the Persians, who hold their office for life, or until they are found guilty of some misconduct. By them justice is administered in Persia, and they are the interpreters of the old laws, all disputes being referred to their decision. When Cambyses, therefore, put his question to these judges, they gave him an answer which was at once true and safe, "They did not find any law," they said, "allowing a brother to take his sister to wife, but they found a law, that the king of the Persians might do whatever he pleased." And so they neither warped the law through fear of Cambyses, nor ruined themselves by over stiffly maintaining the law, but they brought another quite distinct law to the king's help, which allowed him to have his wish. Cambyses, therefore, married the object of his love [Atossa, the mother of Xerxes], and no long time afterwards he took to wife another sister. It was the younger of these who went into Egypt, and there suffered death at his hands.

Assignment: Please record your initial response after reading. Try to limit the length of this recording between 45-90 seconds. I will send you my own response the day after you submit your Think-Aloud in order to give you a sense of how I would approach the same text.