

What Makes a Good History Essay? Assessing Historical Aspects of Argumentative Writing

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“Research & Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Chauncey Monte-Sano to share her work on writing *historical* arguments. She shares a rubric that came from her research, and she concludes that learning history *is* learning to write.

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice” Editor, University of Washington

When I taught high school history, I always found it difficult to assess my students’ essays (not least because of the seemingly endless hours spent grading!). I wanted students to become better writers, but I also wanted them to understand history and the ways of thinking central to it. Yet, when I started grading essays, I found that I focused on more generic aspects of writing arguments, such as you might find in the Common Core State Standards. My typical feedback included: “use evidence to support your thesis” or “explain how this example supports your thesis” or “what is your thesis?” My students didn’t particularly like the amount of work involved in writing essays, but many came to me at the end of the year or in subsequent years and said they learned to write in my class. While that was certainly nice to hear, something else bothered me. My grades didn’t differentiate between students with and without a solid grasp of history. That is, students who were good writers often did well in my class, even if their understanding of history, and the nature of historical argument, was average.

I reconsidered my rubric. My framework offered little in the way of assessing content; instead, it was a framework that could be (and often was) used for writing in any discipline.¹ And yet, some student essays conveyed a sense of history and grasp of the particular topic under investigation that conventional rubrics did not capture. So, to the standard checklist—thesis, evidence, explanation of how evidence supports the thesis, organization, and style—I added “accuracy.” This was

my attempt to capture that difficult-to-articulate quality I was after when grading students’ essays. But this addition didn’t fully distinguish those essays that demonstrated historical understanding. The quality I had hoped to capture went beyond skill in crafting a written argument and addressed mastery of the historical content and ways of thinking that distinguished my class from Ms. Stone’s English class down the hall.

It wasn’t until a research study I

conducted in 2005–2006 for my dissertation that I saw that teaching writing does not have to mean giving up on, or compromising, the teaching of history. In the age of the Common Core, this is good news. What’s more, when I saw teachers integrate literacy and history, their students produced better historical essays. Most importantly, I found that writing a historical argument is not the same as writing a conventional or generic argument. But what does it mean to write a good history essay and what might students’ attempts to do so look like? Here, I share findings from this study that have helped me begin to define historical qualities of adolescents’ argumentative writing and recognize the interconnectedness of writing and history.²

The Study

To understand how high school students’ learned to write in history class, I observed three teachers in three different schools and collected their students’ writing throughout one school year. Three classes of 11th-grade U.S.

Table 1. Benchmarks and Indicators of Evidence Use in Students' Written Historical Arguments

Characteristic	Benchmark	Indicators
Factual and interpretive accuracy	Interprets the documentary evidence accurately—appropriate interpretation. Fair representation of people, issues, events as opposed to misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Factual details and chronology are also accurate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Got the facts straight (e.g., chronology of events, which countries were allied or enemies, etc.) • Comprehended the information in the documents used • Interpreted documents historically, noting subtext and context
Persuasiveness of evidence	The essay substantiates the claim with evidence that is relevant, significant, and specific. The weight of the evidence is sufficient—even compelling.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporated evidence to support the claim • Selected specific evidence that included precise historical details or quotations from documents • Selected relevant evidence that related to the argument • Selected evidence that was historically significant, given the topic • Integrated multiple pieces of evidence in support of the claim
Sourcing of evidence	The essay notes authors of documents or other sources of evidence used to make the argument. The use of evidence recognizes perspectives inherent in sources cited. Evidence is balanced and credible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made reference to documents or cited documents that were relevant to the argument • Recognized or referred to the authors of documents cited • Attributed authorship to the correct person—recognized that a person who is discussed in a document was not always the author • Recognized perspectives of authors or commented on credibility of evidence
Corroboration of evidence	The claim responds to and accounts for the available evidence. The essay synthesizes multiple pieces of evidence that work together to support the claim. The essay recognizes and addresses conflicting/counter evidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognized where documents might support the claim • Used more than one document to support the claim • Recognized and responded to counter-evidence
Contextualization of evidence	Contextual knowledge is used to situate and evaluate the evidence available. In contextualizing evidence and topic, the essay recognizes historical perspectives and demonstrates an understanding of causation. The essay uses sources in a manner that is consistent with the contemporary meaning of the sources for the original audience at the time and place of their creation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established the historical context and perspectives relevant to the topic • Established clear, correct cause-effect relationships • Established the correct chronology • Connected excerpts of documents to their historical context—Or, grounded and situated documents in their original context • Used documents in a manner that was consistent with their original, historical meaning

history students participated. Due to differences between classes, 30 of the students received training in historical thinking and evidence-based writing for 4–7 months, while the other 26 did not. As a result, students' skills represent a range of beginning and intermediate historical writing.

I analyzed students' written responses to a document-based question (DBQ) that I administered toward the end of the school year. I identified patterns in students' use of evidence in their essays and tested these ideas to see which patterns (or approaches to evidence use) were best supported by data from students' essays. The DBQ asked, "Why did the United States drop an atomic

bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, in August 1945?" and included documents that had bearing on this question. Document A included excerpts from primary sources written by government officials in the two months before the bombing of Hiroshima (e.g., Truman's diary; and memoranda between Truman, his Secretary of War, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff). Documents B (by Gar Alperovitz), C (by Herbert Feis), and D (by Barton Bernstein) are secondary sources that can be used to support the arguments highlighted by the primary sources. To ensure that the DBQ was age-appropriate, I abbreviated documents, altered vocabulary, and removed potentially distracting elements (el-

lipses, brackets, etc.).³ Students had 45 minutes to complete the task. The highly structured and timed nature of this DBQ limited its authenticity, but this set up addressed classroom constraints.⁴

So, What Did Good History Essays Look Like?

Argument, not summary. After several months of working on writing in their history classrooms, most students did something critical in their essay: they wrote an argument using the sources, not a summary of the sources or a description of the events asked about in the question.⁵ They made the transition from reporting other people's interpretations to creating their own interpretation. Or, as the Com-

Table 2. Characteristics of Writing Historical Arguments as Observed in Students' Essays

Characteristic	Example from a Student Essay that is Proficient	Example from a Student Essay that Needs Improvement
Factual and interpretive accuracy	Joanna: "American leaders of that age were extremely opposed to communism, and thus opposed the U.S.S.R. Even though we fought alongside them against the Nazis in Russia, we still didn't like them very much. ... For that very reason many historians say the American government wanted to end the war as quickly as possible as to minimize the Soviet Union's involvement."	Nico: "After the bomb was dropped Russia got scared and decided to join forces with the U.S. in order to avoid the U.S. from dropping another bomb." Devin: "July 25, 1945, President Truman admits that an atomic bomb was a horrific idea and that it shouldn't be used on anything or anyone. (Doc A)."
Persuasiveness of evidence	Ken: "The main use of the atomic bomb was to bring an instant end to the war to save the lives of Americans and Allied forces if the war had been continued. For an invasion of Japan, 766,700 troops would be needed, of which 35% would be wounded or killed (Doc A)."	Sayid: "They expected many more will continue to die if the U.S. continues the war."
Sourcing of evidence	Marisol: "Too many American troops and allied troops were being killed. General Marshall concluded that for a land invasion of Japan, we would need 766,700 American troops and Admiral Leahy concluded that 35% if the troops would be wounded or killed." Jeff: "According to Document C, Herbert Feis theorized that 'the agony of war might be ended most quickly and lives be saved,' if the bombs were used."	Sayid: "Russia was showing its arrogance by asking for more land and the rebuild of the wars cause damage."
Corroboration of evidence	Minh: "Many documents support the fact that the a-bomb was drop to save as many soldiers as possible. 'Admiral Leahy estimated that 35% of those troops would be wounded or killed during combat' (Document A). Here, it illustrates that 35% of our troops would be injured or killed was to high of a risk to take. More importantly, we wanted to end the war. 'By using the bomb the agony of war might be ended most quickly and lives be saved.' (Document C)"	Brian: "He, being the president of the U.S. at the time, had to manage a multitude of foreign relationships. 'There is no doubt that President Truman was interested in and concerned about Soviet political influence and he wished to end the war as quickly as possible in order to limit that influence' (Doc B). From this, we can conclude that Truman used the bomb as a device to control Soviet's influence, and that he believed the bomb really would end the war."
Contextualization of evidence	Chris: "A hasty end to war would also mean reduced influence of Russian communism in Europe. (Doc B) By dropping the A-bomb, maybe America hopes to preserve capitalism and nationalism and possibly the might of a capitalist nation."	Cam: "The United States in their use of the atomic bomb had created new battle strategies. Japan in desperate attempt to counterattack had created the kamikaze, plan suicides, that caused greater casualty for the United States than before."

mon Core would put it, they transitioned from writing informative text to writing argument. This often requires a change in thinking about history—from thinking of history as a subject in which one memorizes vast quantities of unrelated facts to a subject in which one critically considers historical sources or other people's interpretations of the past as one crafts his or her own interpretation of the same events or people. This is not an easy shift, but it is a necessary first step.

Not just any old argument: A historical argument. Conventional argumentation requires that writers include a claim, evidence to support the claim, and warrants that explain the ways in which the evidence supports the claim.⁶ Yet, some

essays included all of these components and still were lacking. I looked more carefully at the essays that had both a well-structured argument and a strong historical sense and found five characteristics that distinguished them. When I looked at all of the essays I could see these qualities in students' essays—either by their presence or absence, by their successful or unsuccessful integration. These characteristics include factual and interpretive accuracy, persuasiveness of evidence, sourcing of evidence, corroboration of evidence, and contextualization of evidence. Table 1 summarizes these characteristics, describes benchmarks of each, and lists examples of what students did to demonstrate each characteristic.

The strongest essays didn't just contain an argument, they had an argument that integrated historical thinking into the use of evidence.

Accuracy. Factual and interpretive statements in students' essays were clues to their accuracy. Factual accuracy was straightforward. Students either got the facts right—details that are commonly known and agreed upon—or they got them wrong. For example, several essays showed confusion about the U.S. position with regard to the U.S.S.R. during World War II. The excerpt from Nico's essay implies that the U.S. and U.S.S.R. were on opposing sides during World War II, whereas Joanna's statement was more accurate, recognizing the nuances

in U.S.-Soviet relations. See Table 2 for excerpts from more and less proficient students for each characteristic of historical argument.

Lack of background knowledge may account for factual errors, but unsophisticated reading and interpretive skills posed other problems that came up when assessing accuracy. In his diary, Truman makes a derogatory, racist statement about the enemy in one sentence and states that it would be wrong to drop the weapon on either the old or new capital of Japan in the next sentence (Kyoto and Tokyo, neither of which were targeted). This seeming contradiction presented problems for the students, as revealed in their inaccurate interpretations. For example, Devin was correct in saying that Truman thought the atomic bomb was awful. However, the diary entry does not say it should not be used. Instead, it reveals the bomb *will* be used that summer, while Truman ponders target cities. As Devin's excerpt shows, students can use, paraphrase, or refer to documents in their writing without accurately interpreting them.

Persuasiveness of evidence. One hurdle in writing history is to help students learn to include evidence at all. Where students in my study included evidence, the strength of the evidence selected varied. Sayid gives a reason for why the U.S. dropped the atomic bomb that is historically significant and relevant to the claim; yet, it is still quite vague, especially compared with the available documentary evidence. In contrast, Ken is more specific—and, I would argue, more convincing. He cites specific casualties from a diary entry, gives a reason (to save lives), and details from a document to support the student's reasoning. Another convincing approach students took was to integrate a direct quotation from a historical source to support their argument. In assessing students' use of evidence, those that included more specific and relevant evidence had stronger arguments.

Sourcing of evidence. Historians note the source of their evidence and consider its credibility as they develop interpre-

tations of the past.⁷ When integrating documents into written work, historians acknowledge who is speaking—when, to whom, and why—or at least take those conditions into account. Marisol and Jeff demonstrate the beginning stages of students recognizing sources in their writing. Marisol notes that General Marshall and Admiral Leahy were authors of the statistics she quoted, while Jeff points out that Herbert Feis “theorized” about the end of the war. Along with citing the author by name, the student's word choice indicates that he understands Feis's writing is a secondary rather than a primary source. In contrast, many students did not attribute the evidence or ideas in their essays to any source, even if the ideas they included came from the documents (e.g., Sayid's excerpt).

Corroboration of evidence. In making the case for a particular argument, the stronger essays recognized how different documents work together to support a claim. Minh uses quotations from two documents to support the point about saving lives. He corroborated documents to support his points in a specific and compelling manner. Students also demonstrated lower levels of corroboration by quoting a document, but not citing, referring to, or paraphrasing additional documents that supported their point. Brian uses Document B to support his point that concerns about the U.S.S.R. were a motivating factor in dropping the atomic bomb on Japan. He quotes one document, but doesn't use Truman's words in Document A to corroborate the documents and further support his point.


Contextualization of evidence. If and how students placed their evidence into historical context made a difference in the quality of their essays. Context can include many elements: the occasion upon which someone speaks or writes; a document's audience and its perceptions about the author; the time and place of the document's creation; what happened before and after it was created; the author's intentions; the “climate of opinion” when it was written; and rhetorical and linguistic customs of the

day.⁸ In one strong example, Chris offers background information that helps the reader understand historical perspectives and causation. He noted the climate of opinion and what happened before and after the event. Chris notes that the U.S.S.R. was communist while the U.S. was interested in preserving capitalism—important background that the U.S. wanted to intimidate the Soviet Union by demonstrating its nuclear capabilities. Others, in attempting to contextualize their explanations, incorporated inaccurate information. Cam shows confusion over what came before and after the atomic bomb. While Japan did use kamikaze pilots, it was not in response to the U.S.'s acquisition of the atomic bomb. A faulty context can reveal flawed understanding of cause and effect relationships and a lack of clarity about the significance of factual details.

Conclusion

Teaching students to write standard arguments in history classes is certainly worthwhile; teaching them to write historical arguments is even more so. To be successful requires that teachers identify aspects of historical thinking they wish to target and assess students' progress toward these goals in their essays. Although this is complicated work, it is not something that should be reserved only for Advanced Placement students. In the past three years, I've worked on a curriculum design project with colleagues to promote 8th graders' written historical arguments.⁹ Participating 8th graders are primarily Black and Latino, 45% qualify for free and reduced meals, 30% read below grade level and 10% read significantly below grade level. Across the board, we've seen students improve the level of historical thinking in their argumentative essays. Learning historical writing is something that a range of students can do.

As the Common Core initiative requires history teachers to support the goal “that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school,”¹⁰ we should do so in a way that integrates history. If teach-

ers want to support students' literacy development, it doesn't have to come at the cost of learning history. Indeed, learning history and historical thinking can help students become better writers, especially if we learn to look for the historical qualities in their writing and support their development. In this way, learning history *is* learning to write. 

Notes

1. For an example of a standard argumentation rubric see www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/rubric.html.
2. For the complete report of this analysis of student work, see Chauncey Monte-Sano, "Disciplinary Literacy in History: An Exploration of the Historical Nature of Adolescents' Writing," *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2010): 539-568. For articles on the teaching practices I observed during this study, see (1) Monte-Sano, "Qualities of Effective Writing Instruction in History Classrooms: A Cross-Case Comparison of Two Teachers' Practices," *American Educational Research Journal* 45, no. 4 (2008): 1045-1079. (2) Monte-Sano, "Beyond Reading Comprehension and Summary: Learning to

Read and Write by Focusing on Evidence, Perspective, and Interpretation," *Curriculum Inquiry* 41, no. 2 (2011): 212-249.

3. For more on this approach to preparing historical sources for struggling readers, see Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin, "Reading and Rewriting History," *Educational Leadership* 62, no. 1 (2004): 42-45.
4. Surely, historians do not write in timed situations, nor do they write in response to questions and documents that are given to them. However, writing a DBQ does give students an opportunity to think and write from historical sources, a practice central to the study of history.
5. Forty-nine of 56 students took an argumentative stance (based on the presence of a thesis, organization around a central position, or interpretive statements, rather than a summary).
6. See Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1958).
7. For this and other seminal findings about how historians read and analyze documents (e.g., corroboration and contextualization), see Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Umatural Acts* (Philadelphia: Temple, 2001).
8. Ibid.
9. I have worked with Susan De La Paz, Mark Felton, and Robert Croninger, and Patricia Alexander on

this project, "Disciplinary Writing Instruction for the Social Studies Classroom: A Path to Adolescent Literacy," supported by the Institute for Education Sciences.

10. Common Core State Standards, www.corestandards.org/the-standards (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), p. 3.

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