

# មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

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### Eight Specific History Skills within History Instruction

Depending on the manner of classification, one can list a large number, perhaps dozens, of specific analytical thinking skills. Most of these skills are related to the work of the historian and can be practiced and developed through the use and manipulation of historical data and concepts. I have chosen eight of these as being essential for the student of history and list the skills along with examples taken from my book, *An American History Primer* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1990).

**1. At the basic level, the student distinguishes between factual-type statements and statements of inference and opinion.** The student is not called upon to apply data but to identify and distinguish among items of data. This distinction between fact and inference is essential for the choice of data as evidence.

Example: The Incas of Peru controlled a thousand-mile empire connected by an elaborate system of roads. (Fact) Cortez's subjugation of the Aztecs with only six hundred men plus some Indian allies represents the greatest military accomplishment in history. (Inference)

**2. At the next level, the student again identifies statements by picking out similarities and differences in two essays on topics that have some comparative relationship.** In the early exercises, the student discovers factual differences in the two essays. Later, the student discovers similarities and differences in ideas and attitudes. Together, skill exercise one and skill exercise two, once mastered, enable the student to sort out information, to identify factual-type statements, and to select points of similarity and difference in prose paragraphs.

Example: The Spanish intermarried with the native Americans and taught them their way of life. The English did not live among the native Americans but forced them to withdraw further inland and to live apart from the white man. (Difference)

Both the Spanish and the English assumed that their culture was superior to that of the native American. (Similar)

**3. In the third skill exercise, the student determines the relevance of evidence.** Here the student breaks down information and distinguishes between data that apply directly to the thesis and data that may be interesting and important but do not relate to the thesis.

Example: Topic--The Place of Women in Colonial Virginia. When a woman married in colonial America, she agreed to honor and obey her husband and to be in "revered subjection" to him. (Relevant)

Childbirth was painful in colonial Virginia. (Irrelevant)

The log cabin was introduced by early Swedish settlers along the Delaware River. (Irrelevant)

In Virginia, the woman turned over to her husband whatever property she possessed before marriage. (Relevant)

**4. In the questioning level, the student selects techniques to acquire data.** In science, the experiment is used to acquire data. The social sciences use polls, surveys, clinical observation, and similar techniques. The historian must ask productive questions about specific unique events and then search for answers to these questions. This requires development of the skill of questioning. Productive questions are those that draw out usable evidence and lead to the careful evaluation of this evidence. Questions are the essential technique of historical investigation, both in beginning the study of a topic or thesis and in evaluating the evidence related to the topic.

Example: Topic--Quakers in Pennsylvania

What was the height and weight of Quaker William Penn in the year 1692? (Nonproductive question)

How did the Quakers treat blacks and the poor in Philadelphia? (Productive question)

Were the Quakers correct in their religious beliefs? (Nonproductive question)

**5. The skill exercise involving the organization of data requires the student to relate, assemble, classify, and place into categories diverse data usually acquired in a random manner.** Some structure must be applied to data that, although all related to a period or topic, are scattered, at the outset, in a disconnected conglomerate. The classification most often used by historians is the placement of data into the separate categories of political, economic, social, diplomatic, and cultural. Although synthesis can sometimes be artificial and contrived, it allows the historian to deal with a mass of data while forming the information into a useful heuristic design. This skill involves features of analysis because bits of information, appearing randomly, are separated and examined individually before being placed under the appropriate heading.

Example: Of the following factors leading to the American Revolution, which is political and which is cultural?

The British Parliament taxed the colonies without any direct colonial representation in the Parliament. (Political)

After 150 years of settlement in America, the colonial people had developed a different set of values and had drifted away from British attitudes. (Cultural)

Many colonial leaders felt they were looked down on and poorly treated by British officials and their American supporters. (Cultural)

6. The final three exercises require the student to operate on a higher level of thinking than do the earlier exercises. **For exercise six, the student must evaluate the type of arguments being used by those who make statements about events and situations in history.** Evidence to the historian consists not only of facts and statistics but also of arguments by people involved in the events, by experts, and by historians who have investigated the events. Identification of these arguments is essential for their evaluation because the basis of the argument determines the degree of reliance that can be placed on the argument. The five types of arguments used in the exercise--empirical, reasonable, authoritative, anecdotal, and intuitive--include the types that circulate in the nonmathematical and nonscientific area. **The student, in evaluating each argument, distinguishes the more powerful arguments of the empirical form (those based on reason and authority) from those of the lower reliability level derived from anecdote and intuition.** By picking out and reflecting upon these various types of arguments, the student determines the degree of reliability and strength of support for statements about history. The student becomes aware of the quality of support for a historical interpretation.

Example: Classify each of the following statements into one of the types of arguments--empirical, anecdotal, intuitive, appeal to authority, or appeal to reason.

The Loyalists were grossly mistreated by American patriots. One family, the Cartwrights, had their home outside Philadelphia plundered and burned by a patriot mob. (Anecdotal argument)

Colonists who had strong religious feelings had good justification for siding with the king. The Bible instructs the Christian to "submit to the powers that be . . . to the king . . ." and to obey the authorities that are provided by God. (Argument from authority)

The British had an army and navy superior to those of the patriots, so the outcome of the Revolution was always in doubt. Thus, many Americans either supported the British or attempted to remain quietly neutral. (Argument from reason)

7. The thinking skill exercise that centers on the evaluation and application of evidence gives practice not only in the determination of the applicability of evidence but also allows practice in deciding the manner in which the evidence applies to a

thesis, for example, as a challenge, as a refutation, or merely as data to be included as significant but neutral. Because historians usually operate on the basis of a thesis (revealed at the outset or sometimes hidden in a narrative account), it is important that the history student develop this skill of recognizing the proper placement of data and arguments either in favor of or against the thesis statement. **The student, through the practice of the skill exercises, learns not only whether evidence is or is not relevant to the thesis but also learns to divide data into supportive or nonsupportive categories.**

Example: The American Revolution was caused primarily by emotional or propaganda factors. (Thesis statement)

Americans were supposed to shelter (quarter) British soldiers, and stories were spread that soldiers would be quartered in private homes, there to threaten American women. (Supports)

The British sought by several acts of Parliament to restrict American manufacturing and to force Americans to supply unfinished raw materials. (Refutes the thesis)

**8. Drawing inferences from statistics and from quantified information is also among the higher-level skills of thinking.** Considering factual data in quantitative form, the student reacts to inferences drawn from this data and thinks both analytically and reflectively on the accuracy of the implications drawn from the quantitative data. Numerical data are deceptive in that they seem exact and indisputable; however, arriving at supportable implications from statistical data is hazardous. Normally, statistical data are eventually converted into descriptive language. Assessing inferences from quantitative data brings into play the elements of sound judgment and judicious balance that take the student beyond the obvious and into the realm of thinking in a context of uncertainty, fairness, and impartiality, which cannot always lead to provable statements. This type of thinking also produces an attitude of questioning analysis of all statements of conclusions based upon statistical data.

Example: The United States patent office registered 276 inventions during the 1790s and registered 234,956 inventions in the 1890s. Inference: Inventions increased and were the key factor in the industrial growth of the United States. (Questionable. Inventions did increase, but the numbers alone do not substantiate inventions as the key factor.)

Two out of three farms acquired from the government under the Homestead Act (1862) failed by 1900. Inference: The Homestead Act was a colossal failure. (Questionable inference. One-third of the farmers established and maintained farms. Others may have purchased the failed farms and achieved success.)

**9. The final thinking level encourages students to reflect upon controversial issues related to history and to synthesize critical-thinking processes into reflective thinking that leads to tentative conclusions.** Here, open-ended questions that call for the application of individual values, that encourage personal input, and that

require the student to make decisions related to attitudes, outlook, and personal beliefs are posed. Each controversial question is couched in enough information to allow for some immediate judgment, and yet, each leads the student to search for additional data. The student is, at the end of each section, offered criteria or standards by which to evaluate his or her personal conclusions and reflections as well as the author's personal perspective on the particular issue. Of course, the answers are not exact or precise or "correct," as they might be if the questions involved a mathematical or scientific answer. History is a product of the research and writing of those who function in the humanities and social sciences. As such, one must evaluate, judge, and then live with tentative, temporary, inexact, and incomplete conclusions. The skills developed in the open-ended questions are suited to the less precise humanities and the nonmathematical segment of the social sciences.

Example: Should the Christian religion (Catholic and Protestant) be considered an important cultural contribution from the Europeans to the native Americans? Why or why not? Does an affirmative answer here reflect a cultural bias in favor of a "superior" European outlook on life? Explain.