

Crafting Historical Questions

STEP 1: IDENTIFY PURPOSE

The purpose of a historical inquiry question should help define the scope of investigation for students. A good inquiry question will allow students to evaluate sources effectively as they know the end goal. Some categories of questions include:

- GAIN UNDERSTANDING**
 - Basic Information (who, what, where, when)
 - Understanding the Source (credibility, perspective, close read)
 - Gains background information but does not lead to rigorous inquiry
- INTERPRET THE SOURCE**
 - Examining causes and consequences
 - Compare people and events
 - Identifying continuity and change over time
- EVALUATE THE SIGNIFICANCE**
 - Changes (long and short term) resulting from the events or people
 - What the events or people reveal in history or today

STEP 2: QUESTION LEVEL

After identifying the purpose for the question, consider where and when the question will exist in the class. Is it to capture students' attention? Or guide their yearly thinking? Something in between?

Bell Ringer

- Wide variety of goals
- Can spark interest or introduce a subject

Reading

- Narrow, guides students to critical information about the text.
- Helps gather evidence

Lesson

- Establishes purpose
- Students able to answer it by the end of the lesson
- Centers the investigation

Unit

- Gives purpose to the entire unit
- Helps organize content
- Require several lessons to answer the question

Year Long

- Unites major ideas from multiple units
- Open ended

Examples

Should individuals under 18 be allowed to vote? Why or why not?

In the "Declaration of Sentiments" what reasons do the authors give for demanding women's suffrage?

How did women work to achieve the vote?

What were the goals of Progressives and how did they work to achieve those goals?

What does it mean to be an American in modern times?

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STEP 3: DRAFT & REVISE

Strong inquiry questions begin with an interrogative word or phrase: *How, Why, To what extent, In what ways*. Use some of the sentence stems below to help generate draft questions:

Gain Understanding

- Basic information (who, what, where, when)
 - **Who was involved in...**
 - **When did ____ happen...**
- Understanding the source (credibility, perspective, close read)
 - **Whose perspectives are represented or missing in...**
 - **What assumptions about ____ are embedded in...**
 - **Where can we find information to corroborate...**
 - **What were the arguments for and against...**

Interpret the Source

- Cause and consequence
 - **What factors contributed to...**
 - **To what extent did ____ influence...**
- Comparison
 - **What factors are responsible for the similarities/differences between...**
 - **In what ways are ____ similar/different?**
- Continuity and change over time
 - **In what ways do the views expressed by ____ illustrate continuity/change in...**
 - **How does ____ demonstrate continuity/change in...**

Evaluate the Significance

- **What do the sources tell us about...**
- **How did ____ challenge the common views of...**
- **What can we learn from...**
- **In what ways is this relevant to...**

WHAT TO AVOID

Some types of questions can be problematic as they cannot be easily answered with evidence, may lead students down the wrong historical path, or even put them in the position of defending terrible actions. A few types of questions to avoid are:

- Avoid assumptions or biases that can sway student thinking.
 - E.g., *Why was Abraham Lincoln a great president?*
- Students should never be in a position to justify unethical events.
 - E.g., *Explain why Hernan Cortes justified in colonizing what is known today as Mexico.*
- Avoid inquiry questions that can only be answered with an opinion, not by the evidence in the provided sources.
 - E.g., *Who was the most important historical person?*
- Ahistorical questions that have no basis on evidence.
 - E.g., *If Frederick Douglass was alive today, what would he think about the fight for LGBTQ+ rights?*

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STEP 4: EVALUATE

Just as with all writing, the heart of the process is in the revising. Even with something as small as a question, revising it can mean the difference between a short shallow student answer, and one that has depth. The goal for historical inquiries is for students to take the evidence provided by the teacher, critically analyze, and then interpret. The questions should ideally allow students to practice a historical thinking skill such as argument, reasoning, comparison, contextualization, interpretation, and synthesis. The goal of evaluating and revising the question is to ensure that the question (and student's answers) achieves the classroom goal.

For all questions:

- Is the question clear? Is the vocabulary accessible for my students?
- Does it address the learning goal I have for this instructional component?
- Can the answer be backed by evidence from the provided sources?

For interpret or evaluate questions also ask:

- Is this open-ended and does it allow for many possible answers?
- Does this question require students to think critically?
- Is this topic significant? Should students spend time in its investigation?
- Is it an interesting question that will hold my students' attention?