

The American Historian

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS

A high-angle, wide shot of a large, crowded indoor arena, likely a convention center or a large theater. The audience is seated in many rows, filling the space. At the front, there is a stage area with a large screen displaying a person. The lighting is warm and focused on the stage. The overall atmosphere is that of a significant event or conference.

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“What’s the Question?” Naming and Teaching Thinking Skills in Secondary History Classes

Anyone who knows the history of American education is familiar with the long-standing debate about how teachers should teach and students should learn. Since John Dewey’s time, practitioners have argued about the relative importance of making students *do* things and making them *remember* things. In our particular field of history, that debate continues through arguments about the importance of inquiry and questions versus content coverage and lecture as the basis for course construction and pedagogy. A quick perusal of OAH publications shows that this debate is alive and well today, and a historian might reasonably ask why the conversation continues over a century later.¹ The Dewey-ite progressives have certainly won the war. Today there are no serious professors or teachers who would say that inquiry and questions are *not* important to teaching and learning history, or who would say their goal is for students to simply remember historical facts without being able to demonstrate historical thinking skills. So why does it appear that the progressives have lost the pedagogy battle?

We have grappled with this challenge for many years in our jobs as high school history teachers and department chairs. Over the last decade

we have developed a simple, content-specific framework for teaching history that focuses on the questions at the heart of our field, actively engages students in the intellectual tasks of history and social studies, and allows teachers to achieve an effective balance between content and skills. We call this framework the “Four Question Method” (4QM). We use it to teach students how to tell true, significant stories about the past; how to make coherent, reasonable arguments about those stories; and, ultimately, how to develop personal understandings of themselves and their place in history.

We contend that when educators teach history well we ask and answer these four questions responsibly, and we coach our students to do the same. Planning and teaching courses around these four questions provides our students with a specific and accessible model of how historians approach the discipline. Here are the four questions and their respective thinking skills:

What Happened? (Narration)

What Were They Thinking? (Interpretation)

Why Then and There? (Explanation)

What Do We Think About That? (Judgment)

History starts with a story, and the foundational skill of our discipline is narration.

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Teachers who use the 4QM build their courses and units around stories in a way that seems counterintuitive: we start by telling students how the story ends. For each unit in a survey course, we first identify the notable historical endpoint that makes that unit worth teaching. We then introduce the unit by contrasting the story's outcome with our chosen starting point. The world starts out one way and ends up changed, new, and different. What happened?

Teachers new to the method sometimes find it disconcerting to tell students how the unit ends on the first day, but it is a powerful technique for motivating student curiosity. Consider that when historians ask “what happened?” we are almost never asking “how does this story end?” We know that already and believe that the ending is important, or we would not bother studying it in the first place. We are asking “what sequence of events led to this story's ending? How did this happen?” We do not study the American Revolution, for example, because we are curious about what resulted from an eighteenth-century tax dispute in Britain's North American colonies—we know that the colonies achieved independence. We study the American Revolution because we are curious about *how* American independence, which seemed quite improbable in 1763, was obtained. In the 4QM, question one asks, “How did the thirteen North American colonies go from being a generally happy if insignificant part of the British Empire to founding a new and independent nation that would go on to become a world power? What happened?” Historical thinking starts with the urge to understand the events that produced a new and notable change in the world.

We have found that a second key to teaching narration effectively is to

limit the story. Advocates of inquiry teaching are right: if we want to engage student thinking, we cannot use all of our available class time teaching excess information. As teachers, we have to limit the content we expect students to remember if we are going to coach them to think about it meaningfully. We give 4QM teachers a six-box storyboard printed landscape-style on a single page to force them to limit their unit stories. We put the setting in the first box (happy colonies, having defeated the French in 1763) and the outcome of the story in the last box (the independent United States), which leaves four boxes to describe how the story moves between the beginning and the end. The six-box storyboard is a simple tool that forces teachers to make choices about content. If you cannot fit it into a box, you cannot include it in your unit. The storyboard also creates coherence, since the four intermediate boxes make “chapters” in the story and push teachers to establish clear periodization, themes, and relationships of cause and effect.

Obviously, there are multiple ways to tell the story of any unit, and we let our students know that. But we have finite time—teachers are always choosing to tell one story and not others. As long as we do not let our students think that our story is the *only* story of the unit, we are responsible history teachers. And the simple reality is that without a story to apply the next three questions to, students cannot learn the historical thinking skills that we believe are critical.

Question two uses the unit story to inspire student curiosity about the people who made history happen. Every historical story is driven by people who made decisions—they may be “great men” or they may be less well-known people—but once students understand the story, they

become curious about the people who impacted it. Question two asks us to dive into the heads of key people in the story: “What were they thinking?” 4QM teachers use their storyboards to identify opportunities to pause the narrative and coach their students to understand historical figures on their own terms—a level of comprehension we call “historical empathy.” It is much easier to convince students to do the hard interpretive work this requires (typically analyzing primary sources) when they can see how it relates to the story. Why were people so angry about a relatively minor tax like the Stamp Act? How did Thomas Jefferson justify enslaving people even as he wrote the Declaration of Independence? *What were they thinking?* We identify important participants in the unit story and provide students with the sources to practice the key skill of interpreting what those participants were thinking.

4QM teachers spend most of their time toggling back and forth between questions one and two, coaching students on the skills of narration and interpretation. We generally hold off on question three—“Why then and there?”—until the end of the unit. This is another counterintuitive technique. Question three asks about the underlying causes and conditions that made the story likely to occur in that time and place, and most history teachers and textbooks offer explanations before they actually tell the story. This approach seems to make sense since it respects chronology. The underlying conditions obviously existed before the story happened. But waiting until students understand the story and what key people in it were thinking is a much more effective way to spark their curiosity. Just as with question one, the engaging puzzle of question three lies in knowing the events and

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wondering why they happened at that particular time and place.

For question three we coach our students to “explain a change with a change and a difference with a difference.” We step back from the story and its individual participants, look for patterns and disruptions, and use the categories of social science, such as “economic” or “political.” By 1776 the British had been taxing and regulating their North American colonies for over a century without a revolution. Why did their taxes and regulations cause a revolution then but not before? What changed? And why was there no comparable revolution in Canada? What was different? Students are more effective at explaining these kinds of changes and differences if they already understand the story and the thoughts of key historical figures. And if you have organized your whole course around these four questions and have completed a few units, students may start to notice survey-level patterns related to question three: certain types of events (revolutions, for example) seem to

happen in certain circumstances and not others.

The last question asks students to make a judgment about the history we are studying: “What do we think about that?” This is where we judge the people in the story and the story as a whole. Who do we think are the good guys and bad guys? Do we think of this story as an exemplar or a cautionary tale? And what are the values and criteria that we hold that lead us to those judgments? Continuing with our example of the American Revolution, should we consider the leaders of the revolt against the British crown to be noble freedom fighters or hypocritical elites? Did the revolution make the world better or worse? And what makes us think so?

Obviously, this question cannot be answered before the first three. A responsible judgment must be supported by specific evidence about what happened, what the people involved were thinking, and the context in which they were acting. Responsibly judging the past forces our students to articulate their own

values in the present, and often to question and rethink those values. Studying historical events through the first three questions helps students appreciate complexity and ambiguity, both in how historians answer these questions and how historical figures behaved.

We have found that building history courses with the “Four Question Method” embeds historical thinking skills directly into teaching and learning, explicates these skills for students, and puts them into practice. This method strikes an effective balance between content and thinking skills, allowing teachers to cover important material while regularly coaching students on the historian’s tasks of narration, interpretation, explanation, and judgment. Because the Four Questions Method gives teachers and students a clear way to integrate specific questions into existing survey courses, we think that it has the potential to make inquiry-based teaching and learning of history much easier, and, hopefully, much more common. ■■■

ENDNOTES

1. David J. Voelker and Anthony Armstrong, “Designing a Question-Driven U.S. History Course,” *OAH Magazine of History*, 27 (July 2013), 19–24. Robert J. Fitzgerald, “The Art of Listening in the Question-Driven U.S. History Course,” *American Historian*, <http://tah.oah.org/content/the-art-of-listening/>. Mary Jo Festle, “The Challenges of Learning History: What Students and the SOTL Tell Us,” *American Historian*, <http://tah.oah.org/content/the-challenges-of-learning-history-what-students-and-sotl-tell-us/>.