

# In Defense of Memorization: The Role of Periodization in Historical Inquiry

Dave Neumann

I'm a master packer. At least my wife tells me I am, and I'm happy to believe her. Last summer, anticipating the thousand-mile drive from southern California to Colorado, I packed our Sienna so that everything had its logical place, from the DVDs to the audio books, from the beef jerky to the bottled Starbucks mocha. Of course, at first I had to explain to everyone else where things were, since what seems logical to me isn't intuitive to my family. But once they understood my system, everything was easy to find and, after being used, went back to its well-defined home. While it was a relatively modest element of the journey—certainly not as important as a detailed map or good brakes—it required advance planning and made the journey easier and more enjoyable.

I would like to propose that “periodization” should play a similar role in a history classroom focused on inquiry: a seemingly minor element of an intellectual journey that turns out to make the journey much more enjoyable, as facts and ideas are accessed and placed in appropriate frameworks of meaning. This relatively humble tool represents an important historical thinking skill, even if it doesn't usually get mentioned in texts that address historical thinking. Most historical thinking skills—weighing evidence, investigating change over time, comparing historical accounts—seem dynamic, while periodization appears static by definition. More damning, periodization requires memorization of dates, a rote activity that seems to put the sage back on the stage of direct instruction.

I will argue in this article, however, that periodization, which inevitably requires the memorization of dates, is not only compatible with a classroom centered on historical inquiry, but actually an indispensable tool in inquiry. After

defining periodization and examining why memorizing some dates is essential, I will explore the connection between periodization and historical inquiry. Then I will illustrate the integration of periodization and inquiry with a description of my own former high school American history class. My hope is that this exploration encourages us as teachers to reflect on how we might pack information more thoughtfully for a meaningful intellectual excursion.

## The Need for Dates

The first few years I taught history, I dismissed the importance of dates. I knew that rote learning was bad, that memorization represented a very low level on Bloom's Taxonomy, and that students should be unconstrained by a teacher's impositions and free to determine for themselves what was important. I was also stung by the horror stories of adults who claimed that all they remembered of school history was being forced to memorize dates. So I told my students

that I wasn't interested in dates; I was more interested in big ideas and in their ability to think critically and weigh evidence. Of course, they might find it useful to remember some dates, but it was entirely up to them to decide which dates, if any, they would memorize.

The result is not very surprising, in retrospect. Left to their own devices, students remembered few dates, and could not recall whether Texas became independent before or after the Mexican-American War or what Lincoln meant by “four score and seven years ago,” because they didn't know when the Declaration of Independence was written. This lapse in memory also made higher level historical thinking more difficult. Students struggled to recognize the causal link between Texas independence and the outbreak of the Mexican-American War, or the significance of Lincoln's redefinition of the Declaration of Independence. I suspect that my experiences are not all that unusual among those who like to view themselves as teachers who care about historical thinking and see memorization as antithetical to that role. It turns out, however, that while history is more than memorizing dates, it certainly isn't less.

In the welter of facts and dates that confront students in a history classroom, without a guide to sort the more important from the less important, students simply feel overwhelmed. Their teacher does not experience that same sense of bewilderment, because she is an

expert in the material and easily moves between smaller events and larger processes employing a framework, albeit perhaps an implicit one, that shapes her interactions with those historical facts.<sup>1</sup> The teacher's thinking is invisible to the students and they would benefit from her efforts to make that thinking visible.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, the teacher who refuses to force students to memorize facts seems less like a guide on the side and more like a swim instructor who sips iced tea while children flail about desperately in the community pool. Teachers need to overcome their reluctance to be sages on the stage and boldly compel students to memorize some dates—not every conceivable date, but a fairly sizeable number.

They should do this even if, as good students of history themselves, they recognize that many historical dates are somewhat arbitrary. Did the early republic end in 1815 with the Treaty of Ghent? In 1816, with the onset of the

“Era of Good Feelings”? In 1824, with the candidacy of Jackson? In a sense it doesn't matter—dates don't have to be definitive to be useful.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they should make intuitive sense to the teacher and be historiographically defensible. Once dates meet this standard, teachers should require their students memorize them and explain to them the reference point for the particular years and significance of these dates. That way teachers avoid the kind of muddle I created my first few years in the classroom.

### Dates and Inquiry

Having been intentionally provocative in defending the importance of memorizing dates, I want to nuance my argument by suggesting that history teachers should work with the historical skill of periodization, which requires more cognitive sophistication than simple memorization. Historian David Christian observes that periodization is one of the main techniques used by historians to create struc-

ture. Yet the past is fluid, complex, and continuous, so any attempt to divide it into neat chronological chunks is bound to be artificial. Periodization always does violence to the complex reality of the past, and even the most careful and most honest attempts at dividing up the past involve some distortion. Any scheme must compromise between the often contradictory demands of clarity, coherence, accuracy, and honesty.<sup>4</sup>

It should be clear then that simply presenting students with a list of dates and requiring them to memorize that list does not bear much resemblance to periodization. Rather than a timeline, periodization requires attentiveness to larger eras. Teachers should determine the most crucial turning points in the history they are studying and use those to anchor students' understanding of periods. Then they should help students associate labels with those dates: “revolutionary era,” “early republic,” “antebellum” era. In places where the label is

## A BETTER WAY TO TEACH POLITICS

# Make Your Social Studies, Political Science, or Government Class More Dynamic and Fun!

**M**ake your next class come alive with the world-famous World's Smallest Political Quiz – a fast, fun way to measure political beliefs.

The Quiz asks 10 questions about political issues. Based on the answers, the students learn where they fit on the political map – and they learn about other viewpoints as well!

The Quiz has been used in hundreds of high school and college classrooms all across America.

Created by the non-profit, non-partisan Advocates for Self-Government, the Quiz is a breakthrough

educational tool – which is one reason the *Washington Post* says: “*The Quiz has gained respect as a valid measure of a person's political leanings.*”

Your students will love taking a Quiz they don't have to study for – one with no wrong answers! And you'll enjoy the discussion and learning that follows.

### Get the Quiz – for FREE!

Call toll-free 800-932-1776 or email [Quiz@TheAdvocates.org](mailto:Quiz@TheAdvocates.org) and we'll send you as many Quiz cards as you need – no charge.

Get your  
Quizzes for  
FREE!



# Criteria of Historical Significance<sup>1</sup>

The following factors provide some guidance in helping to determine historical significance. These factors are not “objective” or quantifiable and rely on the judgment of historians—or history teachers and their students. In fact, teachers could ask students to evaluate events or movements by explicitly using these criteria and, in the process, encourage students to wrestle with the subjective nature of historical judgments. The following factors could be applied to individual historical events or to larger trends or movements. The last point would likely be disputed by those who see it as less “objective” than the other criteria; it remains defensible in my view, as all study of the past depends intrinsically on a present determination that the past matters to us.

**Importance:** it mattered to those who lived at the time

**Profundity:** it deeply affected people at the time

**Quantity:** it affected a large number of people

**Durability:** it (or its effects) endured for a long period

**Relevance:** it matters to people today

## Note

1. Drawn from Stephane Levesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 45–52.

not obvious, they should explain what it means.<sup>5</sup> Finally, they should discuss some of the issues, topics, and themes that are important in this era.

Rather than attempting to exhaustively catalogue all possible events of historical significance, this scheme provides a basic framework of some of the most significant events in history. With this framework firmly established, students can add other significant events and movements at their own discretion (and critical thinking) through triangulation. For example, students will certainly want to remember turning points in civil rights that are not represented on the required timeline, as they see the significance of these events and are able to correlate them with World War II and the Cold War. A teacher’s decision to proactively address the issue of memorization through a meaningful framework actually frees students to move beyond a focus on simple memorization throughout the course, and facilitates the development of historical thinking and analysis instead.

While teachers should generally avoid the temptation to share with students the details of historiographic battles over periodization,<sup>6</sup> they can use their understanding of these historiographical debates about the era, bracketed by the memorized dates, to guide students in creating engaging, open-ended inquiry questions that require them to analyze trends in an era and use evidence to make arguments about these trends. In the same way that historians know what members of the Society for the History of the Early American Republic study, and teachers know why they called a unit of instruction “The Cold War,” so students discover that they can join a rich discussion because they understand the chronological boundaries and historical context that frame that discussion and make it meaningful.<sup>7</sup> In advanced classes or classes where pacing allows, teachers might venture into explicit debates about the appropriateness of a particular periodization scheme: the “long civil rights movement,” the possible disappearance of progressivism with the onset of World War I, or the challenge

of deciding the beginning of the Vietnam War.

A grasp of periodization is thus a prerequisite for deep, meaningful inquiry into the past using more well-known historical thinking skills. Determining historical *significance*, for example, connects intimately with the selection of “turning points” in periodization.<sup>8</sup> Turning points suggest a close connection with the skill of recognizing *change over time*. Historical *empathy* requires an understanding of the ways that people’s values and beliefs were different in the past;<sup>9</sup> periodization assists students in pinpointing more specifically how and why beliefs were different in a particular period, rather than “back in the day.” Crafting historical *accounts* requires an understanding of the dynamics of a particular era.<sup>10</sup> What major developments took place in the Progressive era? Why was non-violent protest such a bold strategy in the 1960s South? Why were Americans so distrustful of their government in the 1970s?

## An Example from U.S. History

I want to illustrate one way that periodization might be implemented by describing my former American history class. At the beginning of the year, I used to draw a timeline running the length of both whiteboards with 1450 at one end and the current year at the other end. Then I would ask students to tell me events in American history they thought they were going to need to know for the course and when those events happened. Students were often able to supply many events, but rarely remembered when the events happened. When their answers had been exhausted, I began to recite a litany of other events. I purposely stacked the deck by choosing events like Bacon’s Rebellion that would be obscure to most students. I then discussed the example of a computer desktop with hundreds of files on it and suggested that if students’ own computers looked that way, they probably often spent time looking for files. I bragged that I could find any file on my computer related to their class in an instant, because I organized my course files in a logical hierarchy

of folders within folders. By approaching periodization as a pragmatic technique, rather than an esoteric historical skill, I hoped to create a felt need among the students for the memorization task ahead.

At the heart of the periodization scheme that I adopted lay a framework I learned from Stanford historian David Kennedy. Kennedy argued that three “transformative moments” had taken place in the course of American history: the Revolution and Constitution, Civil War and Reconstruction, and the Great Depression and World War II. As I introduced this framework to students, I pointed out some of the similarities between them: these moments all involved large-scale wars relative to the population size, so they disrupted society in significant ways, leading to major changes in society and culture. And they all changed the way government operated by redefining the Constitution (or, in the case of the first moment, defining it). These three moments were both historiographically defensible and pedagogically useful. They had the virtue of having distinct starting and ending points, even if, as discussed above, the precise years could be disputed. Students’ first task was to memorize the three transformative moments, their starting and ending dates, and the reasons for their significance.

Over the course of the year, I gradually built on this framework. Students had to learn the names, dates, and basic characteristics of each era that resulted from the divisions created by placing these three moments on the timeline. Then students had to memorize five events within each unit. I generally chose wars and presidential administrations, not because I favor political history over other genres, but for the same reason that the three larger moments were essentially political: they are discrete events with clear beginning and ending dates. Students had to be able to articulate the significance of each of these events and relate it to the era in which it occurred. By the end of the year, students had a sophisticated, detailed framework for American history with a

*continued on page 231;  
see also timeline on next page*

# The Better **You** Understand The Better **They** Will

The **Master of Social Science** degree at **Syracuse University’s Maxwell School** was



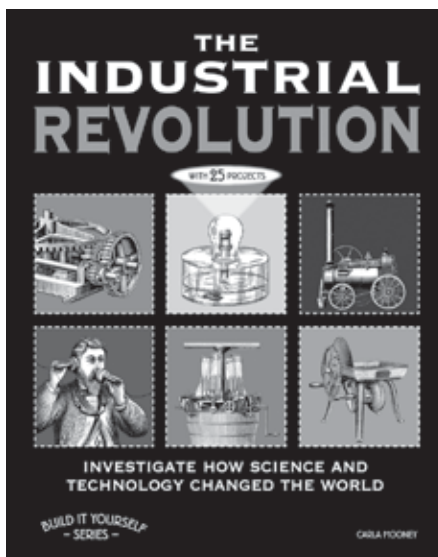
founded nearly 40 years ago to help secondary teachers stay ahead.

- highly interdisciplinary focus on global problems, using comparative analysis of major cultural areas
- distance-learning format, with short-term residencies and self-paced study
- engaged, senior faculty members in small classes with friendly, personal attention

Info: [www.maxwell.syr.edu/exed/mssc](http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/exed/mssc)



## NEW FOR SPRING 2011



***The Industrial Revolution: Investigate How Science and Technology Changed the World with 25 Projects*** includes elements of history, biography, and civics with activity-driven enrichment projects that kids can do with minimal supervision. Activities include creating a water-powered wheel, designing a steam ship, building a telegraph machine, and making a pinhole camera.



**Guided Reading Level Q • Ages 9–12**

Available Cloth, Trade paper, ebook • Distributed by [www.ipgbook.com](http://www.ipgbook.com)

**nomad press**  
Books to Inspire Learning

# THE CHOICES PROGRAM

## Curriculum Resources for High School Social Studies

### FOSTER 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SKILLS

Critical Thinking

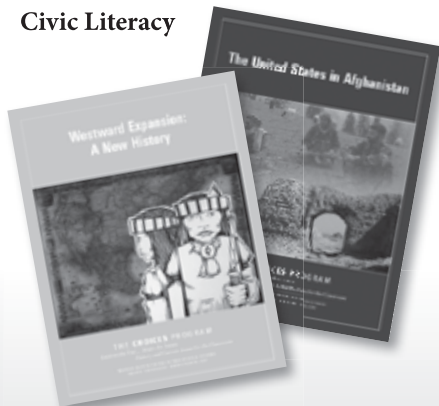
Media & Technology Literacy

Global Awareness

Collaboration

Creativity and Innovation

Civic Literacy



Curriculum for Current Issues, World History, U.S. History

Print & Digital Versions Available

THE CHOICES PROGRAM  
at Brown University

Visit our web site for free lessons, videos and full catalog.

[WWW.CHOICES.EDU](http://WWW.CHOICES.EDU)

Explore the Past, Shape the Future

## Timeline for U.S. History

The following represents the timeline I required students to memorize for U.S. history. Events and dates after the colonial period largely involve very conventional events in political history: wars and presidential elections. (In the colonial period, I chose to emphasize the founding of the two most influential colonies—one in each region—and a significant event in that colony's history; the final event, the Great Awakening, breaks my pattern in many ways, but I used it anyway since historians often see it as the most important colonial event before the onset of the Revolution.)

I chose these events not to downplay social and cultural history, but because they can be dated explicitly. The events can all be justified according to the criteria for historical significance provided in the previous sidebar—and students were eventually required to explain this significance—but they also link to significant social and cultural trends. For example, the end of the War of 1812 is often connected to an upsurge in nationalism and the onset of the Market Revolution and, with it, the Second Great Awakening and reform movements.

As explained in the article, these events are by no means exhaustive, but rather provide a framework for some of the most significant events in American history. With this framework firmly established, students can “triangulate” and memorize other significant events and movements, in part at their own discretion.

*Colonial era—founding: establishing English settlements in North America*

**1607**—Founding of Jamestown

**1630**—Founding of Massachusetts Bay

*Colonial era—development: growth of society & culture in English North America*

**1676**—Bacon's Rebellion

**1692**—Salem Witchcraft Trials

**1730s–1740s**—Great Awakening

Transformative Moment 1: Revolution & Constitution (1776–1788)

*Early Republic era: establishing government & society in an independent nation*

**1800**—Election of Jefferson

**1812–1814**—War of 1812

*Antebellum era: exploring the growth & limits of democracy*

**1828**—Election of Jackson

**1846–1848**—Mexican-American War

**1860**—Election of Lincoln

Transformative Moment 2: Civil War & Reconstruction (1861–1877)

*Industrial era: shifting from an agricultural nation to a mechanized nation of cities & immigrants*

**1896**—Bryan campaign

**1898**—Spanish-American War

*Progressive era: responding to industrialization through reform & international engagement*

**1901**—(Theodore) Roosevelt presidency

**1912**—Election of Wilson

**1914–1918**—World War I

Transformative Moment 3: Depression & World War II (1929–1945)

*Early Cold War: addressing communism abroad and at home*

**1950–1953**—Korean War

**1960**—Election of Kennedy

*Later Cold War:*

**1964**—Tonkin Gulf Resolution

**1968**—Election of Nixon

**1980**—Election of Reagan

## MEMORIZATION *from page 213*

hierarchical structure, as the three transformative moments were always visible above the specific events. Students eventually knew the six events associated with the three transformative moments; names, characteristics, and dates of six major eras in American history; and 20 key events, five for each period before and after a transformative moment. They could easily triangulate events not included in the periodization scheme with events that were. Once students had a good sense of what characterized the antebellum era, for example, it was easier to place additional events there logically. But more importantly, knowing some characteristics of the era allowed me to ask students to consider the question, “To what extent did this era increase democracy for Americans? What evidence would support your conclusion?” Students provided much more thoughtful, nuanced answers because their understanding of the question was imbedded in a framework of meaning—a framework they had internalized because they had been forced to memorize it.

### Conclusion

A recent avalanche of history scholarship has provided a compelling vision of history instruction based on meaningful inquiry into genuine historical questions. Anxious to reject the infantile approach to history that focused on date memorization in favor of this inquiry vision, some history teachers have thrown the baby out with the bathwater by avoiding memorization altogether as antithetical to inquiry. But rather than seeing memorization as a barrier to meaningful learning, we need to change our perceptions to recognize that it represents a tool that enables that learning. In the same way that repetition and practice provide the requisite training that enables a violinist to perform a skilled recital, memorization enables students to engage in genuine historical thinking. Facility with the basics allows cognitive effort to focus on more challenging skills. Some may object that the highly-structured classroom I have described does

not fit the model of inquiry instruction, but inquiry practices are always hybrids that include elements of more traditional instruction for a host of practical reasons.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, those who have been seduced by the list-like character of many state standards,<sup>12</sup> should recognize that date memorization must be part of an integrated, hierarchical, sequential framework of meaning that teachers carefully choose and explicitly communicate to students. Sometimes the teacher has to be the sage on the stage first so that she can be a better guide on the side later on, encouraging students to explore deep historical problems. 📖

### Notes

1. For an explanation of the frameworks of experts in a particular discipline in comparison with those of novices, see Committee on How People Learn: A Targeted Report for Teachers. *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*. (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2004).
2. For a discussion of the invisibility of the thinking of historians and teachers in the classroom—as well as the need to make that thinking visible, see Robert B. Bain, “Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 345-346.
3. Of course, historians might argue about these precise dates, as they bracket the events that are considered part of a particular era. See, for example, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233-1263, in which the author argues that reperiodizing the civil rights movement by extending it back into the Great Depression has significant consequences for who gets viewed as leaders in the movement. My point is that a useful framework can be employed with students without having addressed all possible questions about dates.
4. David Christian, “Periodization—Overview” in Jerry Bentley et al., *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History* (Great Barrington, Mass.: Berkshire Publishing Group, 2005) 4: 1453. It should not be surprising that this quote is drawn from a world history reference, as world historians seem much more interested in issues of periodization than their American counterparts. Perhaps for the latter group periods more often seem intuitive, while for the former the vast scale of time and space demands explicit attention to the issue. A search of JSTOR revealed that of the 36 articles published between 1985 and 2010 in which “periodization” appears either in the title or in the abstract, only 2 dealt with American history, while 12 dealt with world history (defined as invoking world history in the title, being published in a world history journal, and/or having an explicitly comparative or transregional focus).

5. Stephane Levesque, *Thinking Historically* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 70-74, discusses “colligation” and the ways that historians group events into eras to make meaning.
6. The academic warfare of historiography generally interests teachers more than their students. I often suggest to colleagues that the teacher’s display of knowledge is a bit like an iceberg: the majority of what a teacher knows is not visible directly, but forms the necessary foundation for the knowledge that is used in the classroom.
7. Robert Bain and Jeffrey Mirel, “Setting Up Camp at the Great Instructional Divide: Educating Beginning History Teachers” *Journal of Teacher Education* 57, no. 3 (2006): 212-219, discuss the use of historiographical questions in the creation of meaningful classroom inquiry.
8. On significance as a historical thinking skill, see Peter Seixas, “Mapping the Terrain of Historical Significance.” *Social Education* 61 (1997): 22-27.
9. O.L. Davis, Jr., Elizabeth Anne Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster, *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Sciences* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001) define “empathy” and explore its role in history-social science classrooms.
10. Peter Lee, “Putting Principles Into Practice: Understanding History,” in Committee on How People Learn: A Targeted Report for Teachers. *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2004) explores the creation of historical accounts as a historical thinking skill.
11. For a discussion of the history of educational reform and an eloquent testimony of hybrid instruction, see Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890–1990* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).
12. Robert B. Bain, ““They Thought the World Was Flat?": Applying the Principles of *How People Learn* in Teaching High School History,” in *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*, eds. M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005), 182.

DAVE NEUMANN (dneumann@csulb.edu) is Site Director for The History Project, CSULB & DH, in Long Beach, California.