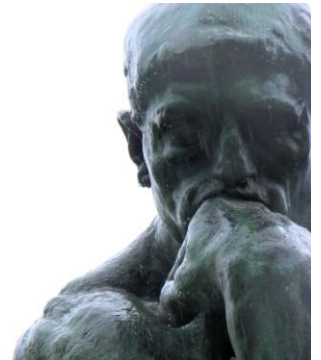


Critical Thinking with History

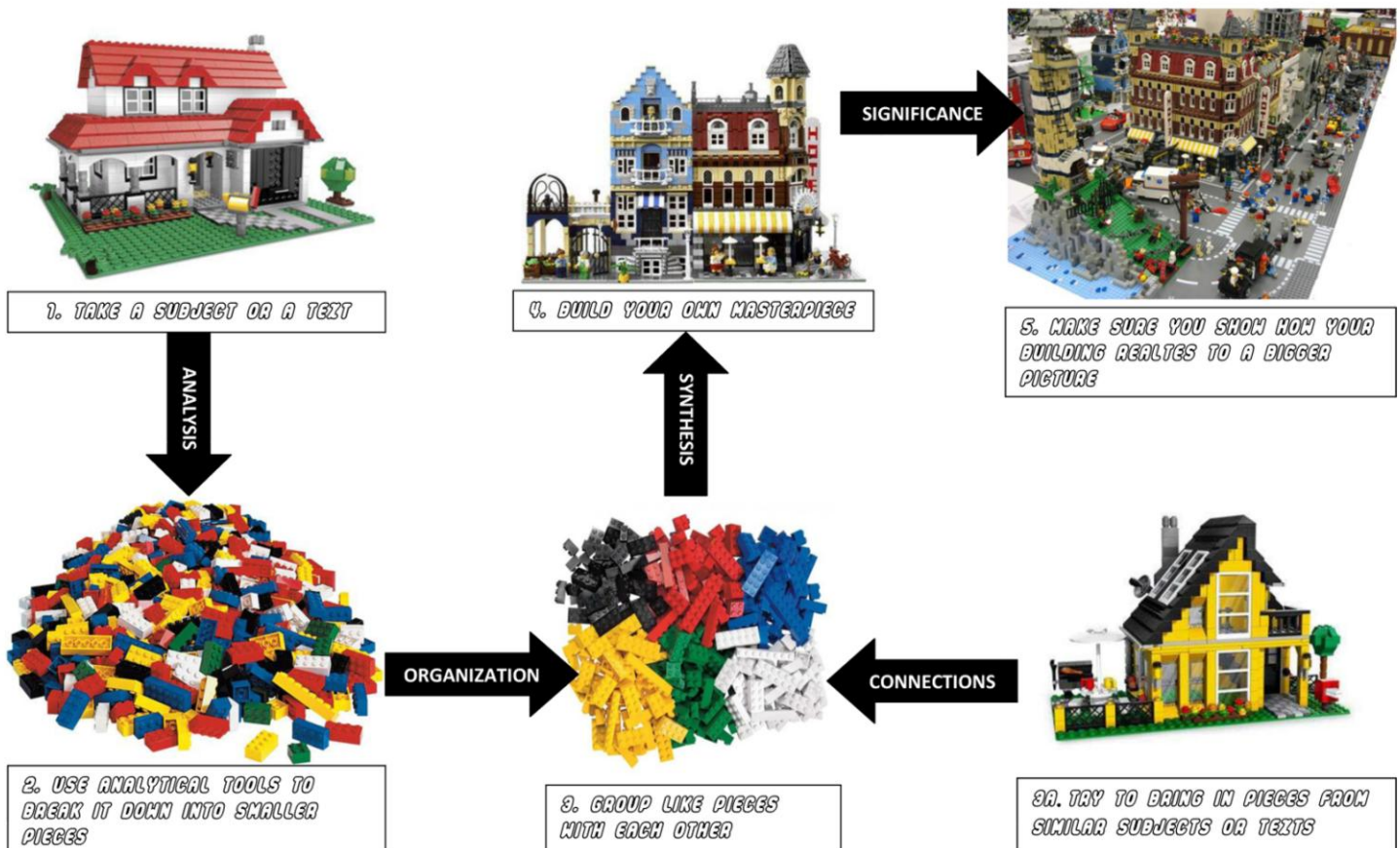
Section 1- What is critical thinking?

You hear teachers say it all the time, but what is it? They want to see it in your essays, they want to see you do it with your readings, but what does it actually look like? What does it mean to be a critical thinker?

At its most basic, critical thinking is taking information and doing something significant with it. That significance can come from creating a brand new interpretation of a subject or from just breaking down a text into smaller pieces so that you have a better understanding of it. Instead of exploring a written definition, it might be more helpful to think of critical thinking as playing with Legos.



CRITICAL THINKING



Elements in the critical thinking process

The diagram above breaks critical thinking into five parts. Below is some explanation of those parts.

1. **GET IN THERE** - Any subject or text is made up of many small pieces. The first step toward being a good critical thinker is to realize that you can't understand any subject or text if you don't get in there and start playing around. Go ahead and take it apart, Legos aren't fun if you don't play with them.
2. **ANALYZE** - You'll need to take apart your subject or text into its smaller pieces. This process is called analysis and it means breaking something complex down into its smaller pieces. Much more on this later.
3. **ORGANIZE** - Once you've taken apart your subject or text into its smaller pieces you can start to group like pieces with each other. This is when you'll start to understand what really went into making the subject or text you're studying. Sometimes to truly understand something, you need to see how it was made rather than just looking at the finished product. It's at this point that you'll start to see patterns emerge and maybe they'll even remind you of other similar subjects or texts. Feel free to bring in pieces from those too. Good critical thinkers make connections with other texts or subjects, just like good Lego builders use pieces from many different store-bought sets. Don't panic if you don't see those patterns emerge. Sometimes you can try different interpretive frameworks that have worked in the past to give yourself a boost. We'll talk more about this later as well.
4. **SYNTHESIZE** - Once your pieces are organized and you start to see patterns emerge; you are ready to build your own masterpiece. This step requires synthesis, another key element in critical thinking. Synthesis is taking smaller things and putting them together. This is where you take the subject and put your own interpretation, or twist, into the creation of something new.
5. **SIGNIFICANCE** – Don't stop with synthesis! Good critical thinkers also strive to show how anything their talking about, from their masterpiece to the small pieces they analyzed fit into, and inform, the larger academic picture. Showing how your building, or your analysis, relates to the whole is called significance.

Now don't worry. You don't have to do all of these steps each time you are asked to critically think. That might seem a little daunting at first. Just make sure that whenever you are thinking critically, you're taking the subject or text and doing one of these elements with it.

Why is critical thinking important today?

You live in exponential times. Just think about how quickly the technology around you is changing. Over the past decade you've seen the rise of the smartphone and the birth of the Ipod. You've watched as 'google' became a verb, YouTube created household sensations and your parents got Facebook pages (sorry). It's not stopping there, either. As Ray Kurzweil, a pioneer in the field of artificial intelligence notes about our technology, "what used to fit in a building now fits in your pocket, and what fits in your pocket today will fit inside a blood cell in 25 years." With this rapidly developing technology has come an avalanche of information. "It is estimated that 4 exabytes (4.0x10¹⁹) of unique information will be generated this year. That's more than the previous 5,000 years."¹ Today, more than ever, it is critical that you be able to do something with information. It is

¹ Ianjukes.com

the currency of the 21st century and those who can create amidst this avalanche, and not just be buried beneath it, will have brighter futures. Today, it is critical to be a critical thinker.

Why use history to become a better critical thinker?

Any number of fields would suffice to give you practice with critical thinking, but none does this as meaningfully as history. History is the study of humanity's glorious, and too often tragic, journey through time. It holds both lessons for who we are and where we're going. Sometimes confused with mere chronology, history is rather the collective drama of billions laid buried in the past. The only way to unearth these stories is with the tools of critical thinking. That's why history is perfect for perfecting this critical skill set. It's real, visceral and ready to be critically mined. Its territory and lessons know no bounds, so it gives you practice across multiple academic disciplines. Historians study everything from heads of state to heads of small households. We chronicle the battles of millions and write the biography of the one. Nowhere can you more meaningfully hone your critical thinking than in your history classes.

Before we start – two warnings

To build critical thinkers out of you, let us start at the beginning and take a look at two things all good critical thinkers, and especially good historians, have to keep in mind. It may be best explained by reading a little Sir Herbert Butterfield. Sir Butterfield was a British historian and philosopher of history in the early 1900s who is remembered chiefly for his book *The Whig Interpretation of History*. In it he writes on the role of the historian:

“It seems to be accepted that each historian does something more than make a confession of his private mind and his whimsicalities, and that all of them are trying to elicit a truth, and perhaps combining through their various imperfections to express a **Truth**, which if we could perfectly attain it, would be the voice of History itself. But if history is in this way something like the memory of mankind and represents the spirit of man brooding over man's past, we must imagine it as working not to accentuate antagonisms or to ratify old party-cries but to find the unities that underlie the differences and to see **all lives as part of the one web of life**. This historian trying to feel his way towards this may be striving to be like a god but perhaps he is less foolish than the one who poses as god the avenger. Studying the quarrels of an ancient day he can at least seek to understand both parties to the struggle and he must want to **understand them better than they understood themselves**; watching them entangled in the net of time and circumstances he can take pity on them – these men who perhaps had no pity for one another; and, though he can never be perfect, it is difficult to see why he should aspire to anything less than taking these men and their quarrels into a world where everything is understood and all sins are forgiven.”²

So Butterfield isn't the easiest read, but let's do a little analysis here (remember that's one of the elements of critical thinking) and break down what he's saying.

1. You must “want to understand [the parties of the past] better than they understood themselves.” This means you need to know your content if you want to think critically about

² Butterfield, Herbert. *The Whig Interpretation of History*, 1931

it. In history, this means you need to know the people involved, the timeline of events, the geography, the historical context etc. Critical thinking made from incomplete content knowledge would be like trying to cook dinner with an empty refrigerator. In the end, you'll probably be lacking some key ingredients that will seriously limit your final product.

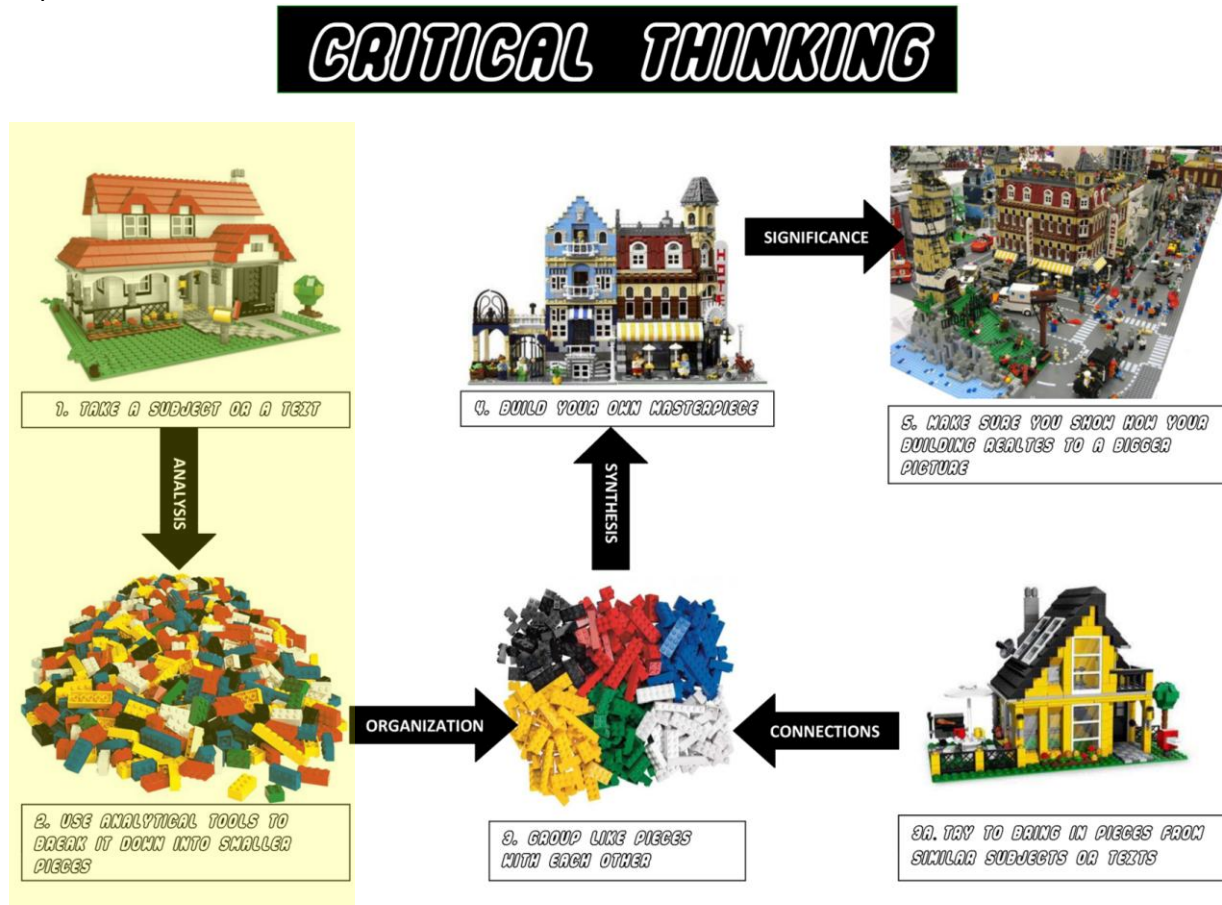
2. When you think critically about the past, you're trying to recreate the 'truth' of what really happened, but this is limited by your "private mind and [own] whimsicalities." This is a very important caution to the student who wants to grow as a critical thinker. The entire process happens inside your mind, a mind that, like anyone else's, is full of biases and personal assumptions. These will cloud your thinking if you aren't very careful. Thankfully Butterfield gives us a way out of this when he says that the discipline of history or any discipline for that matter, will probably only move forward by combining these "various imperfections to express a Truth." This means you should carefully consider what others, especially other scholars, say about a topic. Reading their take on something can make your interpretation that much closer to the Truth.

Section 1 Summary

1. Critical thinking means taking information and doing something significant with it.
 2. Today critical thinking is more important than ever.
 3. History is an especially good discipline for developing critical thinking.
 4. The quality of your critical thinking is limited by your content knowledge and ability to overcome your own biases.
-

Section 2 – Analysis

This section will focus just on the first element of critical thinking: analysis. Remember, that we defined analysis as breaking something down into smaller parts so that you can better understand or describe the whole. On the critical thinking diagram, analysis makes up the first two highlighted steps.



As a scholar you'll find yourself using analysis in three different ways:

1. When you read, **you'll need to identify** the analytical elements employed by the author either consciously on the author's part (genre, parts of the text, compare/contrast techniques etc.) or unconsciously (bias, connotation etc.) to better understand the text as a whole.
2. When you study a topic, **you'll need to use** the analytical elements to break the subject down into smaller parts so that you can better understand the topic as a whole.
3. When you communicate, **you'll need to use** analytical elements to connect your evidence to your assertions so that you can support your thesis.

Not only are there different times that you'll spend analyzing, there are tons of different ways to analyze something. Too often you're just told to analyze this or that, but rarely if ever do we talk about *what it means* to actually analyze something. Ironically, we never analyze analysis.

This section is dedicated to the reality that most students simply don't know what to do when asked to analyze a character or an event that they study or learn. Seeing this regularly, I began to ask students if anyone had ever taught them what analysis is or provided them with some strategies to help them develop more skill in this area. The answer was universally "no". Though initially troubled by this problem; I thought back to my Middle and High School experience. "Had anyone ever taught me to be more analytical?" I thought. The answer was "no". That's where the Periodic Table of Analysis (see below) comes in.

The periodic table of analysis organizes common analytical elements you'll encounter in your academic lives. It does so in much the same way that chemistry's periodic table of elements lists atoms. Chemists use the periodic table to break down a large molecule into its atomic parts to better understand the molecule. In the same way, the periodic table of analysis allows you to break down larger texts or subjects into their smaller parts to better understand the whole. In addition, much like chemists use their periodic table as a guide to binding atoms into molecules, so too can you use these analytical elements as the glue to bind your evidence to your assertions.

In the following pages we'll spend some time talking about each of these analytical groups. Don't feel overwhelmed. Analysis never means using all of these tools at once. That would be silly. This chart is simply a way to show the most common tools scholars use to break down their subjects or texts into smaller parts. Just like you use the periodic table as a reference in your chemistry class, you can use this table as a reference when you are asked to analyze something.

1. Language- All analysis must, to some degree, involve the analysis of language. The actual words on a page, and the arrangement of those words into units of meaning, lay the foundation for all textual meaning. Whenever you seek to analyze a text, look carefully at the following aspects of the text's language.

Style- Style refers to an author's unique manner of presenting information.

Diction- Diction is word choice. When analyzing diction, consider:

Connotation- The connotation of a word is all of the associations that we bring to bear on it. For example, springtime is associated with new life; many people hear spring and automatically think of baby bunnies and budding plants. None of these speak to the literal definition of spring, yet they definitely play a role in our concept of spring. These associations are so pervasive that most people easily recognize springtime as a metaphor for youth and new life. To be in "the springtime of one's life" is a good thing. Tracking the connotations of words in a piece can alert you to bias or help you gain a better understanding and appreciation for an author's complete message.

Denotation- A word's denotation is its literal, dictionary definition. We previously considered connotations of "springtime"; according to Merriam Webster, the denotation of spring is simply "the season of spring"

Level of Diction- Generally, an author will sustain a particular "level of diction" throughout a writing. The writing may be formal, informal, poetic, filled with jargon, etc. Recognizing the level of diction in a piece you are reading can tell you a great deal about the purpose and intended audience of a piece.

Syntax- Syntax refers to the arrangement of words into units of meaning. A few things to consider when analyzing syntax include

Sentence Type- When we refer to sentence type, we are talking about whether a sentence is declarative, interrogative or exclamatory. Remember learning about these way back when? Patterns in sentence type can have a dramatic impact on a piece of writing. Writings that contain a number of questions, or interrogative sentences may

demand a lot of introspection on the part of the reader. A reading with a lot of exclamatory statements may be very dramatic.

Sentence Length- Sentence length can have a big impact on meaning. Track patterns regarding sentence length and analyze the effect this has on the writing.

2. **Credibility** – An essential way to analyze any text you encounter is to assess its credibility.

Credibility is how much, if any, of the reading you can take as being true. It is the quality of being believable. The following elements go into making a source credible or believable.

Source – Where is the information in the text coming from? Who is the author or authors? Does the author(s) have enough expertise to be taken seriously? Does the author(s) have an agenda that will taint what they are trying to say or can you believe them? Source can also refer to the sources used by an author. Are they good reliable sources from academic scholars or are the works cited list a whole bunch of Wikipedia entries? Did the author use an adequate number of sources or did he/she rely too heavily on one source?

Statistics – As Gregg Easterbrook so aptly said, “Torture numbers, and they’ll confess to anything.” Just because a text uses statistics doesn’t make those stats credible. Analyze those numbers carefully. Does the author claim causation when there is only correlation? Are the findings statistically significant or in other words is $P < .005$? Do they meet confidence levels?

Methodology – Numbers alone aren’t enough to determine credibility. Dive into the methodologies, or academic techniques, employed by the author. Make sure the historian you’re reading remembers to stay within the historical context of the period or doesn’t fall prey to hindsight bias. Make sure the scientific study you’re reading carefully employs the scientific method. Are biases properly avoided, was the sampling carefully done, are there any confounding variables etc.?

Bias – We all have assumptions about the world. Assumptions form from our past experiences and influence all of our future interactions. Some authors are better than others at putting aside their assumptions, or biases, and trying to write objectively. Some authors don’t even try. Analyzing the author’s bias will greatly affect how credible you rate the text.

Point of View (POV) – Learning to identify point of view is an excellent way for students to grow analytically. Identifying POV means that you should consider that events are experienced by different groups in different ways. One needs to look only to the Superbowl every year for a prime example. The same event takes place for everyone, but after the game it is clear that it was experienced very differently for all the parties involved. Same event; different perspective on the event depending on which locker room you were in! It may also be helpful to consider that point of view stems from source and bias.

3. Parts of a Text

Introduction – Here an author sets the stage for the rest of the reading. Make sure that you look for the author’s thesis when you read an introduction.

Complexity – This is the part of the text that acknowledges other arguments that could have been made. The more scholarly the work the more time an author will spend acknowledging other arguments. Good authors will not only bring up other arguments but will also overcome those arguments to show why his/her argument is the best.

Assertion – Assertions are the key points, or reasons, in an argument that is supported by evidence. Make sure you carefully look at the evidence and how the author connects that evidence to the assertion being made.

Summation – This is the part of a text that brings together and summarizes the main assertions as well as establishes the overall significance of the topic in the text.

Qualification – Sometimes you will see an author make an assertion, yet set limits on how far the reader can take this assertion. Be looking for statements like this so as not to misinterpret what the author is trying to say.

Refutation – This is the part of a text that not only acknowledges complexity but overcomes it.

Mood- The mood of a text is the overall feeling a reader is supposed to get from said text. IF you are reading an article that is arguing for the urgency of action regarding global warming, you are probably supposed to feel alarmed about the crisis or inspired to act.

Tone – Tone is the author’s attitude toward the subject of a piece. Understanding tone is key to understanding meaning.

Theme- In literary terms, theme is the overall life message a reader is supposed to learn from a work of literature. When you read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you aren’t just supposed to remember the story, you are supposed to learn that courageous people can change society for the better.

4. **Cause and Effect** – Cause and effect are the two sides of the coin we call change.

Cause is something that makes something else happen. An effect is what happens because of the cause. Cause answers the question, “Why did it happen?” while effect answers the question, “What happened because of this?” Analyzing cause and effect is an excellent way to establish significance. The following elements make up the different types of causes and effects you’re likely to encounter.

Origins - Origins are beginnings, roots, or sources of events. Origins are often open to a lot of interpretation and differ in nature from immediate causes. Origins can be the earliest events in a series of dominos. Origins can often be considered as long-term causes.

Immediate Causes – these are the events that happen right before the event in question. They often spark the event, but usually, if it wasn’t for some other long-term causes, they might not have caused it on their own. They can sometimes be seen as a catalyst more than an actual cause.

Immediate Effect – these are the things that happen right after the event in question.

Turning Point - Turning Points are events of such gravity as to alter the course of history; decisive battles in war or impactful new technologies can be good examples of historical turning points.

Reaction – these are events that are so strongly opposed to the change in question that they go in the opposite direction.

Change Over Time - Change over time is an important idea to recognize and apply because it will often provide the framework for a trend, including beginning, end, peaks and decreases. This analytical element tries to identify the entire picture of change from its origins to its long term effects.

5. **Compare and Contrast** - Perhaps the most common of analytical tools employed by author and student alike is that of compare and contrast. Much of what we read everyday has some element of comparison within it. Comparisons can be made on a spectrum, by degrees or by consideration of other factors.

Degree - Degree is important to command because reality is not black and white. Degree is usually applied when considering the extent of something. For example, “To what degree were the British responsible for The Plight of the Irish in 1847?” Degree considers evidence on a continuum or scale; it suggests evidence that is not absolute in nature. Radical and moderate are terms that exemplify this idea.

Disparity - Disparity is a comparative term. It can be applied to show the difference in the ways comparable entities develop differently than one another. It is often helpful when pointing out changes over time such as the ‘disparity of wealth distribution became more acute from 1710-1770. Disparity is a divide, when a divide increases or decrease over time or suddenly changes there is an analytical opportunity.

Dichotomy - A dichotomy is an analytical opportunity that involves a separation or chasm between two elements of the same topic. A dichotomy implies that there exists a gap or divergence between two parts such as the dichotomy between expectations and reality, or a dichotomy between legislation and enforcement of laws. The classic most accessible example of dichotomy is looking at the divergence between words and actions.

Strata - Strata is also a comparative term often applied in concepts that are organized vertically like layers (such as the layers of the atmosphere or the layers of the earth) The idea of strata can be helpful when describing relationships in a hierarchy like class structure etc.

Spectrum – Placing events on a spectrum is a common comparative tool. Oftentimes you’ll see conservative ideologies to the right, moderate elements in the middle and liberal ideologies to the left.

Superlative – This qualifies why an event is important or significant by comparing it to other events. Some events carry more weight than others because they are the largest, the first, the last, the only, the most etc. Superlatives can be a number of things, but they are always the result of some implied comparison.

6. **Patterns** – This analytical family is made up of conditions or behaviors that re-occur over time. Identifying patterns in what you read or study will help you see how to group information together.

Anomaly - Anomalies are the deviation from a pattern or normality. Sesame Street introduced you to the notion of anomaly with “One of these things is not like the other”. They are often associated with the notion of complexity.

Juxtaposition and Paradox – Paradox is a seemingly contradictory statement or condition that may nonetheless be true. The fact that Americans professed to be lovers of liberty, while at the same time they were slave holders is a paradox. Paradox is a pattern with high contrast.

Irony - Irony is the outcome of events contrary to what was expected or intended. It would be ironic if an ambulance, rushing to save a victim of a hit and run accident, struck a pedestrian on the way to the injured man. Qualifying evidence as ironic is a high level analytical move and shows that you already identified a pattern and were surprised when the expected patten didn’t pan out.

Oxymoron – This is pattern comprised of two things that really shouldn’t go together. Think of it like a patter with colors that don’t match, yet nonetheless they make up the same fabric. Examples of oxymorons include military intelligence, a just war, corporate culture.

Paradigm - A paradigm is a way of viewing reality. It is the biggest picture pattern and usually encompasses many of the preceding elements.

Theme- Themes are patterns that stand for a long period of time. Some examples of are things like; expansion, struggles to gain rights, or the growth of the federal government.

7. TP GIVEN

TP GIVEN is an acronym that helps students to pick out and categorize key elements of a current event, international relationship or historical event. Think of these categories like informational 'bins'. When you read or study a topic, you can start to place pieces in these bins to help your speed up your organizing process.

Technology

Inventions impact history. The creation and use of technology alters life, society, and the environment.

Policy/Politics

Policies are typically decided by governments. Policies are often in response to some problem or situation. Policies tend to show in the form of a law, presidential order or judicial decision.

Geography

This is the science dealing with the differentiation of the earth's surface, as shown in the character, arrangement, and interrelations over the world of such elements as climate, elevation, soil, proximity, place, natural resources, vegetation, population and land use. Location matters.

International/ Domestic

The first half of this bin relates to two or more nation's international affairs. This includes things like treaties, wars, and foreign policy. These are events that extend across national boundaries. The second half relates to the internal workings of a country.

Values

Values are the relative worth, merit or importance of a given component of society. These include individual and societal choices like freedom, liberty, equality, wealth, slavery, etc. Values are often reflected in religion, culture, family, society, art and/or education.

Economics

This is the science that deals with the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services, or the material welfare of humankind. The economy is the system or systems that are pertain to the production of goods and the matters of money.

Natural Environment

These are the effects of nature or the natural world on human activities. Events like floods, diseases, plagues, and volcanic eruptions impact humankind.

8. Psychology

Psychology is the study of human behavior and mental processes. If you are reading or studying about humans, than psychology can play a role in your analysis. Psychology is made up of different approaches. Think of approaches as different lenses you can wear to study psychology. If you approach psychology from a biological perspective you might ask questions about how a person's biology determines their behavior. If you approach psychology from a social perspective, you might explain a person's behavior by looking at how the presence of other people altered their behavior. These lenses help determine the questions and thus conclusions their wearer asks and gets. This is much like if you wore orange sunglasses, everything you'd see would be a bit orange. Some of the more helpful approaches include:

Biological Psychology - This approach studies how the brain and the body provide the biological mechanisms that create our psychological responses.

Behavioral Psychology - This approach only studies observable human behavior focusing on how we learn, react, and manipulate our environment.

Social Psychology - This approach studies how the individual is influenced by other individuals or other groups of people.

Humanistic Psychology - This optimistic approach to psychology studies how humans can reach their full potential.

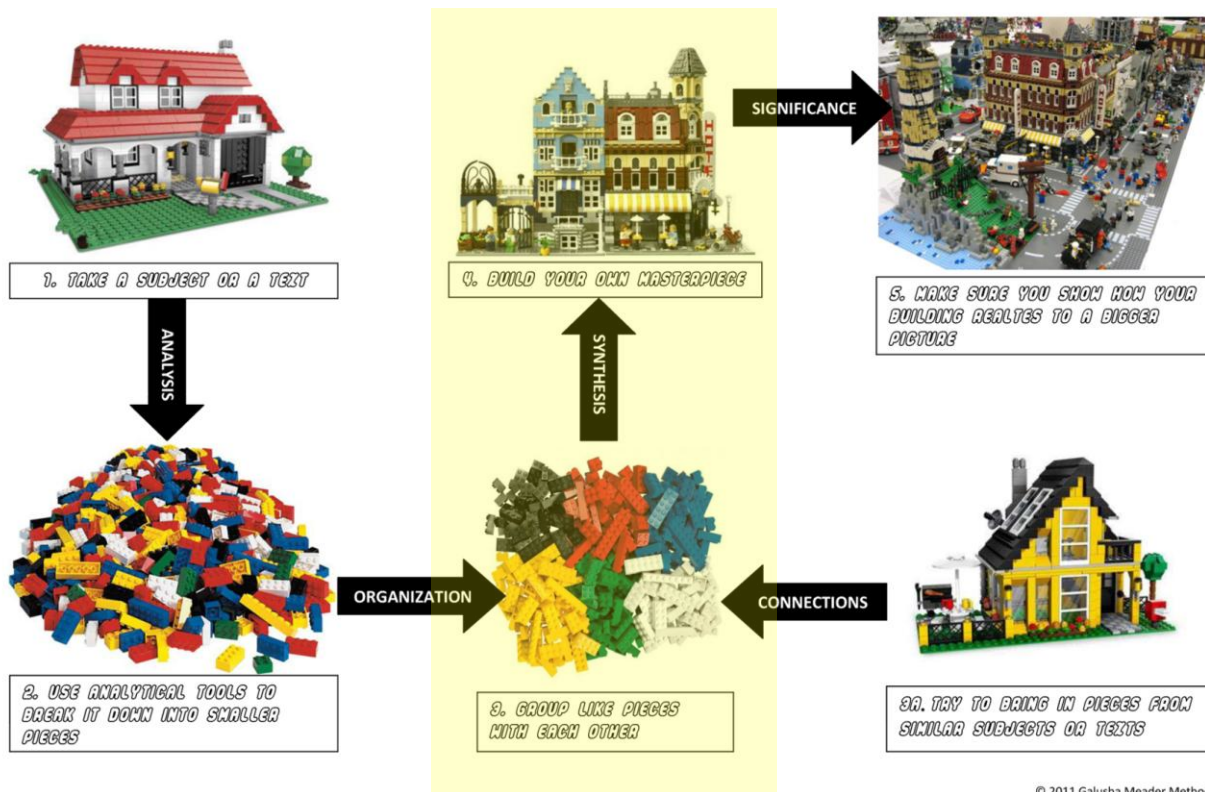
Psychodynamic Psychology - This approach views the human psyche as an energy system. Desires or anxieties build up like energy in the unconscious and must be released or bad things will happen to a person's mental health.

Section 2 Summary

1. To understand a text, identify the analytical tools used by the author.
 2. Use elements from the Periodic Table of Analysis to break down a subject or text on your own
 3. In your writing, use elements from the Periodic Table of Analysis to bind your evidence to your assertions.
-

Section 3 – Organizing and Synthesizing Using Interpretative Frameworks

CRITICAL THINKING



Once you've analyzed a subject or text, the next step is to organize all of those pieces of information. Remember that the process of organizing things for the purpose of making a meaningful statement is called synthesis. If synthesis were just organizing Lego blocks it would be easy. The red ones would go in the red pile and the blue ones would go in the blue pile. Blocks could be sorted by size or by function; it's all pretty concrete. However, critical thinking is abstract and sometimes this can make it difficult to find what it is that things have in common. One way to try to synthesize is to match up things that fall under the same analytical category. If the author used a lot of evidence that you categorized as economic factors, well then one of your organizing bins might be economics. If those factors then were the origins for a major event, then you've got both economics and origins at work. Seeing how analytical elements combine to form an important grouping is a key aspect to being successful in this stage of critical thinking.

You aren't going to become a great critical thinker over night. You won't read this handbook and wake up the next morning ready to write the next great journal article. It's going to take practice, practice and more practice using these steps. After that it will take some more practice, but stick with it. The more you try it, the better you'll get.

However, sometimes you'll just hit the wall in your ability to synthesize things. You'll have a pile of information in front of you and a pile of frustrating hours behind you, yet no good ideas left in

your head. That's the time you might want to pull out an interpretative framework and see if the evidence you've got may fit this mold. Think of interpretative frameworks as the instructions that come with a store-bought Lego set. The only difference is that didn't buy the set. Look at the pieces you've got in front of you. You may have the right pieces to build that framework or you may not. It will depend on what is out in front of you. If you can, then great run with it. If not, don't try to force it. In the English classroom these frameworks would be different schools of literary analysis such as the feminist school, Marxist school, or Structuralism. In the history classroom we've compiled a few below that you might want to try out.

1. Narrative

What is Narrative?

- **The Telling of a Story.** Simple. You do it everyday. Narrative is how we organize our everyday lives. It is how we tell our stories.
- **Narrative is *not* a chronicle.** Sometimes budding historians think of narrative history as a sequenced listing of things that happen. Nope. That is a chronicle. That is different than narrative. (Much more boring) Narrative does not list events, it tells their story.
- **Narratives are 'shaped' accounts.** They are created by an author with a certain point of view and bias. Much like the editor of a reality TV Show, the narrator must pick and choose what to include. This picking and choosing can alter the story.
- **Use it for studying the past.** If it is how we naturally express our lives, then it may be correct to think that it is how we ought to express our history as well.

Some common plotlines you may use to organize your evidence:

- **Quest.** This plotline features a search for some object or outcome.
- **External Conflict.** This plotline places the key event within the framework of a struggle between two powerful forces in which the outcome is in doubt.
- **Internal Conflict.** This plotline places the key event within the framework of a struggle inside a character or group.

Thoughts on Narrative

- "Narrative is something that you do not have to be trained to do. You surely have to learn to narrate, but it is like learning your own language. . . Narrative is, I would say, something that comes with social life, intrinsic to social and group identification."³
- "Narrative is an instrument – and a quite effective instrument at that – for making sense of the world in which we live. Perhaps nobody was more aware of that than Freud, when he demonstrated that our psychological constitution best expresses itself in how we tell ourselves the story of our life."⁴
- "What the formula is for the scientist, narrative is for the historian"⁵

³ Hayden White, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism*, interviewed by Ewa Domanska (New York: The University Press of Virginia, 1998), 16.

⁴ Franklin R. Ankersmit, *Encounters: Philosophy of History after Postmodernism*, interviewed by Ewa Domanska (New York: The University Press of Virginia, 1998), 78.

⁵ Ankersmit, 80

- “(Narrative) is an organization that is not intrinsic to the past itself.”⁶

2. Models of Decision Making

If the evidence in front of you doesn't seem to tell a story, you may want to try out another interpretive framework. The following excerpts come from a wonderful chapter by James Davidson and Mark Lytle in their book *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*. In this chapter they outline how three different interpretative models commonly used by sociologists can be implied to history.

“To better analyze the workings of organizations, historians have borrowed a technique from the social sciences. They work with interpretive models. For many people the term “model” might bring to mind an object like a small plastic airplane or an electric train. For social scientists a model, not unlike the small plane, reduces the scale of reality and increases the researchers’ capacity to describe the characteristics of what they observe.”⁷

With this increased capacity Davidson and Lytle suggest three different models that may help the historian organize the past.

1. Rational Actor Model – “This is perhaps the interpretive framework that historians most often adopt without even thinking about models. Rational actor theory treats the actions of governments and large organizations as the acts of individuals. Further, it assumes that the individual actor, like Adam Smith’s capitalist, behaves rationally, in that he or she uses the most efficient means to pursue ends that are in his or her self-interest. When forced to choose among a range of possible actions, government leaders will select the option that achieves the best result at the lowest cost. One does not use a bat to swat a fly, nor would a government go to war to collect a small debt, unless war served some larger purpose.”⁸

“The appeal of this model lies in its predictive powers. Often enough, governments do not make clear why they act. On other occasions, they announce their goals but keep their strategies for achieving them secret. By applying standards of rational behavior, an analyst can make inductive leaps about a government’s unclear goals or hidden actions. If we know that a government has suddenly ordered highly mobile assault troops to the borders of its nation, but we lack evidence about goals, we might still conclude that a rational actor would not use mobile assault troops merely to defend borders: an invasion is planned. The process works in reverse as well. If analysts know what goals a nation has at hand, they can guess with some confidence what its leaders might do in a situation, given their resources.”⁹

2. Organizational Process Model– “Imagine, for a moment, the government as a kind of giant clock. Rational actor analysis would define the telling of time as the visible movements of the hands controlled by a closed box. Inside are the gears, springs, and levers that move the clock’s hands: the bureaucracy supporting decision makers at the top. In the rational actor model, these gears are seen as neutral cogs in the machine, passing along the energy (or in government, the information) that allows the hands to do their highly visible work. But suppose we look at the decision-making process

⁶ Ankersmit, 80

⁷ Davidson and Lytle, 3.

⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁹ Ibid, 4.

using a model that focuses on the organizational processes themselves. Is there something about their structure or behavior that influences the outcome of decisions made by supposedly rational actors?

“Of course, the actions of bureaucracies and agencies are usually less regimented than the movements of a clock. Often enough, the subgroups that make up a government end up working at cross purposes or pursuing conflicting objectives. While the Surgeon General’s office warns that cigarette smoking is “hazardous to your health,” the Department of Agriculture produces films on the virtues of American tobacco. Perhaps, then, it would be better to envision not a clock but a football team. If we observe a game from the stands, the players can be seen moving in coordinated patterns, in an effort to control the movement of the ball. Rational actor analysis suggests that the coach, or another centralized decision maker like the quarterback, has selected the strategies best suited to winning the game. That larger strategy, in turn, determines the plays that the offense and defense use.”¹⁰

3. Bureaucratic Politics Model- “Powerful individuals or groups can often override the standard procedures of organizations as well as the carefully thought-out choices of rational actors. It makes sense, then, for historians to be alert to decisions shaped by the politics within government institutions. If we return to our vantage point in the football stadium, we see linebackers blocking and receivers going short or long—all SOPs being executed as parts of a complex organization. The team’s coach—the rational actor—remains prominent, pacing the sidelines, deploying forces. But we notice now that often an assistant sends in a play or the quarterback makes a decision at the line of scrimmage. There is not just one decision maker, but many. And the play finally chosen may not reflect rational choice, but bargaining and compromise among the players and coaches. Although final authority may rest with a coach or the quarterback, other players, such as a star halfback, gain influence and prestige from the skill with which they play their position. A historian applying those insights, in what might be called a model of bureaucratic politics, recognizes that a person’s official position as defined by the organization does not alone determine his or her bargaining power.”¹¹

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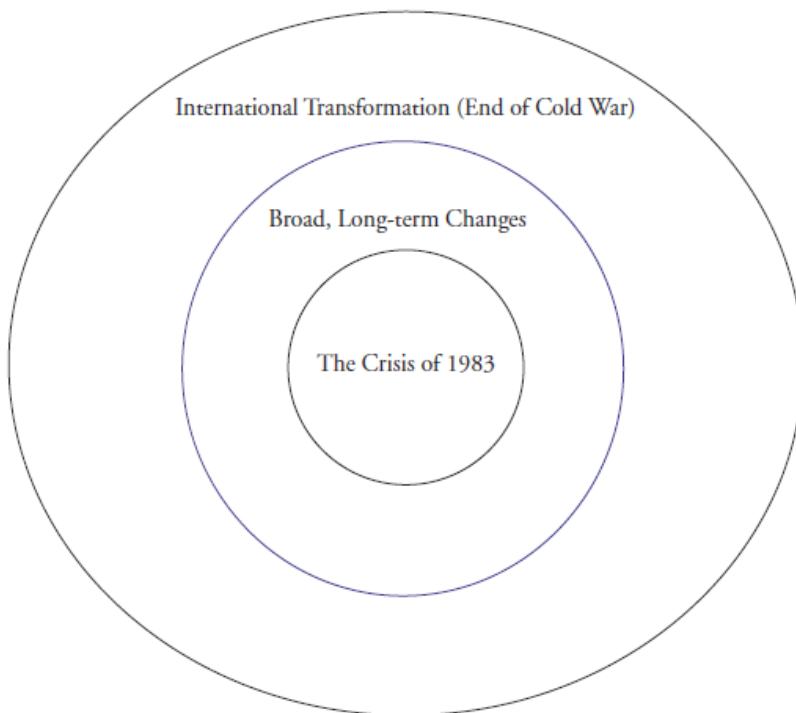
¹⁰ Davidson and Lytle, 11.

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

3. Pattern of Concentric Circles

If a sociological approach doesn't seem to fit you may want to try this simpler interpretive framework. Cold War historian Jeremi Suri does a wonderful job explaining this framework in his article, *Explaining the End of the Cold War: A New Historical Consensus?*

"instead of monocausal explanations on the one hand, or arguments that everything in the world is related to everything else on the other hand, the historian can organize information into a "pattern of concentric circles" that elucidates complex moments of major change." This provides, "a narrative structure for explaining how a series of narrow events (what I will call the "first circle") facilitated a broad set of changes (the "second circle") that ultimately transformed the international system (the "third circle.") Moving from the first small circle to the larger concentric circles, the issues confronting leaders become progressively more significant and dependent on previous choices ("path-dependent").¹²



¹² Suri, 61.

4. History of the Longue Durée

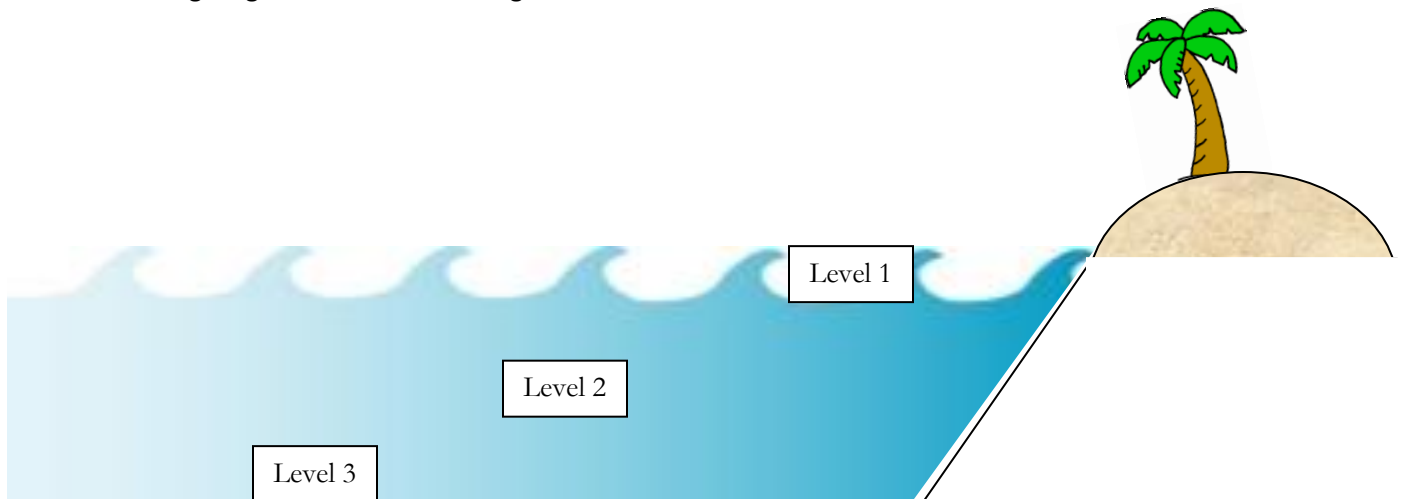
If you are faced with evidence that includes short and long term causes you may want to look at something called the history of the Longue Durée. This interpretive framework was made famous by Fernand Braudel in his work *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.

About the Book

Braudel began work in 1968 on a book about the Mediterranean during the Greco-Roman period. The book was supposed to be a multi-author, multi-volume history of the Mediterranean, from ancient to modern history. The project floundered, and by 1973 Braudel had moved on to other projects; the manuscript was incomplete and at his death in 1985 it was laid aside. Only in 1998 was the text published in French, under the title *Les Memoires de la Mediterranee*.

Braudel's Thesis

Despite a rather winding road to publication, Braudel's work in this book was very important. In it he argued that the development of history is best understood by looking at three levels of causation. He likened history to the following diagram of waves washing ashore on an island.



Level 1: Waves – This level is made up of surface events such as wars, assassinations, acts of parliament, or revolutions etc. Although they can be easily seen, if we want to understand their cause, we need to dig deeper. The shape of the waves aren't caused by the waves themselves but something below the surface.

Level 2: Currents – Long-term underlying forces of history such as culture, economic patterns, social divisions etc. make up this level. These currents help determine the shape of the waves on the surface.

Level 3: Ocean floor – This is the level Braudel called the Longue Durée . These are the constraints of geography, climate, and possibly human nature. These are the factors that shaped level 2 which in turn determine the events we see on the top of history's surface.