

Reading Like a Historian
Defending the Importance of History Education

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“Just as students in Language Arts class are taught about similes and alliteration, so history students must be taught to source historical authors and to contextualize historical documents. When they leave our classes, students get to practice these skills every time they open their browsers to read the daily news.”¹

Discipline-Specific Literacy

WARM UP EXERCISE: Discipline-Specific Literacy

1. Identify each subject discipline in school (except History/Social Studies)
2. Identify the specific language associated with each subject.
3. Identify the skills students practice daily in each subject.

What is Discipline-Specific Literacy?

Reading and writing within the field of study, or subject. To do this, students “must be able to internalize the discipline’s knowledge claims and institutional culture.”²

Discipline-Specific Literacy for History:

- What is the specific language associated with history?
- What are skills students need to learn to be successful in learning the subject?
- What should students use to practice these skills daily?

Unlike math, where students study numbers, or science, where observation and experimentation are central, history is rooted in time, specifically the past. History is hinged upon dates, places, and events and the people who experience history are married to those dates, places, and events. To understand the information created by our discipline, we do not focus on mathematical equations or the examination of cells under a microscope, but instead, we primarily read documents. How do we understand the past? We go to primary sources created by the people who were there, and we apply discipline-specific skills to create meaning, understanding, and conclusions, all of which connect us in the present to time and place in the past.

Reading like a historian teaches discipline-specific literacy:

“Facts are crucial to historical understanding, but there’s only one way for them to take root in memory: Facts are mastered by engaging students in historical questions that spark their

¹ Ibid., vi.

² Qtd. in Susan Boshier, *Acquiring discipline-specific literacy in a second language: A case study of an ESL nursing student*, Taiwan International ESP Journal, Vol. 2:2, 17-48, 2010, Accessed 10-13-2012, <http://bit.ly/QYfbWK>, 18.

curiosity and make them passionate about seeking answers.”³ This is why essential questions are the focus of our Instructional Plans. “Each question sends us back to the original sources to formulate arguments that admit no easy answer.”⁴

“In an age where ‘I found it on the Internet’ masquerades as knowledge, history serves as a vital counterweight to intellectual sloppiness. When a video uploads from a cell phone in Tehran reaches San Francisco in half a second, history reminds us to start with basic questions:

- Who sent it?
- Can it be trusted?
- What angle did the video miss?”⁵

This is why Reading Like a Historian is VITAL for students to **learn, understand, and practice**. Teachers can empower students to analyze information in a world where we are BURIED in it!

Reading Like a Historian

Pillar 1: Sourcing

“Historians have developed powerful ways of reading that allow them to see patterns, make sense of contradictions, and formulate reasoned interpretations when others get lost in the forest of detail...”⁶

Many students start with the first word at the top of the page and end their reading with the last. Historians, begin a document at the end. They SOURCE it first. (They may look at the first words to get their bearings, but they immediately go to the bottom). They ask questions of the document based on the source information:

- Who wrote this source and when?
- Is it a diary entry? A memo? An email?
- Is the author in a first-hand position?
- Is this account based on hearsay?⁷

Pillar 2: Contextualization

“Historians, even those who know little about the Civil War—start from a different place. Instead of issuing conclusions, they begin with questions.”⁸

³ Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Sano, *Reading Like a Historian* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), v.

⁴ Ibid., v.

⁵ Ibid., v.

⁶ Ibid., v.

⁷ Ibid., vi.

⁸ Ibid., vi.

Questions used by historians:

- What is the context for the words?
- When and where were they stated?
- What kinds of people were in the audience?
- If the words are a first-hand account, when are they being said in relation to the event?

“Contextualization is the notion that events must be located in place and time to be properly understood.”⁹

Application and Use of Primary Sources¹⁰

3 Strategies for working with Primary Source Documents

1. **Select** documents with precision and trim them to the point where they convey the essence of the historical problem.
2. **Modify** documents using ellipses, providing a word bank for difficult vocabulary, and provide a “Note” to orient students as to what follows.
3. **Adapt** the document by conventionalizing spelling, simplifying syntax, and changing vocabulary, all while trying to keep the original “texture.”

Interrogation: Strategies for using primary source documents to understand the essential question

Compare accounts from different sources:

- Compare accounts made by different individuals about the same event.
- Compare the accounts made by one individual at different points in time.
- Learn how historians have interpreted differences in accounts over time.
- Are there participants in the story (even main characters), who have not contributed to the narrative? (i.e. Who is silent?)
- Are there other ways you can determine their perspective on the story, even when there are no written accounts?
- Can others corroborate the accounts?
- When using visual sources and historical documents, ask how “visual accuracy and historical accuracy differ.”¹¹
- When using auditory sources or oral histories, have students analyze nuances in voice, memory, how the interviewer asks questions, the response, reactions of the respondent, questions avoided, or re-visited.

⁹ Ibid., vi.

¹⁰ Ibid., vii.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

Compare differing accounts from the same source:

- “Often students privilege primary sources as reflections of historical truth and don’t recognize the need to interrogate them.”¹² When primary sources written by the same author contradicts him/herself, students learn the importance of interrogating the sources and offering possible answers (interpretation) for the contradictions.

Determine the facts of the story:

- Look for corroboration to determine facts of difficult historical events.
- What do the facts mean?
- How can fictional and non-fictional sources be used to determine the facts?
- If the focus has become that of national “myth,” try to learn when the story became part of the national narrative. Try to determine why we like the myth so much.

Assessing Student Understanding

What to look for when assessing student application of disciplined-specific literacy strategies:

- Assess the questioning strategies students use to source documents.
- Assess the questioning strategies students use to analyze documents.
- Can they identify phrases and details that exemplify differences and similarities?
- Do they use direct quotes, details, and specifics from the documents to support their answers?
- Can they recognize other possible conclusions and evaluate them?

History presented as a series of problems to be explored, rather than a set of stories to be committed to memory, may be a new experience for your students.¹³

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Ibid., 4.