

## How to Think (and Talk and Write) Like a Historian

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*History.* Not “the past”! The study of the past. Not merely names, dates, chronologies. An investigation into the past. From the Greek, “*historia*,” meaning “inquiry.”

*What is history good for?* Not predicting the future. History helps us understand the world, helps us understand others (the cultivation of empathy), helps us understand the constraints on societies and individuals, helps us fathom other ways of doing things, helps us sharpen our own values. It helps us cultivate a healthy skepticism. And it can help us understand how change can play out

*Historiography.* Not the study of history! The study of historical writing, in general; or more specifically, the body of historical work on a particular subject. So, we might refer to the historiography of the print revolution or the historiography of Vietnam and the press.

*Primary sources.* Texts, images, documents, artifacts, anything, really, that provides an entryway to another time or place. These are not a direct transmission from the past, but documents that require contextualization and interpretation. They might include: news articles, photographs, memoirs, diaries, letters, ephemera, song lyrics, etc.

*Secondary sources.* The work of historians.

*Change & continuity.* This is the historian’s bread and butter. What changes? What remains the same? We can point to continuities in American foreign policy from 1898 to the present. Or to decisive changes. Remember these words of wisdom: history changes slowly, except when it doesn’t.

*Forces of change (causality).* These forces are rarely singular. We can often point to several forces of change that produce events. So... we argued that the print revolution of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. helped create conditions that fed the Scientific Revolution and the Protestant Reformation.

*Context.* A classic historian’s tool. We are always trying to put our sources and our subjects into context. Looking to context – national, social, economic, political, etc. – can help us to understand where something is coming from. To establish context, start with time and place. Of a news article, we would ask: When was it published? Where? Who was the journalist? What is the newspaper? What was happening at this time?

*Chronology and periodization.* What is your chronology? What is your periodization? And what defines each period? Such questions invite us to line up events in time and understand their relationship.

*Turning points.* Moments in time – or particular events – at which history turns.

*Contingency.* An advanced term, but an important one. The contingency of history reminds us that “every historical outcome depends upon a complicated web of prior conditions.... Change a single prior condition, and any historical outcome could have turned out differently.”

*Complexity.* In understanding historical change and continuity, historians often insist upon complexity. History is not an experiment with a dependent and independent variable. There are usually more variables than can be easily accounted for. Thus, historians prefer to analyze the many factors behind historical change.

*The “burden of the past.”* Remember these words of Karl Marx: People “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.” The past provides the circumstances that shape the present. (Note: you don’t need to follow the thinking of Marx the revolutionary to learn from Marx the historian!)

*Historical legacies.* Another way of talking about the “burden of the past,” though historical legacies are not necessarily burdens. The term points us to the lasting influence of the past upon the present. This influence may have to do with a wide variety of things: demographic patterns, culture, institutions, economic development, etc.