

# Rubrics for Examining Historical Thinking Skills in High School World History Activities and Student Work

Emi Iwatani, Angela Hardy, Barbara Means, and John Seylar

January 15, 2021



## Rubrics for Examining Historical Thinking Skills in High School World History Activities and Student Work

Last major update October 2020

### Suggested Citation

Iwatani, E., Hardy, A., Means, B., Seylar, J. (2021) Rubrics for examining historical thinking skills in high school world history activities and student work. Digital Promise.

### Acknowledgements

This research was made possible through funding from Gates Ventures. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders.

### Contact Information

Email: [eiwatani@digitalpromise.org](mailto:eiwatani@digitalpromise.org)

Digital Promise:

**Washington, DC:**

1001 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 935

Washington, DC 20036

**San Mateo, CA:**

2955 Campus Dr. Suite 110

San Mateo, CA 94403

Website: <https://digitalpromise.org/>

*Rubrics for Examining Historical Thinking Skills in High School World History Classrooms* by Digital Promise is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

## Introduction

The Rubrics for Examining Historical Thinking Skills in High School World History Activities and Student Work were created and validated for use in the evaluation of Gates Ventures' open source World History Project (WHP) curriculum. The set of rubrics for scoring teacher lessons were designed to evaluate the **potential of teacher-assigned activities (e.g., an essay prompt) to provide opportunities for students to learn historical thinking skills**, while the set of rubrics for scoring student work were designed to assess **the extent to which students successfully used historical thinking skills in the work these activities produced (e.g., a written essay)**. The categories of historical thinking skills identified for measurement are aligned with widely accepted national frameworks and standards, making these rubrics **applicable for use by researchers, educators and professional learning experts to study historical thinking skills learning in high school world history classrooms**.

**The activity dimensions (A1 - A6) can be used to assess the extent to which a learning activity provides students the opportunity to:**

- Make and develop claims and/or assess the quality of claims found in a historical account or interpretation (A1 - Historical argumentation)
- Employ causal reasoning (A2 - Historical causation)
- Describe and explain similarities and differences between historical developments, processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas (A3 - Historical comparison)
- Contextualize historical phenomena and actions within a temporal, spatial and/or sociocultural setting (A4 - Historical contextualization)
- Analyze continuity and change over time in history (A5 - Continuity and change over time in History)
- Source a historical document (e.g., identify the author's purpose and perspective) (A6 - Sourcing)

**The student work dimensions (S1 - S6) can be used to assess the extent to which student work provides evidence that student:**

- Made, supported or evaluated a historical claim (S1 - Historical argumentation)
- Employed historical causal reasoning (S2 - Historical causation)

## Rubrics for Examining Historical Thinking Skills in High School World History Activities and Student Work

Last major update October 2020

- Described and explained similarities and differences between historical developments, processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas (S3 - Historical comparison)
- Contextualized historical phenomena and actions within a temporal, spatial and/or sociocultural setting (S4 - Historical contextualization)
- Analyzed continuity and change over time in history (S5 - Continuity and change over time in history)
- Sourced a historical document (e.g., identified the author's purpose and perspective) (S6 - Sourcing)

Each dimension has four levels (0-3) where generally 0 indicates the **absence** of a historical thinking practice/skill in the activity/student work, 1 indicates **emergence**, 2 indicates **presence**, and 3 indicates **rigorous presence**.

By scoring the activities and examples of student work, **it's possible to answer questions like:**

- Does this high school world history learning activity provide opportunities for students to use historical thinking skills? In which ways, and in what ways not?
- What are ways to modify high school world history lessons so that students have opportunities to engage in historical thinking practices?
- Did high school students who participated in the world history learning activity demonstrate historical thinking skills? In what ways, and in what ways not?

### **Please note:**

- The rubrics are not designed for everyday grading of students' work, and are not meant for student eyes or student use. A low score is not intended to imply that the student should necessarily receive a low grade, or that the activity is a poor assignment. Recall that there are many many important skills that rubric does not touch (such as geography or historical empathy). In addition, the rubric does not get at lessons that are strictly about teaching content knowledge. Essentially, remember that these are historical thinking skills rubrics, and only evaluate the extent to which those skills can be seen in assignments or student work.
- It's OK (and sometimes better) to use only a subset of dimensions of the rubric. For example, if one's primarily interested in improving opportunities for students to employ causal reasoning, it could be reasonable to focus only on A2.

*Rubrics for Examining Historical Thinking Skills in High School World History Classrooms* by Digital Promise is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#)

## Rubrics for Examining Historical Thinking Skills in High School World History Activities and Student Work

Last major update October 2020

- Even when lessons are designed to focus on historical thinking, It's not expected for all activities and student work to score high on all dimensions. Different activities have different purposes — and it is rare for a single assignment to encompass all dimensions of historical thinking. So it's neither expected nor realistic for every activity to score high on all dimensions.
- To be scored at the highest level, almost every dimension calls for an **extended** argument. In student work, it is not the length of the argument but the complexity of the argument that determines whether it is brief or extended. In assignments it can be more difficult to determine whether they call for a brief or extended response, but the following factors can help: 1) whether the assignment is formative or summative, 2) how much evidence students are expected to employ 3) the time taken or length of the argument students are expected to produce.
- But, (we think) it's important for high school students to have opportunities to learn and grow in each of the ways that are described in the rubric. The rubric went through an extensive design process, including consideration of alignment with national frameworks of historical thinking skills (described in Hardy & Iwatani, 2021<sup>1</sup>) and careful review by teachers and researchers (described in Iwatani, Means, Seylar & Hardy, 2021<sup>2</sup>) to make sure that the dimensions are relevant to high school world history teaching and learning.

One recommended use of this rubric is for professional learning. Teachers can bring in their activities and a few examples of student work, and use the rubric(s) as a guide to discuss what they observe and possible next steps for students and/or the activity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Hardy, A., & Iwatani, E. (2021) *Rubrics for examining historical thinking skills in high school world history activities and student work: Construct validity evidence from the literature*. Digital Promise.

<sup>2</sup> Iwatani, E., Means, B., Seylar, J., and Hardy, A. (2021). *Rubrics on historical thinking skills for assignments and student work: Initial validity evidence*. Digital Promise.

**A1. HISTORICAL ARGUMENTATION: Activity explicitly calls for students to make, support or assess a historical claim.**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>Activity <b>does not explicitly</b> call for students to make, support or assess a historical claim.</p>	<p>The activity <b>explicitly prompts students to state</b> a historical claim, a reason for a historical claim or an evaluation of a historical claim .</p>	<p>The activity explicitly prompts students to state a historical claim, a reason for a historical claim or an evaluation of a historical claim .</p> <p><b>The activity explicitly prompts students to briefly explain their claim, reason, or evaluation.</b></p>	<p>The activity explicitly prompts students to state a historical claim, a reason for a historical claim or an evaluation of a historical claim.</p> <p>The activity explicitly prompts students to <b>provide an extended explanation</b> of their claim, reason, or evaluation.</p>	<p>For example, the activity may prompt students to support their own claim by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● integrating relevant evidence from multiple sources,</li> <li>● acknowledging the credibility and limitations of the evidence used and noting discrepancies across sources,</li> <li>● addressing and evaluating potential counterarguments, and/or</li> <li>● using reasoning to connect the evidence to their claim.</li> </ul> <p>Or, the activity may prompt students to extend their argument on the validity of another person’s claim by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● examining supporting and refuting evidence, including information the claim maker has omitted,</li> <li>● explaining the strengths and limitations of the reasoning used to support the claim,</li> <li>● corroborating the claim with other accounts or interpretations, and/or</li> <li>● considering the perspective and credibility of the claim maker.</li> </ul>

\*Historical claims can include historical accounts and interpretations.

**A2. HISTORICAL CAUSATION: Activity explicitly calls for students to employ causal reasoning using appropriate historical evidence.**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>The activity <b>does not explicitly</b> call for students to describe causes and/or effects to explain human actions, events, and/or larger structures or processes.</p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to <b>describe causes and/or effects to explain human actions, events, and/or larger structures or processes.</b></p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to describe causes and/or effects to explain human actions, events, and/or larger structures or processes, <b>and asks students to provide a brief analysis of distinctions between different causes and/or effects (e.g., primary vs. secondary or immediate vs. long-term) or the relationship between causes and/or effects.</b></p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to describe causes and or effects to explain human actions, events, and/or larger structures or processes, and asks students to provide <b>an extended</b> analysis of distinctions between different causes and/or effects (e.g., primary vs. secondary or immediate vs. long-term) or the relationship between causes and/or effects.</p>	<p>For example, the activity may prompt students to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● provide an extended analysis of the distinctions between background conditions, triggering events, primary and secondary causes, and/or immediate and long-term effects.</li> <li>● evaluate the relative historical significance of various causes and effects.</li> </ul>

**A3. HISTORICAL COMPARISON: Activity explicitly calls for students to describe and explain similarities and differences between historical developments and processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas, using appropriate historical evidence.**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>Activity <b>does not explicitly</b> call for students to describe similarities and differences between historical developments, processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas.</p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to <b>describe similarities and differences between historical developments, processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas.</b></p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to describe similarities and differences between historical developments, processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas <b>and prompts students to provide brief explanations of why the similarities and differences existed.</b></p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to describe similarities and differences between historical developments, processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas and prompts students to provide <b>extended</b> explanations of why the similarities and differences existed.</p>	<p>For example, the activity may prompt students to extend their analysis by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• evaluating the relative historical significance of particular similarities or differences and/or</li> <li>• exploring the connection between similarities and differences within and across different categories (e.g., political, religious, geographic).</li> </ul>

**A4. HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION: Activity explicitly calls for students to contextualize historical phenomena and actions within a temporal, spatial and/or sociocultural setting using appropriate historical evidence.**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>The activity <b>does not</b> explicitly call for students to situate phenomena and/or actions in their broader temporal, spatial, and/or sociocultural context.</p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to <b>situate phenomena and/or actions in their broader temporal, spatial, and/or sociocultural context.</b></p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to situate phenomena and/or actions in their broader temporal, spatial, and/or sociocultural context, <b>and prompts students to provide a brief analysis of how understanding that context improves their ability to interpret the phenomena/action and its significance.</b></p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to situate phenomena and/or actions in their relevant broader temporal, spatial, and/or sociocultural context and prompts students to provide <b>an extended</b> analysis of how understanding that context improves their ability to interpret the phenomena/action and its significance.</p>	<p>For example, the activity may invite students to acknowledge ways in which contemporary values, attitudes, and conceptualizations differ from those in the past, and show an understanding of how particular perspectives of historical agents would have affected actions.</p>

**A5. CONTINUITY AND CHANGE OVER TIME IN HISTORY: Activity explicitly calls for students to analyze continuity and change over time using appropriate historical evidence.**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>Activity <b>does not</b> explicitly call for students to analyze continuity and change over time.</p>	<p>Activity explicitly calls for students to <b>provide a description of patterns of continuity and change over time.</b></p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to describe patterns of continuity and change over time, <b>and asks students to provide a brief analysis of why phenomena persisted or changed.</b></p>	<p>The activity explicitly calls for students to describe patterns of continuity and change over time, and provide <b>extended</b> analysis of why phenomena persisted or changed.</p>	<p>For example, the activity may prompt students to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>analyze the short-term or long-term historical significance of developments in relation to patterns of change and continuity, and/or</li> <li>ask students to draw conclusions about aspects of patterns, such as their level (global, interregional, regional, or local), speed, and direction (progressive or regressive).</li> </ul>

**A6. SOURCING: Activity explicitly calls for students to source a historical document (e.g., identify the author’s purpose and perspective).**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>Activity <b>does not</b> explicitly call for students to describe the author’s identity and point of view of the author, broader temporal and spatial context, purpose, and/or intended audience of a source.</p>	<p>Activity explicitly calls for students to <b>describe the author’s identity and point of view of the author, broader temporal and spatial context, purpose, and/or intended audience of a source.</b></p>	<p>Activity explicitly calls for students to describe the author’s identity and point of view of the author, broader temporal and spatial context, purpose, and/or intended audience of a source <b>and prompts students to briefly analyze how and why some of these factors impacted the way that the author framed the content and how they might affect its meaning.</b></p>	<p>Activity explicitly calls for students to describe the identity and point of view of the author, broader temporal and spatial context, purpose, and intended audience of a source and prompts <b>an extended analysis of</b> how and why some of these factors impacted the way that the author framed the content and how they might affect its meaning.</p>	<p>For example, the activity may prompt students to evaluate how and why the factors above relate to the historical significance of the source and/or its limitations and credibility.</p>

**S1. HISTORICAL ARGUMENTATION: Students made, supported or assessed a historical claim.**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>The student <b>neither makes, supports or assesses a historical claim.</b></p>	<p>The student <b>states a historical claim, a reason for a historical claim or an evaluation of a historical claim.</b></p>	<p>The student states a historical claim, a reason for a historical claim or an evaluation of a historical claim.</p> <p>The student <b>briefly explains their claim, reason or evaluation.</b></p>	<p>The student states a historical claim, a reason for a historical claim or an evaluation of a historical claim.</p> <p>The student provides <b>an extended explanation</b> of their claim, reason or evaluation.</p>	<p>For example, the student may support their own claim by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● integrating relevant evidence from multiple sources,</li> <li>● acknowledging the credibility and limitations of the evidence used and noting discrepancies across sources,</li> <li>● addressing and evaluating potential counterarguments, and/or</li> <li>● using reasoning to connect the evidence to their claim.</li> </ul> <p>Or, the student may extend their argument over the validity of another person’s claim by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● examining supporting and refuting evidence, including information the claim maker has omitted,</li> <li>● explaining the strengths and limitations of the reasoning used to support the claim,</li> <li>● corroborating the claim with other accounts or interpretations, and/or</li> <li>● considering the perspective and credibility of the claim maker.</li> </ul>

*Note: Possible student misconceptions about claims and evidence include the student grounding their claim in unsupported opinion and/or not distinguishing between historical fact and historical interpretation.*

**S2. HISTORICAL CAUSATION: Students employed historical causal reasoning using appropriate historical evidence.**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>The student <b>does not</b> describe historical causes and/or effects to explain human actions, events, and/or larger structures or processes.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>The student employs causal reasoning in non-historical contexts.</p>	<p>The student <b>describes historical causes and/or effects to explain human actions, events, and/or larger structures or processes.</b></p>	<p>The student describes historical causes and/or effects to explain human actions, events, and/or larger structures or processes, <b>and provides a brief analysis of relationships or distinctions between different causes and/or effects.</b></p>	<p>The student describes historical causes and/or effects to explain human actions, events, and/or larger structures or processes, and provides <b>an extended</b> analysis of relationships or distinctions between different causes and/or effects.</p>	<p>For example, the student may</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>analyze the distinctions between background conditions, triggering events, primary and secondary causes, and/or immediate and long-term effects.</li> <li>evaluate the relative historical significance of various causes and effects.</li> </ul>

*Notes: Possible student misconceptions about causation include the student conflating causes, actions, and events, believing that a longer list of causes made an event more likely to occur, considering the alternative of a cause to be the lack of an occurrence rather than an alternative occurrence, and/or placing causes in a linear order and arguing that the first cause impacted the second cause and so on, until the event or process occurred.*

**S3. HISTORICAL COMPARISON:** Students described and explained similarities and differences between historical developments, processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas, using appropriate historical evidence.

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>The student <b>does not</b> describe similarities and differences of developments, processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas.</p>	<p>The student <b>describes similarities and differences of developments, processes, regions, eras, or other focal areas.</b></p>	<p>The student describes similarities and differences between the foci of comparison, <b>and provides a brief analysis of reasons for these similarities and differences.</b></p>	<p>The student describes similarities and differences between the foci of comparison, and provides <b>an extended</b> analysis of the reasons for these similarities and differences.</p>	<p>For example, the student may</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● extend their analysis by evaluating the relative historical significance of particular similarities or differences and/or</li> <li>● exploring the connection between similarities and differences within and across different categories (e.g., political, religious, geographic).</li> </ul>

**S4. HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION: Students contextualized historical phenomena and actions within a temporal, spatial and/or sociocultural setting using appropriate historical evidence.**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>The student <b>does not</b> situate phenomena and/or actions in their broader temporal, spatial, and/or sociocultural context.</p>	<p>The student <b>situates phenomena and/or actions in their broader temporal, spatial, and/or sociocultural context.</b></p>	<p>The student situates phenomena and/or actions in their broader temporal, spatial, and/or sociocultural context, <b>and provides a brief analysis of how understanding that context improves their ability to interpret the phenomena/action and its significance.</b></p>	<p>The student situates phenomena and/or actions in their relevant broader temporal, spatial, and/or sociocultural context and provides <b>an extended analysis</b> of how understanding that context improves their ability to interpret the phenomena/action and its significance.</p>	<p>For example, the student’s connections to context may acknowledge ways in which contemporary values, attitudes, and conceptualizations differ from those in the past, and show an understanding of how particular perspectives of historical agents would have affected actions.</p>

*Note: Possible student misconceptions about contextualization include the student using a present-oriented perspective in thinking about past phenomena and actions.*

**S5. CHANGE AND CONTINUITY OVER TIME IN HISTORY: Students analyzed continuity and change over time using appropriate historical evidence.**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>The student <b>does not</b> describe continuity and change over time.</p>	<p>The student <b>describes patterns of continuity and change over time.</b></p>	<p>The student describes patterns of continuity and change over time, <b>and provides a brief analysis of why phenomena persisted or changed.</b></p>	<p>The student describes and explains patterns of continuity and change over time, and provides an <b>extended</b> analysis of why phenomena persisted or changed.</p>	<p>For example, the student may</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>analyze the short-term or long-term historical significance of developments and relate them to the larger patterns of change and continuity, and/or</li> <li>draw conclusions about aspects of patterns such as the level (global, interregional, regional, or local), speed, and direction of the change or continuity (progressive or regressive).</li> </ul>

*Note: Possible student misconceptions about change and continuity over time include the student confusing continuity with “no change” occurring, conflating any differences that happened over time as changes, seeing events and changes as synonymous (rather than taking into account gradual change or changes in opinion, circumstance, etc.), conceptualizing all change as progressive, and/or looking at the past through a deficit lens.*

**S6. SOURCING: Students source a historical document (e.g., identify the author’s purpose and perspective).**

0	1	2	3	Level 3 Examples
<p>Student <b>does not</b> describe the identity and point of view of the author, broader temporal and spatial context, purpose, and/or intended audience of a source.</p>	<p>Student <b>describes the identity and point of view of the author, broader temporal and spatial context, purpose, and/or intended audience of a source.</b></p>	<p>Student describes the identity and point of view of the author, broader temporal and spatial context, purpose, and/or intended audience of a source <b>and provides a brief analysis of how some of these factors impacted the way that the author framed the content and how they might affect its meaning.</b></p>	<p>Student describes the identity and point of view of the author, broader temporal and spatial context, purpose, and intended audience of a source and provides an <b>extended</b> analysis of how and why some of these factors impacted the way that the author framed the content and how they might affect its meaning.</p>	<p>For example, the student may evaluate how and why the factors above relate to the historical significance of the source and/or its limitations and credibility.</p>