

# Historical Thinking – The “Big Six” Historical Concepts

Based on <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-thinking-concepts>

To think historically, students need to be able to six distinct but closely interrelated historical thinking concepts:

- Establish historical significance
- Use primary source evidence
- Identify continuity and change
- Analyze cause and consequence
- Take historical perspectives
- Understand the ethical dimension of historical interpretations.

Taken together, these concepts tie “historical thinking” to competencies in “historical literacy.” In this case, “historical literacy” means gaining a deep understanding of historical events and processes through active engagement with historical texts.

Historically literate citizens can assess the legitimacy of claims people have made related to History. (“History proves that . . .”, “History tells us that . . .”) They can interrogate historical sources. They know that a historical film can look “realistic” without being accurate. They understand the value of citing sources. In short, they can detect the differences, between the uses and abuses of history. “Historical thinking” only becomes possible in relation to substantive content. These concepts are not abstract “skills.” Rather, they provide the structure that shapes the practice of history.

## 1. Establish Historical Significance:

What is historically significant? How significant is something in History?

Sample activities:

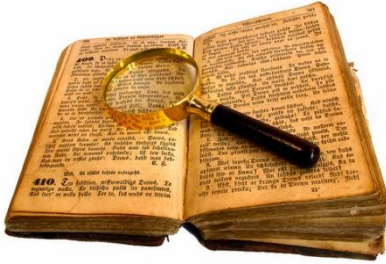
*After going through the simulation students are asked to identify the most historically significant events and developments.*

*The teacher provides them with specific events or developments and asks them to assess how significant each was.*

*Students are asked to assess how significant Canadians contributions to the war were?*

*Students examine individual soldier’s experiences and try to link their stories to larger trends such as training camp issues, daily life/dangers at the front, the course of battles, new battle technology and tactics, changes in morale, issues in racism and sexism.*





## 2. Use Primary Source Evidence:

Reading a source for evidence demands a different approach than reading a source for information. A history textbook is generally used more like a phone book: it is a place to look up information. Primary sources must be read differently. To use them well, we set them in their historical contexts and make inferences from them to help us understand more about what was going on when they were created. Once we establish what the evidence is, and whether or not it is legitimate, we examine it to see if it offers clues about the person who owned or created it, when the evidence was made, what it tells us about its creator, and what else was going on at that time.

Sample activities:

*What can we infer from the primary evidence from the war? Students are asked to examine original diaries artifacts and images presented in the simulation and draw inferences concerning the people who created them. Students could draw inferences concerning a soldier's thoughts/fears/attitudes towards serving in the war: training camp life and preparation for combat, surviving trench life, combat dangers, and attitudes towards their leaders and the war as a whole.*

## 3. Identifying Continuity and Change:

Students sometimes misunderstand history as a list of events. Once they start to understand history as a complex mix of continuity and change, they reach a fundamentally different sense of the past. There were lots of things going on at any one time in the past. Some changed rapidly while others remained relatively continuous. Judgments of continuity and change can be made on the basis of comparisons between some point in the past and the present, or between two points in the past.



Sample activities:

*Where can we find examples of continuity and change in the war? What stays the same, what changes – and in what ways? Students are asked to find examples of change and continuity through the war years, in training techniques, daily routines for our soldiers, sailors and airmen, their attitudes, weapons and equipment, types of fighting, and the progress of the war - who is winning, who is losing?*

#### 4. Analyze Cause and Consequence

In examining both tragedies and accomplishments in the past, we are usually interested in the questions of how and why. These questions start the search for causes: what were the actions, beliefs, and circumstances that led to these consequences? In history, as opposed to geology or astronomy, we need to consider human agency. People, as individuals and as groups, play a part in promoting, shaping, and resisting change. People have motivations and reasons for taking action (or for sitting it out), but causes go beyond these. We also have to look at the larger



context. Causes are thus multiple and layered, involving both long-term ideologies, institutions, and conditions, and short-term motivations, actions and events. Causes that are offered for any particular event (and the priority of various causes) may differ, based on the scale of the history and the approaches of the historian.

Sample activities:

*WWII is full of examples of examples of cause and consequence. Students can find examples of cause and effects in the origins of the war, why the German Blitzkrieg was so successful at first - and its consequences, the evolution of the U-Boat war, the origins and consequences of Germany's attack on the USSR and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the evolution of the Allies' mass bombing campaign, origins and consequences of the Western Allies Italian and Normandy invasions, the origins and consequences of Germany's "Final Solution" and the Holocaust, and the many consequences of the Allied victory in the war.*



#### 5. Take Historical Perspectives

Understanding the foreignness of the past is a huge challenge for students. But rising to the challenge illuminates the range of human behaviour, belief and social organization. It offers surprising alternatives to the taken-for-granted, conventional wisdom, and opens a wider perspective from which to evaluate our present preoccupations. Taking historical perspective means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional settings that shaped people's lives and actions in the past. Understanding diverse perspectives is a key to historical perspective-taking. Though it is sometimes called "historical empathy," historical perspective is very different from the common-sense notion of identification with another person. Indeed, taking historical perspective demands comprehension of the vast differences between us in the present and those in the past.

Sample activities:

*Students will use evidence from the simulation to investigate how Canadians in 1939 viewed and understood their world. They will discover how people felt when war was declared and what they thought the war will be like. They will investigate how attitudes to the war changed over time with changes in military technology, and the increasing destructiveness and brutality of the fighting. Students will use documents from the simulation to learn what soldiers thought of their purpose and role in the military and how this changed during the war. They will also investigate peoples' attitudes to other groups – minorities, women, the government, military leadership, the British, the enemy, etc. as well as what they thought the result would be and the world that would be created afterwards.*

## **6. Understanding Ethical Dimensions of History**

Taking historical perspective demands that we understand the differences between our ethical universe and those of bygone societies. We do not want to impose our own anachronistic standards on the past. At the same time, meaningful history does not treat brutal slave-holders, enthusiastic Nazis, and marauding conquistadors in a “neutral” manner. Historians attempt to hold back on explicit ethical judgments about actors in the midst of their accounts, but, when all is said and done, if the story is meaningful, then there is an ethical judgment involved. We should expect to learn something from the past that helps us to face the ethical issues of today.

Sample activities:

*Students will investigate key ethical issues in the war: inadequate training leading to soldiers sent to their deaths by poor planning and errors on leadership, deliberate attacks on defenseless civilian populations, changes in military technology leading to increasing destructiveness and brutality in the fighting: mass aerial bombing, use of atomic bomb, should more have been done much earlier to stop the Holocaust? Students will explore ethical issues related to sexism and racism, the treatment of Women, Indigenous Peoples, French-Canadians, Canadian Blacks, and the internment of Japanese-Canadians.*

