



# Learning to Think, Read, and Write Like Historians

## SUMMARY

Two social studies teachers with more than 35 years of combined experience share their three-fold approach to teaching literacy in the content areas. The authors use a flexible, mixed-bag of both generic literacy strategies and disciplinary literacy routines; collaborating across grade levels to scaffold and reinforce skills; and collaborating across subject areas with English teachers both to establish consistent expectations for students about reading and writing, and to highlight the distinctive literacy practices of history as a discipline.

*“History can be thought of as an argument about what the past means based on a perplexing array of possible evidence for making claims ...”*

*VanSledright (2012, p. 213).*

### What is History?

At the beginning of every year, students respond in writing to the question, “What is history?” One student, Alexa, gave an answer that was short and to the point: “History is what happened a long time ago.” When asked to answer the same question again at the end of the year, her response was remarkably different.

“History is confusing ’cause whatever we learned could be wrong ’cause it’s not really facts. Maybe later on they find artifacts about different things that happened back then. Or they might have other ideas, but only if they can prove it.”

It’s feedback like this that inspires us to continue to ask, what does it mean to think historically? What does it have to do with literacy? Why does it matter? Perhaps most pressing of all, how do you teach it?

A plethora of scholarly research revolves around these complex questions, but for practicing social studies teachers, the questions are less theoretical than practical. Although there have been at least two decades of scholarly calls arguing for a “disciplinary literacy approach” to

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integrating literacy instruction in the content areas, academic appeals are typically slow to reach practicing educators. Furthermore, despite the New York State Social Studies K-12 Framework that explicitly includes historical thinking as a skill students should develop (NYSSS Framework, 2014), and NYS Learning Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy that define literacy instruction as “a shared responsibility within the school” (NYSP12CC LSELA, 2010, p. 4), few resources exist to help teachers accomplish these goals.

In fact, institutional conditions often conspire against it. Working in the context of a content area like social studies, in which textbooks and curricula are typically arranged chronologically, and high-stakes assessments are mostly multiple choice (VanSledright, 2004), nuanced understandings of history and the thinking that constitutes literacy in the discipline often take a back seat to memorization of historical “facts.” Nonetheless, what social studies colleagues talk about, in addition to the constant pressure to “cover the curriculum,” is the often stressful responsibility of teaching literacy. But even defining literacy in the content areas can be complicated.

### **Content Literacy**

Probably most familiar is the version of content literacy instruction as generic literacy strategies for both reading and writing that are applicable across subject areas. The idea is that students use these as tools to help them find, understand, and study information from content-area text (e.g., anticipation guides, vocabulary previews, graphic organizers like K-W-L charts, and study strategies like SQ3R). Research has shown that strategies like these, while not necessarily effective in all cases, can help students become more engaged in their reading and improve learning (Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2011). We’ve found these tools and others like them to have positive effects in our classrooms.

Less familiar perhaps, but strongly advocated over the past several decades by adolescent literacy scholars, is a disciplinary literacy approach. What this approach assumes is that each discipline is a kind of “discourse community of practice” (Gee, 2001, p. 719) with its own specialized language, text structure, and ways of negotiating and interpreting printed text (Draper, Broomhead, Jensen, Nokes, & Siebert, 2010; Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). What it proposes is

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that the focus of literacy instruction in content areas be on the so-called discursive literate practices of the discipline associated with those features (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). In practice, it means initiating students into the discourse community of the discipline by familiarizing them with the specific ways professionals in the field read, interpret, analyze, and critique text. It also means letting students in on the ways knowledge is produced, warranted, and communicated in the field (Moje, 2008; Wilson, 2011). Specifically for the discipline of history, texts are read closely with an eye toward sourcing — attending to the biases and perspectives of text authors; corroborating — substantiating claims across texts; and contextualizing — understanding texts in terms of when, where, for whom, and under what circumstances they were written (Wineburg, 1991a, 1991b). Thus, historical texts are understood to be inevitably value- and purpose-laden accounts of history with an intended audience, rather than as history itself (Moje, 2011; Wilson & Wineburg, 1993). And while historical knowledge can be constructed, supported, and enhanced through such texts, it is nonetheless understood as “slippery and elusive,” subject to evidentiary substantiation, but resistant to unequivocal conclusiveness (VanSledright, 2012).

Thus, as compared to a content area literacy approach that considers all reading more or less equally bound by generic reading strategies, a disciplinary perspective holds a more complex view of literacy. In doing so, it makes room for social studies pedagogy that moves beyond the simple transmission of historical facts. History, literacy, and the social studies classrooms in which they are taught, become less about strategies and more about critical thinking, less about details, and more about the arguments made about those details (Jetton & Shanhan, 2012; Leinhardt, Stainton, & Virji, et al., 1994; VanSledright, 2002). Rather than functioning as passive recipients of historical knowledge, students are apprenticed into the discourse community of the discipline (Greenleaf, Schoenbach, & Cziko, et al., 2001), and are positioned as active participants in the construction, evaluation, and defense of historical understandings. Given the complex, frequent, and abundant sources of information available to us today, the thinking, reading, and writing approaches practiced by historians — ones that can help evaluate the legitimacy of one argument over another — seem broadly and significantly applicable. Given that students often consider their social studies classes boring and irrelevant (Reisman, 2012a; Rosenzweig, 2000), a disciplinary literacy approach holds out the promise of improved student engagement and richer learning.

## Theory and Practice — Bridging Literacy Divides

One problem is that these two approaches to literacy in the content areas — one based in generic strategies, and the other in disciplinary practices — are too often viewed as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive (Brozo, Moorman & Meyer, et al., 2013). Theoretical discussions abound in scholarly circles about the advantages of one approach over another, but these are largely irrelevant in classrooms alive with a diversity of students whose literacy and learning needs cry out to be met. Most importantly, reading in a content area like history requires the ability to discern both explicit and inferential meanings, and doing so inevitably draws both on more generally applicable English language arts skills, and on discipline-specific ones as well. For example, in order to successfully read and think historically, students must become adept at using context clues to define new vocabulary, identifying the main idea and supporting details, and distinguishing fact from opinion. Without these skills, students have no foundation upon which to build those more complex disciplinary approaches like sourcing, contextualizing, corroborating, and close reading.

As sixth- and seventh-grade social studies teachers with more than 35 years of experience between us, we've found that what often works with students may not fit neatly into one or another theoretical perspective. On the one hand, we've found that sticking to generic reading skills shortchanges students on what it means to understand and appreciate history. On the other hand, when a lack of sufficient basic comprehension stymies students' ability to critically analyze and evaluate text, learning of any kind can be short-circuited. Like all teaching, what we do is a balancing act. In order to maintain that balance, we build and blend generic reading strategies into discipline-specific approaches, simultaneously leveraging the best advantages of each to promote student literacy learning. Our basic approach is three-fold:

- **Flexibility:** We use a flexible, mixed-bag of both generic literacy strategies and disciplinary literacy routines that work for our students in our teaching context. These may and do change from one unit or year to the next depending on what we determine is or isn't successful.
- **Collaborate across grade levels:** We collaborate across our grade levels to reinforce and more effectively and efficiently scaffold skills and approaches.

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## Sample 2

Throughout the discussion I work to elicit an understanding that part of what distinguishes different activities is the thinking, behavior, and language that they use. I then ask students to select an activity in which they are involved and, working in a group with others involved in the same or similar activity, complete the “Thinking Like a \_\_\_\_\_” worksheet. They then create a butcher-paper display of their findings, which are shared with the whole class.

### Introducing what it means to “Think like a Historian” – sixth Grade

Having established this background understanding, I’m ready in the following lesson to take the next step in disciplinary literacy by helping students begin to learn and experience what it means to “think like a historian.” Using introductory elements based on the Reading Like a Historian curriculum (found at <https://sheg.stanford.edu/intro-materials>), I typically explain that just like soccer players, trombonists, and video game players, for example, historians also have their own special ways of acting, thinking, and speaking. I go on to explain that because history is about things that may have happened many years ago, some of the things historians do when they think, read, and write about the past are similar to the kinds of things detectives do when they try to solve a mystery.

The Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) introductory lesson *Lunchroom Fight* capitalizes on these similarities by engaging students in what usually proves to be a high-interest investigation of who started a fictional fight in the school cafeteria. The scenario provides students with opportunities to work with different sources of evidence and grapple with evaluating and interpreting that evidence in ways that emulate what historians do when they engage in sourcing. Because the goal of the lesson is for students to begin to understand this disciplinary literacy practice by experiencing it, most likely for the first time, I’ve found that rather than being done in pairs as suggested, the lesson is most successful as a guided, whole class inquiry. This approach also allows me to model the processes involved.

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How I Think and Act Like a Lacrosse player

Things I say: * "Here, I'm open!" * "Pass it to _____!" * "Middi back!" * "You can shoot!"	Things I do: * run * catch * pass * shoot
Objects, tools, or equipment I use: * my lacrosse stick * ball * The goal * uniform/cleats	Where I do this: * on a field (obvs fields) * turf * indoors (field) sports complex
People involved who I can see: * my team * the other team * the goalie * my coaches (the referee)	People involved who I can't see: * organizers * announcers * people who wrote the rules
Things I notice or pay attention to: * the ball * the goal * the defensemen (other team)	How I learn(ed) to do this: * practice * coaches * family * watching games * friends

# Learning to Think, Read, and Write Like Historians

## Sample 3

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Per \_\_\_\_\_

Learning to Think Like a Historian: Lunchroom Fight Part I



**“Historical” situation:**  
YOU are the principal of a school and you just found out that there was a fight in the cafeteria during lunch. You’ve asked many people who witnessed the fight what they saw so you can figure out who started it. Unfortunately, you’ve gotten many different stories that sometimes disagree about how and when it started and who was involved.

Think about the following questions...

1. Who are the DIFFERENT PEOPLE who might have seen this fight?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. How could there be different stories of the event? \*For the purposes of this activity, we will assume that NO ONE IS LYING!

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Whose story might be MORE BELIEVABLE than another person’s? EXPLAIN.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Whose story might be LESS BELIEVABLE than another person’s? EXPLAIN.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

After introducing the activity and reading the scenario aloud to students, I distribute my own modified version of SHEG’s student handout (see Sample 3). I begin the inquiry with the question, “Who are the people who might have witnessed the fight?”

Although I eliminate the “hints” provided in the SHEG version, I do include a picture of a typical middle school cafeteria scene to provide support to students who might have difficulty getting started. Students first brainstorm ideas independently, and then turn and talk to a neighbor to share ideas before, as a class, we list all the possible witnesses on chart paper. Because it is crucial to building an understanding of how to evaluate the reliability of sources, the second question, “What makes one person’s version of the events more believable than another person’s?” usually works best as a whole class discussion. Students often are quick to reference the loyalty of friends and the ulterior motives of enemies, a perfect opportunity to introduce the concept of bias. While my sixth graders may be familiar with the term as a way of referring to unfair treatment of people based on irrelevant characteristics, they generally don’t know its rhetorical use. Because identifying bias is an essential part of sourcing documents, I keep the definition, consistent with the one Mary McGonnell uses with her seventh graders, posted in my room and refer to it often.

The third question, “How could there be different stories of the event *if no one is lying?*” usually proves to be the most difficult one to tackle. Typical of students of this age (VanSledright, 2002a, 2002b), not only does the caveat “no one is lying” strike students as unrealistic, but it leaves them struggling to find alternate explanations for the different versions of the events. This commitment to untruthfulness as the only explanation for disparate versions of the past hinders students’ ability to meaningfully evaluate sources. I therefore find it essential to use this introductory scenario to facilitate at least a nascent understanding of the influence of perspective on how events are represented.

From a disciplinary literacy perspective, role-playing ... can help students interpret text from an empathetic framework.

To accomplish this goal, at this point I generally arrange a reenactment of the lunchroom fight scenario. Unsurprisingly, reenactments, simulations, and role-playing are popular with students. They are also strategies McGonnell uses extensively with her seventh graders, and through our collaborations, they've become a more significant part of what I do with my sixth graders as well. As means to an end, embodied representations like these can serve both traditional content-area literacy and disciplinary literacy goals. For example, in my own classroom, I use simulations to help preview meanings of key social studies terms like inflation, which students then add to their personal key terms dictionary. Used alongside completing flow-chart notes, reenactments are useful in helping give students access to complex content, like the Silk Road economics of a middleman system of distribution of goods. From a disciplinary literacy perspective, role-playing assembly line working conditions, for example, can help students learn to interpret text from an empathetic framework (Wilson & Chavez, 2014) at the same time that they access the required content. In each case, a blend of generic and disciplinary strategies is supported.

For this reenactment of the lunchroom fight, I designate an area of the room where the fight takes place, and a few

(responsible) students to stage an argument. I also select several students to stand in the imaginary lunch line with their backs to the area where the fight begins, and send one or two others outside of the room, instructing them only to enter when I give the signal. The rest of the class functions as observers. Running through the scenario several times, students become aware of the effects of time and location on their perspectives, and therefore on the version of the event they might produce. Prepared in this way, a foundation is established from which students can begin to consider reasons other than intentional duplicity for varying versions of past events. For example, students recognize possibilities such as:

“Someone who saw the fight from start to finish might have a different version from someone who came to lunch late because they didn't see it all.”

“People who were right next to where the fight happened and people who were far away. That could be different because of different point of views [sic].”

“People who were in the fight themselves [sic]. They could be right or wrong too because maybe they don't want to get into trouble or they only saw one part.”

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Guided classroom discussions are key to expanding student thinking, and to helping students understand that rather than rejecting one source in favor of another, historians actually use multiple sources to help them piece together a picture of the past.

Building on understandings like these, students are better prepared to begin making deliberated evaluations of the relative believability of one historical source over another. At the same time, they become more open to, even if not necessarily comfortable with, ambiguity. Admittedly, the process takes time — often more than one period for the lunchroom fight activity alone — but it is time well spent on meaningful social studies and literacy learning.

### **Working with Sources – sixth grade**

As a follow-up to *Lunchroom Fight*, I give students their first opportunity to apply sourcing to some simulated historical documents. I do this by using a worksheet called Evaluating Sources (Sample 4), a modified version of one found at the Stanford History Education Group website. In it, historical questions are followed by a set of potential sources of information from which the question might be answered. Students are asked to determine which source is most and least believable, and to explain their reasoning. By first modeling the thinking involved in determining the relative believability of each of the sources, students gradually become more adept at discerning what might potentially add to and detract from reliability. Again, the process takes time, both because these approaches are generally new to

sixth graders, and because I intentionally include examples in which the believability of one source over another is not clear-cut.

For example, Historical Question No. 2 is, “What was it like to be a slave in South Carolina before the Civil War?” Three sources are suggested: An interview with a former slave in 1936 (the Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery in the U.S. in 1865); a textbook chapter on slavery; and a diary written by a slave.

My students generally grasp the drawbacks of using a textbook chapter to, as one student put it, “get the feeling of slavery” because “textbooks weren’t there experiencing it.” More difficult, however, is the question of whether the diary or the interview provides more reliable information. Initially, students often consider a diary less reliable because “the handwriting might be bad,” or “pages might be torn out,” or “it might be in a different language.” Like the tendency of students to turn to lying as the reason one source might be in disagreement with another, students also tend to seek out concrete reasons why one source is less believable than another.

Guided classroom discussions are key to expanding student thinking, and to helping students understand that rather than rejecting one source in favor of another, historians actually use

## Sample 4

multiple sources to help them piece together a picture of the past. By the time students take their first chapter test on which they are asked to evaluate the reliability of sources, most display more nuanced reasoning.

For example, one student explained that, “A diary could be good and bad. Good because it’s what the person was experiencing right then. But bad because maybe they were afraid to get caught so they wouldn’t want to tell everything or not have time.” Another student, describing the reliability of the interview wrote, “There’s a problem because he’s pretty old then and people start to forget things, but it was really bad being a slave and probably you don’t forget those things. That’s why I think this is more believable, but the diary too because it was when it was happening.” Responses like these demonstrate growth not only in historical thinking, but also in the kind of critical thinking that is applicable across content areas.

By the final quarter of the school year, students have been given multiple opportunities to work with and evaluate sources in various contexts. Although I use primary source documents as often as possible, the textbook is also useful for teaching students to interrogate claims. For example, reading that despite the danger, slaves in Egypt willingly built pyramids because of their strong religious beliefs, we question from whose perspective this was written and consider alternate stories that could be told. By later in the school year we’ve also used artifacts to prove that Mohenjo-Daro was civilized, evaluated the system of justice represented by excerpts from Code of Hammurabi, and compared evidence of democratic governance in the United States with that of ancient Greece.

In each of these units, I use a variety of strategies and approaches to help students read, understand, evaluate and write about often difficult text. Some of these include elements from a generic literacy approach like completing K-W-L charts, answering questions about texts, annotating, guided note-taking, and outlining. Many reflect a disciplinary literacy

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Per. \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluating Sources

Directions: For each historical question below, circle the source you think is more believable. Explain your choice in at least one complete sentence.

1. **Historical Question:** Who was present at the signing of the Declaration of Independence?

**Source 1:** A Hollywood movie from 2001 about the American Revolution.

**Source 2:** A book written in 1999 by a famous historian who is an expert on the American Revolution.

I think Source \_\_\_\_\_ is more believable because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. **Historical Question:** What was it like to be a slave in South Carolina before the Civil War?

**Source 1:** An interview with a former slave in 1936 (the Emancipation Proclamation abolished slavery in the U.S. in 1865).

**Source 2:** A textbook chapter on slavery.

**Source 3:** A diary written by a slave.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. **Historical Question:** What did the city of Pompeii look like before it was destroyed by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in AD 79?

**Source 1:** A map of the city drawn by archaeologists who excavated (dug up) the site of the ancient city.

**Source 2:** A painting of Pompeii found by archaeologists at the site.

**Source 3:** A description of Pompeii written by a historian from Rome in AD 1452.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. **Historical Question:** What happened at the Battle of Lexington?

**Source 1:** A middle school textbook written in 1985.

**Source 2:** A newspaper story from the day after the battle in April, 1775.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. **Historical Question:** Why were Japanese Americans put in internment camps during World War II?

**Source 1:** A film made by the US government during WWII explaining to other Americans why this was happening.

**Source 2:** A classified (secret) government report on Japanese internment written during World War II that was later released to the public (no longer secret).

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# Learning to Think, Read, and Write Like Historians

## Sample 5

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ PERIOD \_\_\_\_\_

**DOCUMENT ANALYZER**

#	DATE WRITTEN OR CREATED	AUTHOR & Occupation	DOCUMENT PURPOSE To inform? honor? discredit?	VIEW OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT Generally Positive or Negative?	EVIDENCE Details from the document that support the positive or negative view	RELIABILITY What bias is revealed? Why might the author have this bias? Is this a reliable source?

approach like asking students to identify bias (sourcing), to recognize the rhetorical devices that reveal that bias (close reading), and to use multiple sources to gain a broader understanding of historical events (corroboration). Although the particular mix of strategies and approaches may vary, what remains consistent is the sequence of activities that over the course of the year helps students build their capacity to tackle complex primary and secondary source documents (Reisman, 2012a, 2013b). These activities, based on Reisman’s (2012a, 2012b) Document-Based

Lesson sequence, have four predictable

phases. First, I build background knowledge through a combination of lecture, textbook passages, video clips, PowerPoint presentations, or newspaper and magazine articles; each of these is often supplemented by one of the generic literacy strategies described above. Working into historical inquiry, I then model the procedure for reading and analyzing documents with the help of a guided graphic organizer; students complete the inquiry in small groups or in some cases independently. Third, we debrief our findings through class discussion. And finally, in a step that expands on Reisman’s model, students produce a piece of guided writing that is based on the documents and defends a historical claim.

Our unit on Alexander the Great is the culminating activity that maintains this activity structure, and ties together many of the generic and disciplinary literacy approaches that I scaffold throughout the year, and that McGonnell continues to build upon with her seventh graders. Although prior to this, students have regularly practiced sourcing and contextualization, their experience with corroboration is limited to documents that are in relative agreement. In this unit, students must use their skills in sourcing and contextualization, and independently evaluate conflicting evidence to select and defend a historical claim.

Six print and picture documents about Alexander the Great are first analyzed in small groups. A graphic organizer helps students with note-taking (Sample 5), the format of which is consistent with what students use in English for character analysis. The first two columns simply ask students to extract information from the

## Sample 6

documents (date, author, occupation). In the third, again consistent with expectations in their English classes, and based in a generic literacy skills approach, students are asked to evaluate the intended purpose of the documents (to inform? to persuade? to entertain?). The last two columns require students to work from a disciplinary perspective: Does the document present a generally positive or negative view of Alexander? What evidence suggests this? How reliable is this source?

To begin the analysis, I select two documents that present opposing views of Alexander, and use these as the basis for a reenactment. One describes Alexander's bravery and his generosity to his soldiers; the other portrays him and his army as murderous plunderers. Two separate groups are assigned to develop a short skit from the information contained in the text they are given. These reenactments provide a perfect springboard from which to discuss the perspectives presented by the documents. The discussion, in turn, creates an ideal opportunity to model the process of analyzing these two historical texts using the document analyzer. On this graphic organizer students record the date, author, and purpose of the document. Using this information, as well evidence from close reading of the text, students determine whether the document provides a generally positive or negative view of Alexander. Finally, in the last column, they evaluate the reliability of the source; specifically, they are asked to think about what bias is revealed in the document, and why the author might have this bias.

The process of modeling is essential because students are still novices at what it means to think historically, but also because documents relevant to the sixth-grade curriculum pose a particular challenge. Written mostly thousands of years ago and requiring translation into English, they often contain difficult vocabulary and complex sentence structure. At the same time, they offer opportunity in that they represent the kind of complex texts the NYS K-12 Social Studies Framework expects students to read. In an effort to make these documents inviting, rather than intimidating (Reisman & Wineburg, 2012), I use

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REPORT CARD FOR: ALEXANDER III OF MACEDONIA		
CHARACTERISTIC	GRADE	DOCUMENT EVIDENCE
Positive attitude		
Fair		
Decisive, but open to ideas		
Sets reasonable goals		
Persuasive		
Powerful		
Deserves to be called...		
ALEXANDER THE GREAT		

Comments: Beginning with a claim/thesis statement, explain why you think he should or should not be called Alexander the Great.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Sample 7

### What Makes a Paragraph Successful?

#### ***\*Think of structure, audience and purpose.\****

- A topic sentence that hooks the reader and introduces the topic.
- At least three supporting details that elaborate about the topic sentence and engage the reader.
- Transitional words or phrases that create a flow and link ideas together.
- A concluding sentence that sums up/ties the details together in a meaningful way.
- Correct spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.

several strategies that primarily serve to simplify and focus the texts (Wineburg & Martin, 2009). These provide opportunities both for an expansion of students' language abilities, and for rigorous and meaningful engagement with primary source documents (Reisman & Wineburg, 2012). Depending upon the difficulty of the text I may first, alongside the text of the document, provide definitions of what I anticipate will be unfamiliar words. Next, to create clarity, I may modify or paraphrase the wording of the document, being careful to sustain a tone consistent with the original. And finally, rather than using entire documents, I may use relevant excerpts that maintain the integrity of the document as a whole. Supports like these, which I scaffold during the year, help prevent the language of the text from imposing roadblocks to com-

prehension that impede analysis.

After modeling analysis of the first two documents in the Alexander unit, the remaining ones are analyzed in small groups, followed by a whole-class debriefing. During this stage, students are encouraged to offer additional or counter-evidence for the image and reliability sections of the document analyzer. Presenting the overarching question about whether Alexander deserves to be called "the Great" often generates some rather heated debates. By this point in the school year, students have generally become more comfortable with the idea that history does not always produce complete or clearly defined truths, but they are eager to defend their positions. Although the tendency persists to revert to blaming duplicity for disagreement between sources, my sixth graders become increasingly adept at recognizing more historically and critically productive analyses.

That critical analysis is put to work in the historical claim essay writing that constitutes the culminating activity of the unit. (For students who require modifications, the activity takes the form of Alexander's Report Card – see Sample 6). Students are provided with a detailed outline (sample attached) that guides them through the requirements. Similar to the format of a historical claim essay that McGonnell assigns at the beginning of the year to

her seventh graders (described below), my sixth graders write four paragraphs, are provided with two sample claim/thesis statements (both I and the English teachers on my team use both of these terms with students) from which to choose, depending on the historical claim they wish to make, and are asked to briefly recognize the opposing viewpoint. Unlike the seventh-grade version, I also give my students a mentor text, which we read and analyze as a group while we go over the essay requirements. Although the mentor text and detailed outline undoubtedly suggest a formulaic approach to essay writing, they provide the kind of supports most sixth graders need to be initiated into the way historians construct and warrant knowledge. The modeled writing, including the programmed claim/thesis statement, also give students access to language and sentence structure that has the potential to expand their linguistic abilities. To help maintain cross-disciplinary consistency, I also borrow charts the English teachers on my team use in their classrooms to summarize focused writing lessons. One outlines the features of a good paragraph (Sample 7), another lists transition words (Sample 8), and a third reminds students how to effectively use conjunctions to combine sentences (Sample 9). Provided with sufficient resources and guidance, students are generally able to produce

remarkably sophisticated essays.

While not all students demonstrate a high level of historical thinking through their writing, by the end of the year most students are comfortable enough with the process to be able to use appropriate documentary evidence to support their claim, and to recognize that in many historical cases, opposing claims might also be defensible.

### Working with Sources – seventh grade

Confident that students coming into my seventh-grade social studies classroom have been provided with a foundational understanding of “thinking like historians,” I can begin the year by building on those skills. Like Carmela Gustafson, I follow a predictable activity sequence in my units (Reisman, 2012a, 2012b) that follows the general format described for the sixth grade. The additions and modifications that I make reflect the increased expectations of seventh grade and are described below.

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## Sample 8

### Argument Transitions

- for example
  - for instance
  - obviously
  - of course
  - likewise
  - additionally
  - furthermore
  - not to mention
  - for this reason
  - another key piece of evidence
  - most compelling evidence
  - to summarize
  - all in all
  - as has been noted
  - without a doubt
- } use AFTER your first example/evidence

## Sample 9

### Conjunctions

To combine two sentences into one, use:

- F**or
- A**nd
- N**or
- B**ut
- O**r
- Y**et
- S**o

I went to the park and had a terrific picnic lunch.

Insisting that students defend a position other than what they might otherwise have selected can help ... motivate [them] to stretch [their] critical thinking to a new level.

The first full inquiry in which my students engage involves making a historical claim about whether Columbus was a villain or a hero. While this inquiry closely parallels what Gustafson does with her sixth graders in their Alexander writing, it also expands on it. For example, while she asks her students to analyze six documents, this inquiry involves a total of nine. These include a passage from a textbook other than our own, excerpts from a picture book about Columbus, two contemporary newspaper articles, and several extracts from Christopher Columbus's journal. Where the sixth-grade documents are all under 250 words, the ones for this inquiry range from 100 to more than 600 words; while each of the Alexander documents represent one clear-cut view of Alexander, the documents about Columbus are sometimes more ambiguous; and finally, while we both provide programmed claim/thesis statements, Gustafson allows her students to select the position they want to defend, whereas I assign them.

My rationale for doing this stems first from another less obvious way in which this inquiry forces students to stretch their critical disciplinary thinking skills. Since most sixth graders have little or no prior knowledge of Alexander the Great, they have no preconceived notion of him as a historical figure; whether or not he deserves to be called "great" involves no emotional

baggage. The opposite is true of Columbus. In addition to having been exposed since an early age to the lore of Christopher Columbus through both books and music, students are keenly aware of our celebration of Columbus Day. The first document we analyze for this inquiry, entitled *Columbus: Debunking Some Myths*, inevitably creates in students emphatically expressed feelings of disappointment, betrayal, and even anger. Why, they ask, would we celebrate the birth of someone who did all of these horrible things? Why didn't we learn about this sooner? As a result, despite other documents in the inquiry that highlight the accomplishments of Columbus, students are so horrified by this newly discovered perspective that few come away from the analysis willing to defend him as a hero.

My other rationale for assigning a claim/thesis statement to students is based in more strictly pedagogical concerns. When students have free choice in which historical claim to defend, their reasoning for making that choice may not be clear. Have they made the choice because they've been convinced by what they see as stronger arguments in the documents, or because they already had their minds made up? Perhaps it was because one position just struck them as an easier way to complete the assignment. Or, might they have chosen it because documents defending the other view were,

despite the reading and analysis supports I provided, still too difficult for them to understand? By sometimes insisting that students defend a position other than what they might otherwise have selected, I can help a student whose difficulties might have gone unnoticed, provide impetus to a student with work habits less developed than her abilities, or motivate a student to stretch his critical thinking to a new level. To help support this approach, I also include a debate as an additional step in the activity sequence of this unit.

After establishing background knowledge through a combination of a K-W-L chart, textbook passages, and class discussions, we tackle the document *Columbus: Debunking Some Myths*. Depending on ability, students read the passage independently or in pairs and, in keeping with a generic literacy approach, complete a set of true or false statements. As they read and complete the statements, they are required to annotate the text.

Consistent with the English teacher on my team, as well as with the generic literacy skills taught in sixth grade across subject areas, students annotate by finding evidence in the text for their answer, underlining it, and then numbering it. We then go over and discuss the answers. This sequence continues until students have progressed through all nine documents, each of which has

either a guided note-taking page, or a set of questions associated with it. In order to parallel similar work they do with narrative text, answers to the questions may be either directly evident in the text, or may have to be inferred. Students are in some cases also asked to determine the author's purpose, or to summarize the text. In all cases, students must annotate, and answer all open-ended questions in complete sentences. Again, this is a procedure consistent with the expectations both in sixth grade, and in their seventh-grade English classes.

After all of the documents have been analyzed and discussed, students are ready to prepare for their first formal, but somewhat modified, debate. I see this as a natural progression from the informal debates that sometimes emerge through class discussions, and although the entire process generally takes two full class periods to complete, it is a meaningful and enjoyable learning experience. Particularly relevant during an election year like this one, introducing the concept of a debate produces important content knowledge, and allows students to engage in the defense of a (historical) claim in both oral and written forms. Students are assigned sides (Columbus as Hero vs. Columbus as Villain), and use the documents and associated notes to independently write opening statements with the sentence starter, "I  
*continued on following page*

What we consider essential to effective teaching and meaningful learning is not any one set of practices, but rather an ongoing commitment to examining and enriching our pedagogy.

believe that Columbus was a hero/villain because...”

After several from each side have been shared, students then write rebuttals, again with the help of a sentence starter, “I disagree with my opponents when they said...because...” In the final stage, students write and then share a closing statement explaining why they think the evidence on their side of the issue is stronger than that of their opponents. While challenging at first, it’s not uncommon for students to ask to do more debates later in the school year.

Well-prepared by these preliminary steps, and particularly supported by the debate activity, students move to the writing portion of the activity sequence. In keeping with Gustafson’s approach with her students, I also provide students with an outline, but it is somewhat more open-ended than the sixth-grade version. For example, in the introduction, students write a lead, or “bait” sentence, and select a programmed claim/thesis statement, but are also required to include historical context consisting of any general relevant statement about the Age of Exploration gleaned from the background knowledge segment of this and other units. Perhaps most significantly, rather than mentioning the opposing viewpoint in the conclusion as Gustafson has her students do, my

seventh graders do this immediately after they present the primary evidence supporting their claim in the first body paragraph. This is a significant difference because it requires students to be able to maintain focus both on their own and the opposite argument at the same time. Subtle differences in approach like these, combined with thoughtful pedagogical reflection, and perhaps most important in our view, our collaborative efforts, help us create powerful learning experiences for our students.

### Conclusion

Our purpose in this article has been to summarize some of the ways we incorporate a flexible range of disciplinary and generic literacy approaches into our respective sixth- and seventh-grade social studies curricula. Although we are proud of what our students often accomplish as a result, it is not to say that we believe that these approaches are in any way carved in stone. What we consider essential to effective teaching and meaningful learning is not any one set of practices, but rather an ongoing commitment to examining and enriching our pedagogy. What we feel most proud of is the collaboration that energizes us in that pursuit. What we are most encouraged by is the growth we see in our students.

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