

# Building Reading, Writing and Analysis in the AP U.S. History Classroom

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AP U.S. history teachers have a lot to do. Not only is the content of the course voluminous and rich, but teachers also need to instruct their students in habits of good reading, writing, and analysis. And, somehow, this all needs to be done within an academic calendar that ends often four weeks earlier than non-AP courses.

The building of historical thinking skills has historically been a lonely endeavor for AP U.S. history teachers. Many often generate their own pedagogy, perhaps modified from an AP workshop or generally gleaned from released exam essay questions. However, as currently scheduled, in 2014, the AP U.S. history exam will undergo a redesign that will make explicit the kinds of historical thinking skills students should exhibit. While these skills have always been foundational to any good history class, after the redesign, they will become an integral part of the everyday vocabulary and skill building in AP U.S. history. This will give teachers a common lexicon for sharing pedagogical tips and innovations. Broadly, the four historical thinking skills to be tested are:

**Skill 1: Chronological Reasoning**

**Skill 2: Comparison and Contextualization**

**Skill 3: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence**

**Skill 4: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis<sup>1</sup>**

Over the past five years, we have facilitated a summer AP workshop at Carleton College entitled “American Themes in the AP Classroom,” for which we choose a theme or themes, bring together experienced AP U.S. history and AP English language teachers, and practice cross-curricular reading so that both courses can mutually benefit each other. Our participants come from schools large and small, with both affluent populations, and working class or impoverished populations. Uniting historical thinking with rhetorical analysis has proven a fruitful exercise, which we believe can assist AP U.S. history teachers in building student reading, writing, and analysis, while simultaneously strengthening students’ factual knowledge. In 2011 our theme, “Witch Hunts in America,” led us to Mary Beth Norton’s *In the Devil’s Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (2002) and Gretchen Adams’ *The Spectre of Salem: Remembering the Witch Trials in Nineteenth-Century America* (2008) and the realization that if teachers and students are looking for examples of the College Board’s four historical thinking skills, there are few better places to go than secondary

sources themselves.<sup>2</sup> Below are some of the examples we found and ways to illuminate the College Board’s four skills through the process of reading history itself.

The concept of reading across the curriculum—while laudable in theory—poses some questions when it comes to working with more content-driven disciplines, such as history, versus more skill-driven disciplines, such as language arts. The extent to which we can construe the act of reading in a history classroom as a *skill* driven approach broadens our repertoire of instructional strategies.

The most distinct difference in the act of reading for information—what most often occurs in a history class—is the transference into historical interpretation or historical argument. Higher order thinking skills—such as analysis, synthesis, or evaluation—depend upon two distinct areas:

1. One’s historical knowledge
2. One’s ability to transfer historical thinking skills onto that knowledge. In other words, how do we move the act of historical reading beyond the necessity of boldfacing key words or terms as a way of ensuring coverage, accuracy, and cogency?

More traditional methods of instruction in historical study approach these

two skills in a chronological manner. In other words, *once* students have acquired a set body of knowledge, only then do they engage in more historical thinking skills. By contrast, teaching students to *read historically* allows them to engage in more critical inquiry simultaneous to the act of reading. In language arts, academic reading often means *rereading*. In history, we can make the same assertion: that as students are reading, they must stop and reread through their historical thinking lenses. In reviewing the four historical thinking skills as outlined by the College Board, we can articulate commensurate writing and reading skills to accompany students' reading of secondary sources. The process of reading invokes several skills simultaneously, so it would be erroneous to somehow suggest that some texts lend themselves to distinct historical thinking skills. Rather, we wish to teach our students all four historical thinking skills, so that they can apply these in a purposeful manner to any text.

The third historical thinking skill is "Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence." As students read a text, they read for *more* than just the content of what a writer is saying; students construct historical argument as they are reading. This skill focuses on historical argumentation and the appropriate use of relevant historical evidence.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, when students read historically, they seek a *logical* argument, based upon an appropriate range of evidence. While this latter statement may sound an awful lot like an English classroom's writing assignment, the main difference is the contextual boundaries that the reading of history invokes.

The first historical thinking skill is: "Chronological Reasoning," with a focus on historical causation, patterns of continuity and change over time, and periodization. As students read primary or secondary source material, they look at ways in which discrete pieces of evidence build towards larger frameworks, and they successfully synthesize,

or combine, these pieces of information into new concepts, categories, or factors.<sup>4</sup> Such a process in rhetoric is called invention; the student "rhetor" approaches this task as an inductive or deductive process. If deductive, the reader compiles a broad swath of information, from which she/he draws significant conclusions. If inductive, the reader begins with a general claim or assertion, then supports this with a comprehensive range of information.

The second historical thinking skill is "Comparison and Contextualization," a skill that builds upon the first two. Consider that skill #3—crafting historical argument—operates on a more linear plane, whereby students can focus on the cause-effect relationship throughout all of history, and skill #1 synthesizes trends and patterns into larger concepts through a process of rhetorical invention. Skill #2, then, takes this process and adds another layer by drawing comparisons between eras and analyzing how context influences our understanding of events. Adding contextual understanding asks for students to call upon a prior understanding to view historical data.<sup>5</sup> The act of comparison and contextualization, therefore, involves the process of *juxtaposition*, whereby students make deliberate choices about what historical information is combined in a way that serves original argument. Whether this comparison is made through a subject-by-subject or a point-by-point approach, this comparison calls upon students to clearly identify the boundaries through which they choose to make key points.

The fourth and final skill, "Historical Interpretation and Synthesis," focuses on students' ability to create original interpretations based upon their own creative combination of historical information.<sup>6</sup> If we consider these four historical thinking skills as part of a sequence, we may create a flow chart where one skill builds to another:

### **Skill 1: Chronological Reasoning** Historical Causation

Patterns of Continuity and  
Change Over Time  
Periodization

### **Skill 2: Comparison and Contextualization**

Comparison  
Contextualization

### **Skill 3: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence**

Historical Argumentation  
Appropriate Use of Relevant  
Historical Evidence

### **Skill 4: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis**

Interpretation  
Synthesis

A review of the process of reading (and writing) historical argument may help illustrate how these four historical thinking skills operate in harmony. The selected texts that follow are from Gretchen Adams' *The Specter of Salem*, a secondary source that explores the Salem witch trials as a metaphor for the American narrative (especially when the majority needs to demonize its enemies) and Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare*, which situates the Salem witch trials within the broader framework of conflicts between Indians and Puritans in the late seventeenth century. These excerpts have been selected for their primary illustration of a particular historical thinking skill, though the accompanying annotation reflects how the skills interplay, often in a cumulative manner.

In the first excerpt below, Mary Beth Norton exhibits the basic tenets of historical argument we look for in our student papers; namely, she summarizes previous historical arguments and highlights shortcomings, raises the historical question that has served to guide her research, and offers a compelling thesis that demands factual and analytical support. (The bold face is ours and it highlights the accompanying annotation.)

Skill 3: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence	Annotation
<p><b>Scholars have developed a variety of interpretations of the crisis.</b> Some have detected natural causes for the girls' vision of ghostly specter: ergot poisoning or, more recently, an encephalitis epidemic. One has argued that at least some of the accused really were practicing witchcraft and thus that some of the charges had merit. Several historians contend that the girls were faking their fits from the start, others that they were hysterical, angry, or delinquent adolescents....</p> <p>... <i>In the Devil's Snare</i> moves out of the realm to examine the origins and impact of the witchcraft charges in Salem Village, Andover, Essex County, and Boston as well. It devotes a great deal of attention to accusers, confessors, and judges.... And above all it poses the deceptively simple but rarely asked question: <b>Why was Salem so different from all previous witchcraft episodes in New England?</b></p> <p><b><i>In the Devil's Snare</i>, then, contends that the witchcraft crisis of 1692 can be comprehended only in the context of nearly two decades of armed crisis between English settlers and the New England Indians in both southern and northern portions of the region.<sup>7</sup></b></p>	<p>Framing argument with others' arguments.</p> <p>Historical question to guide research/writing.</p> <p>Argument.</p>

The next excerpt, from Gretchen Adams, reflects skill #1, "Chronological Reasoning," by recognizing patterns of continuity and change; through it we can see how Adams presents a causal link between the seventeenth century and the nineteenth century. This passage also highlights skill #4, "Interpretation and Synthesis":

Skill 1: Chronological Reasoning Skill 4: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis	Annotation
<p><b>Just as participants in the 1692 trials were described in these narratives as suffering from "delusions," "fanaticism," "superstition," "ignorance," or even lying, so too would those involved in the nineteenth-century controversies and public excitements be described by opponents who drew direct comparison with Salem's witch hunt.</b> Political and social developments after the Revolution created an environment where history would be seen as a source of authoritative examples of both virtue and vice. <b>In that search for the foundations of national character, many would find the memory of Salem's witch hunt a useful symbol to mark the cultural boundary between the virtuous national present and the superstitious, disorderly, and even brutal colonial past.<sup>8</sup></b></p>	<p>Continuity and Change</p> <p>Interpretation/synthesis of continuity/change</p>

Adams' interpretation and synthesis also allows for the *inclusion* of other skills, such as periodization and comparison, which fall under skills #1 and #2, "Chronological Reasoning" and "Comparison and Contextualization." Note, too, the rhetorical use of deductive logic, for in order for Adams to make a cogent argument—that Salem became a metaphor for all future 'demons' of the American ethos—she must carefully select what information she chooses to synthesize (skill #4), from which her main points can be made.

Skill 1: Chronological Reasoning Skill 2: Comparison and Contextualization Skill 4: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis	Annotation
<p><b>By 1776 the trials were more than eighty years in the past.</b> Although one or another of these men might have learned their history from local tradition, <b>several lived at a distance from Massachusetts, so their knowledge likely derived from one of the histories in print.</b> With the availability of general histories that overwhelmingly favored the Calef interpretation, those who drew on Salem witchcraft as a warning could also presume that readers would at least be aware of his perspective.<sup>9</sup> Such events, all the published histories since Calef's book in 1700 had already concluded, were <b>products of the failure to maintain control of a situation, of a loss of reason, or of excessive religious "zeal!"<sup>10</sup></b></p>	<p>Periodization/deductive logic</p> <p>Interpretation of synthesis/events</p>

The same type of interplay among historical thinking skills manifests itself again below, this time as skill #3, "Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence" and skill #2, "Comparison and Contextualization." In this case, Adams presents a comprehensive range of evidence of both immediate *and* causal examples. By presenting such a range of evidence, she successfully moves to establishing the context by which she can make her argument. In other words, noting "the psychological framework" of Salem permits Adams to extend her argument that Salem operates as a metaphor.

Skill 3: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence Skill 2: Comparison and Contextualization	Annotation
The ongoing war with Indians on the northern frontier and the ever-present threat from the bordering French colonies were other sources of anxiety. <b>Local and individual</b> tensions over church-related issues, as well as personal feuds and the sense among many that the <b>religious mission and faith of colonists</b> were in decline made them more alert to any signs of God’s displeasure or the devil’s predations. Each of these contemporary difficulties not only posed an immediate threat to life and property but created a <b>psychological framework</b> wherein the appearance of witchcraft was not only possible but likely. <sup>11</sup>	<p>Immediate example</p> <p>Causal/distant example</p> <p>Rhetorical invention</p>

Integral to the process of historical thinking as a reading skill is an understanding of these same skills as ones that influence writing. Like language arts—where students are taught the reciprocity between reading and writing—in history, students can also be taught to read as writers. The major difference lies in *argument*, for as historical skill #3 prominently points out, historians are in the business of creating historical argument, and as each day or era offers new insights, we must continually revisit the past in order to make informed decisions about our present.

To this end, students must be taught that the process of *writing* about history bears a direct correlation to reading about history. When a reader begins a primary or secondary source, she/he brings to bear upon that experience two distinct mindsets. The first is prior knowledge, which acts as a *lens* by which to evaluate the text and to draw key conclusions. This lens is shaped, crafted, and directed by virtue of how well students understand the four historical thinking skills. The second experience that the reader brings to the reading process is an implicit or explicit understanding of the writing process, whereby she/he composes his argument for the audience. The extent to which new (or experienced) readers of historical content understand the conventions of creating clear and cogent arguments will inform both their reading and their writing. We believe that when students *read historically* by engaging a secondary source not only for what it says but how it says it, students will become mindful of the process by

which history is made by the historians who write it.

While all students should be taught to read history skillfully, the suggestions here are best suited for students who are taking AP U.S. History and/or AP English Language, both of which are usually taught during the junior year of high school. 🌐

#### Notes

1. The College Board recently rearranged the order of the thinking skills, which is why they are not discussed sequentially in this article (which was written with the earlier order in mind).
2. Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002); Gretchen A. Adams, *The Specter of Salem: Remembering the Witch Trials in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
3. “Advances in AP: Historical Thinking Skills,” <http://advancesinap.collegeboard.org/historical-thinking>.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Norton, 4-12.
8. Adams, 36.
9. Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (London: Nath. Hillar and Joseph Collyer, 1700)
10. Adams, 36.
11. Adams, 11.

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## RESOURCES

AP United States History:  
Curriculum Framework, 2014-2015  
[http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/2012advances/12b\\_5353\\_AP\\_US\\_Hist\\_CF\\_WEB\\_120910.pdf](http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/ap/2012advances/12b_5353_AP_US_Hist_CF_WEB_120910.pdf)

Overview of Historical Thinking Skills  
<http://advancesinap.collegeboard.org/english-history-and-social-science/historical-thinking>

AP English Language: 2007-2008 Professional Development Workshop Materials  
[http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/06EngLangComp07-1070\\_pp.ii-82.pdf](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/06EngLangComp07-1070_pp.ii-82.pdf)

For additional AP resources, visit: <https://apcommunity.collegeboard.org> and [advancesinap.collegeboard.org](http://advancesinap.collegeboard.org).