

# What Happened and Why? Helping Students Read and Write Like Historians<sup>1</sup>

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**M**OST HISTORIANS know how important questions are to their enterprise. The poet W.H. Auden understood that good scholarship can only come from good questions, saying “history is, strictly speaking, the study of questions.” Others have concurred. The great British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote, “the function of a genius is not to give new answers, but to pose new questions.” But where do good questions come from? In history, as in most social sciences and humanities, this is a key concern, though one often neglected in the teaching of our disciplinary methodologies. How do historians—or, for that matter, all good scholars—use questions to frame their analyses? More practically, how can students’ understanding of this process of “problematizing” help them read and write history more effectively? What follows are my thoughts on the subject, thoughts that have emerged from a decade of teaching undergraduates at a liberal arts college in New England. Additionally, years of working with high school educators who teach advanced placement United States history have convinced me that the principles of good scholarly investigation are also applicable to students at the high school level. The key to improving the asking of good questions at either level, it seems to me, is developing a better understanding of how professional historians do their work.<sup>2</sup>

## What Historians Explain

Most high school and college history students have long been told that the most important part of a historical argument is the thesis. Many know that the thesis in a history argument must explain how or why something happened in the past. What is less well appreciated is that the *something that happened in the past* is just as important as the *how or why* it happened. A history thesis is an explanation, and the *something that happened* is the thing to be explained. Without something to explain, there can be no explanation; without an explanation, there can be no thesis; and without a thesis, there can be no historical argument.

In history, there are many things to be explained. Sometimes the focus is on a discrete event, such as the beheading of King Charles I in 1649 as consequence of the English Civil War (1642–48). Often, though, the historical phenomenon that is the subject of historical writing consists of a series of connected events that adds up to a broad historical phenomenon, such as the Industrial Revolution, or the spread of Islam in the eighth century. In either case, the key to understanding arguments in analytical historical writing is to understand the task before the author. The loftier the goal—the more resistant the problem seems to simple explanation—the more potential reward there is in the answer. This is known as “problematizing” history, and of course it means that readers and authors must understand what the problem is. Good authors clearly lay out their questions; some even tell us why their problem is so difficult to explain. Consider, for example, this paragraph from the beginning of a chapter of Jared Diamond’s Pulitzer-Prize winning *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*:

Why, then, did only some peoples and not others develop writing, given its overwhelming value? For example, why did no traditional hunters-gatherers evolve or adopt writing? Among island empires, why did writing arise in Minoan Crete but not in Polynesian Tonga? How many separate times did writing evolve in human history, under what circumstances, and for what uses? Of those people who did develop it, why did some do so much earlier than others? For instance, today almost all Japanese and Scandinavians are literate, but most Iraqis are not: why did writing nevertheless arise nearly four thousand years earlier in Iraq?<sup>3</sup>

Generally speaking, the more ambitiously posed the historical problem is—the more it seeks to include and explain under its umbrella—the greater the author’s challenge.

Posing problems is a far more complicated task than most non-historians appreciate. Historians must often work just as hard to establish the

legitimacy of their problem as they must to establish the answer to it. Not many readers who first encounter the passage above by Jared Diamond will do so with his questions already in their minds; instead, Diamond himself has posed these questions, and before answering them must support his right to ask them. Is it in fact the case that no hunter-gatherers adopted writing, or that different peoples developed writing at vastly different points in history? If these premises behind the central question cannot be established, perhaps the question itself is misguided, and thus its solution must be, too.

In practice, we can think of well-crafted historical problems such as this one as almost always entailing questions for which there are several premises, or “givens.” If, for example, a historian wishes to explain how Americans’ deep-seated racial prejudices against Japanese people were manifest in the particularly brutal forms of warfare evident in the Pacific Theater of World War II, he/she must first establish the following: that the Pacific Theater was particularly bloody, and that there were, in fact, deep-seated American prejudices against the Japanese. If these cannot be supported, then any explanation based upon them cannot succeed.

Premises deepen historical problems by suggesting how readily they defy simple explanation. To ask how Hernando Cortés and his band of Spanish conquistadores overthrew the Aztec empire of central Mexico in 1520 is difficult enough. Add to it several premises and the challenge becomes considerable: how was it that the Spanish defeated the Aztecs, *given that* the Aztecs had conquered every other tribe in central Mexico, *given that* they vastly outnumbered the Spanish, and *given that* their knowledge of the land was far superior to that of the Spanish? An author who can overcome this challenge is on the way to writing an exciting historical investigation that will hold the reader’s attention.

Of course it is not always the case that historical answers seek to explain phenomena that are newly posed. Many works of history seek instead to offer new insights into accepted problems. Michael L. Kurtz’s close reconsideration of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy offers a good example of this type of scholarship.<sup>4</sup> But most analytical history relies to some degree on formulating problems—reposing old questions or formulating new ones.

### **Building Road Maps: What Good Reading Looks Like**

These insights can be a great help to students in both reading and doing history. Analyzing the problem in a piece of historical writing helps determine the task the author has set for himself/herself, and offers important cues to what the author is likely to do in the course of a book or

article and when he/she is likely to do it. Further, it can tell the reader what to look for, and how to evaluate the argument, and offers a yardstick by which to measure the author's success. How do we go about this in practice? Let me lay out a few questions students might consider when reading analytical history. (Appendix 1, Essay Evaluation Questions, offers these questions in a format suitable for classroom use.)

1. *What is the historical problem?* Introductions to historical essays (the first few pages) or the introduction and first chapter of books are the most likely places to determine how the author identifies the historical problem. Conclusions are also good places to look. Does the author clearly spell out what he/she is setting out to do, or (in a conclusion) what he/she contends has been accomplished? Even if this appears to be the case, it is important to remember that authors cannot be relied upon completely. Often, historical writing will do more than authors claim. Frequently, authors will not capture in one sentence or paragraph the complete scope of their enterprise. A full understanding of the problem may only come after reading the piece through.

2. *What kind of historical problem is it?* It is important to ask whether the historical phenomenon—the thing requiring explanation—falls into the category of a discrete event or a long-term phenomenon and to determine the form of the author's argument. Is the author offering a new explanation for an established problem, or is the author offering a new problem that will have to be established? Does the author do anything to suggest that the problem defies simple explanation? Does he/she, for example, discuss implicitly or explicitly how other scholars have approached the topic?

3. *What are the premises underlying the central question?* Your goal here is to try to pose the central question in all of its complexity in one sentence—something the author may not have done. Try to write a single sentence that incorporates the question and all its premises. For example, “why did the effort to grant freed slaves full citizenship rights in the United States after the Civil War fail, *given that* the Union had won a resounding military victory over the Confederacy, *given that* mass emancipation had happened during the war, and *given that* the United States Congress had passed the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery and would soon pass the 14<sup>th</sup> granting blacks citizenship?” The more “given that’s” you can find to append to the central question, the farther you will go toward capturing the full complexity of the author's problem. If you can state the central problem and its attendant premises, you will have a “road map” for understanding your reading.

4. *Has the author structured his/her argument around the “road map” you have identified?* Once you have built a “road map” to the argument, you can then easily determine if the author has adhered to it. Does the author structure his/her argument around the points in your road map?

Does he/she spend more time on some points than on others? Are any crucial premises merely taken as given? At what points does the author offer much evidence, and at what points only a little? The task of establishing the premises to the thesis question may occupy up to a third or even a half of a history essay.

5. *What is the author's solution to the problem?* In the same way that you used your road map to break down the author's problem, you should outline the author's solution to the original problem. Look for the point in an essay when the author turns from delineating the problem being confronted to presenting the solution being offered. Often this "fulcrum" point is signaled by summarizing the thesis question, and by outlining the proposed solution. What are the components of the solution that follows? Does the author offer a simple list of factors of equal weight? Or do the parts of the author's explanation build one upon another? Or, perhaps, does the author offer a "mono-causal" solution to the problem? Whatever the case, try to understand the ways the answer breaks down. Considering the premises, does the proposed solution seem reasonable? Where is it weak or tenuous? At what points will the author face the biggest challenges?

6. *How is the argument made within each point?* Only once you have broken down the argument into its sub-points does it make sense to closely examine it piece-by-piece. By the time you get to this stage in the process, you will have a very strong understanding of the author's challenge and strategy. Now it is time to evaluate the fine points of the argument by looking at its discrete parts. For each sub-point, ask yourself if the author is making his/her case. Is he/she using evidence and logic soundly? Does each small point buttress the argument as a whole? Where are evidence and argument weak, and where strong?

Remember that for each step in the above process you will need to cite examples from the writing itself. Just as the scholar you are reading uses evidence and analysis to make his/her case, so too even your summation (or critique) of that scholarship requires evidence and analysis. There is no such thing as mere summary; you are, in fact, making an argument about what the argument is in a piece of historical writing.

### Writing Better

The skills outlined above are useful not simply when reading secondary historical scholarship. The same habits of mind that benefit students when reading history can help them research and write better themselves. When researching paper topics, it is important for students to keep in mind that most instructors are, like most historians, interested in problems and explanations. When choosing topics for research papers, stu-

dents would be well advised to think in these terms. What about the chosen topic defies simple explanation? Where might other historians have missed something, or have gotten it wrong? What opportunities exist to intervene in ongoing scholarly discussions about the topic? Ideally, course readings will model historical debates, and perhaps even provide established debates students might step into.

This suggests that writing strong papers requires a knowledge of secondary historical arguments related to the topic being researched. Reading critically as I have suggested can help students quickly grasp the arguments in historical literature on a given topic, and can illustrate how they can interject their own voices into ongoing historical debates. Ultimately, the goal is to enable students to participate in the scholarly process. History, for students who learn these lessons, will come alive. From a passive process of imbibing received wisdom from unchallenged authorities, it will become an active process in which students' own creative and critical capacities turn them into true scholars.

Students also need to know that the same methods used to evaluate secondary historical scholarship come in mighty handy when preparing their own papers. Students can apply the principles of good reading to their own writing. Especially when editing one's own first drafts, it is helpful to have a rubric or method by which to evaluate words already on the page. The questions outlined in Appendix 1: Essay Evaluation Questions offer one such approach. Appendix 2: The "Road Map" Exercise Illustrated with a Sample Student Paper offers an illustration of how a student might put these principles into practice in a research paper. After they work with these materials, students may begin to internalize the principles of good historical writing, and engage in the sort of preemptive editing that identifies the experienced writer.

A final note to instructors: My experience is that every reading we assign our students should be an opportunity not simply to model good or bad historical writing, but to model a range of historical methods and writing styles. The methods I've outlined above work well with reading assignments that are well-written and clearly argumentative. For example, James McPherson's essays on the Civil War (*Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* [1996] and *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* [1992]) offer excellent examples suitable for undergraduate and high school audiences. Yet while much good historical scholarship is argumentative, some excellent work is not overtly so. This is particularly the case with history that seeks primarily to evoke the texture of a specific time and place, such as Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (1991), or Natalie Zemon Davis's

*The Return of Martin Guerre* (1984). I suggest that educators choosing to implement the strategies I've discussed carefully choose the appropriate time for each type of reading assignment.

Some students will always love history, but almost all need to be taught how to write the kind of history that history instructors are interested in reading. I am confident that most will do better, however, if we can effectively share with them the thinking processes that so attracted us to the field. Most importantly, we should also share with them the lesson that historians themselves have learned, sometimes through painful experience—that some questions are indeed better to work with than others.

## Appendix 1: Essay Evaluation Questions

These questions will guide students through the preparation of “road maps” to historical arguments. One of the best places to put the “road map” exercise to use is in peer evaluations. This exercise can be given to students evaluating each other's first drafts. Of course, the exercise can also be used by students while editing their own first drafts, or preparing detailed evaluations of secondary historical essays. Students should be reminded that at each point they will have to cite or quote the text itself in support of their responses, and that to answer these questions comprehensively will take several passes over the reading.

### A. Basic questions

1. What is the central question or problem the author poses? What is the troubling phenomenon from the past he/she seeks to explain?
2. What are the premises of the question, or the assumptions built into it? (Remember, readers can often rephrase these as *givens*.)
3. What is the central solution to the problem the author offers?
4. How does the solution break down into smaller components?
5. What is the paper's “road map” (essentially, a list of the question premises and thesis components)?
6. Does the paper follow the road map?

### B. Detailed questions

The thesis itself:

1. Is there a clear historical problem being addressed?
2. Is the thesis question sufficiently complex to yield an interesting answer? That is, does the thesis question require many premises?
3. Does the thesis answer the thesis question?
4. Does the thesis contain vague or undefined words or concepts?
5. A history thesis generally explains why or how something happened. Does this one?

The argument in general:

6. What unanswered questions does the problem raise?
7. What alternative explanations could be offered for the phenomenon described?
8. What criticisms does the author need to anticipate?
9. Given the thesis, what examples or scenarios could make it wrong?
10. How could the thesis be modified to overcome these shortcomings?

Topic sentences and paragraphs:

11. Point out topic sentences which do not relate to the thesis.
12. Paragraphs are miniature arguments; point out paragraphs where the miniature argument is unclear.
13. Point out paragraphs which fail to support the topic sentence.

Use of evidence:

14. In which paragraphs are there insufficient or inappropriate source evidence to support the argument of the paragraphs?
15. In which paragraphs does the author present primary source evidence, yet fail to explain how that evidence supports the argument of the paragraph?
16. Where has the author presented primary source evidence without adequately citing its source?
17. Where has the author presented primary source evidence without correctly incorporating it into the author's prose?

## Appendix 2: The "Road Map" Exercise Illustrated with a Sample Student Paper

Let's consider how the first paragraph of a sample student paper can be used to develop a "road map" for understanding the structure and argument of the rest of the essay. The following sample comes from a student paper. The paper itself is rather ambitious, but it illustrates the principles discussed above.

*Historians may argue about whether the Allied bombing of Germany helped end World War II, but none doubt the destructiveness of these campaigns in their final days. By the end of the conflict, Allied bomber forces were able to attack targets in Germany without encountering the serious opposition of German fighters. This is surprising, as Germany possessed many apparent advantages in its fighter force: long experience with tactical air power, good fighter designs, an elaborate system of homeland defense, and a well-developed tactical fighter doctrine. How, then, did the Allies become capable of bombing Germany with impunity? By the end of World War II, German air defense suffered from two limitations that doomed its capacity to protect the homeland: the limits of a fighter doctrine predicated on attack, and severe inadequacies in producing new fighters. These factors led to defeat despite Germany's apparent advantages.*

1. The problem:  
*Given apparent German advantages of long experience, excellent fighter designs, and a well-developed tactical fighter doctrine, how did Allied air forces become capable of bombing Germany with impunity by the end of World War II?*
2. Premises inherent in the problem:  
*The German air force possessed several advantages which suggested its capacity to inhibit the effectiveness of Allied bombing campaigns, such as:*
  - a. *Long experience with tactical air power (which it developed in the Spanish Civil War);*
  - b. *Fighter designs (such as the Messerschmitt Bf-109 and Focke-Wulf FW-190) that surpassed comparable Allied aircraft;*
  - c. *An elaborate system of homeland defense.*

*By the end of the war, the Allies had somehow negated these advantages and were capable of bombing German targets with relative ease.*
3. The thesis:  
*German air defense suffered from two limitations that doomed its capacity to protect the homeland.*
4. Components of the thesis:
  - a. *The limits of a fighter doctrine predicated on attack;*
  - b. *Severe inadequacies in producing new fighters.*

The introductory paragraph of this paper offers the reader a skeleton argument or “road map” of the paper that should follow. Based on the questions we’ve asked above, the reader can expect a paper organized something like this:

1. The first part of the paper will establish the problem:
  - a. *By end of war, Allies could bomb with impunity*
  - b. *German experience with tactical air power*
  - c. *Elaborate defense system of the homeland*
  - d. *German fighter designs extremely good*
  - e. *Germany developed tactical fighter doctrine*
2. The paper will then turn to the thesis itself, or the solution to the problem:
  - a. *Production inadequacies*
  - b. *Doctrinal problems*
  - c. *These factors led to defeat despite apparent advantages*

This road map offers a valuable tool for evaluating the success of the paper. Each point in the road map must be argued effectively for the entire argument to succeed. Each point should be supported with evidence from historical sources or secondary authorities, and this evidence must be analyzed in the writer’s own voice to show how it supports the point under discussion. (In a short student paper, each point in the road map may require a paragraph or two of explanation. In a scholar’s book, each point in the road map may encompass an entire chapter.) The road map exercise thus offers an excellent tool for authors when editing their own work. If student writers can subject their own drafts to this

form of evaluation, they will go far toward embracing the principles of sound historical argumentation.

## Notes

1. For critiques of an earlier draft of this essay, I am thankful to my Bowdoin College colleagues Mathew Klinge and Page Herrlinger, and to the anonymous readers for *The History Teacher*.

2. For more on these historical habits of mind, see Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

3. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 216.

4. *Crime of the Century: The Kennedy Assassination from a Historian's Perspective* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

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