

Critical Thinking IN SOCIAL STUDIES & HISTORY

FIRST BOOK 



Critical Thinking in Social Studies & History

According to [The National Council for the Social Studies](#), civic competence is a key goal of social studies education. Analyzing complex, interrelated historical events and synthesizing multiple points of view are components of thinking critically in social studies, civics, and history classrooms and essential skills for navigating the modern world.

Responsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking, and naming for you; it means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts; hence, grappling with hard work.

ADRIENNE RICH

Best Practices: Critical Thinking in Social Studies

The following strategies encourage critical thinking by shifting the focus from memorizing facts and dates to making connections among historical periods, places, events, and students' lives:

- Make content relevant to students' lived experiences by including diverse voices in the classroom, especially around current events.
- Evaluate the point of view of an author and source, place arguments in context, and validate claims.
- When comparing different periods or events, encourage students to be specific about how and why they are different or similar.
- Use primary sources to engage and contextualize historical events, understand the context in which they were created, and assess their credibility.
- Use problem-based and inquiry-based models with relevant, real-world topics.
- Use open-ended, strategic questions in assessments and discussions to activate students' critical thinking. See [Critical Thinking in a World of Accelerating Change and Complexity](#) for a list of questions, such as *How do we know this information is accurate? What is the point of view of this historian? How do the viewpoints of these historians differ?*



Open-ended questions require students to think beyond yes/no or right/wrong answers. These questions encourage deeper thinking and allow students to explore various possibilities, develop reasoning skills, and articulate their thoughts. For example, instead of asking, ‘What is the capital of France?’ ask, ‘How might the culture of a country be influenced by its geography?’

ASHLEY, FIRST BOOK EDUCATOR

Lessons & Activities

The following lessons challenge students to grapple with important questions about power and perspective and involve skills emphasized by the [NCSS](#), including data analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving. These activities also fulfill Common Core requirements in reading informational texts and history.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS | DIGITAL INQUIRY GROUP

This lesson introduces students to reasoning about photographs as historical evidence and teaches them to assess the strengths and limitations of photographs as evidence.

To align photo analysis with the Common Core, ask students to connect what they see to textual information, solicit comparisons between written and visual information from the same era, and engage the class in discussions where students can provide evidence for their interpretations and conclusions.



COMMON CORE CONNECTION

ELA: Reading Informational Texts: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.7](#) Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, time lines, animations, or interactive elements on Web pages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears.

INCAN RELIGION - WHAT SOURCES SHOULD I USE? | PROJECT LOOK SHARP

This media literacy lesson has students explore various sources of information (e.g., a Wikipedia article, a tourism website, and a documentary) to assess their validity and relevance as a source of information about the Incas and their religion.



COMMON CORE CONNECTION

ELA: Reading Informational Texts: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.7](#) Draw on information from multiple print or digital sources, demonstrating the ability to locate an answer to a question quickly or to solve a problem efficiently.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7](#) Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

BLACK DEATH | C3 TEACHERS

This lesson about the bubonic plague sparks student interest with an overarching, relevant question: Can disease change the world? In answering this question, students explore geography and history by examining maps and other sources and make connections to present-day scenarios.

**COMMON CORE CONNECTION****ELA: History/Social Studies: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7](#) Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

OUR SHARED DIFFERENCES | PBS LEARNING MEDIA

Help students understand that each person's unique life experiences shape their values, interests, and choices. Through exploring their own and each other's differences, students will recognize how diversity enriches our democracy and helps make our communities vibrant and resilient.

**COMMON CORE CONNECTION****ELA: Speaking & Listening**

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.1](#) Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

FACTS VS. OPINIONS VS. INFORMED OPINIONS AND THEIR ROLE IN JOURNALISM | STUDENT REPORTING LABS | PBS LEARNING MEDIA

In this lesson, students learn why many people like opinions more than facts and reflect on the negative and positive consequences of this tendency. Then they practice three strategies for determining the difference between the opinions and facts to discover the power of critical thinking.

**COMMON CORE CONNECTION****ELA: History/Social Studies: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.8](#) Assess the extent to which the reasoning and evidence in a text support the author's claims.

MAPPING ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS: WHO'S INCLUDED AND WHO'S NOT? | PROJECT LOOK SHARP

In this media literacy activity about bias, students analyze the techniques used in maps of ancient civilizations. This activity includes an activity plan, student handout, and tips for online media decoding.



COMMON CORE CONNECTION

ELA: History/Social Studies: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Using Debate to Hone Critical Thinking Skills

Research shows that high school debate improves academic and social-emotional skills, including reading ability, grades, school attendance, self-esteem, and interest in school. Debate also sharpens students' critical thinking by requiring them to:

- understand both sides of an issue
- conduct research and evaluate sources
- distinguish facts from opinions
- reason logically and articulate their reasoning
- identify weaknesses in their opponents' arguments
- consider different viewpoints
- defend their ideas with evidence

Source: [The Power of Speech & Debate Education | Stanford National Forensic Institute](#)

[ProCon.org](#) is a reliable, nonpartisan resource that offers pro and con summaries of issues, many of which can be used as middle and high school debate topics.

[Weareteachers.com](#) offers a lighter selection of controversial issues, such as whether people should be allowed to go barefoot anywhere they want.

Debates don't have to follow the traditional one-to-one format. Use the [Comprehension Clash](#) method at the end of a lesson or unit to deepen student comprehension, encourage independent reflection, and foster collaborative discussion. Using the [Clash Guide template](#), students consider a guiding question: What is the unit's most important piece of knowledge or information to remember? Students share their ideas, defend their opinions, and learn from different perspectives.

Sources

[Vetting Social Studies Resources Is Important. And Hard. Here's How to Do It Well. | EdSurge News](#)
[How to Prepare Social Studies Students to Think Critically in the Modern World | Edutopia](#)

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