HISTORICAL THINKING BENCHMARKS

• Analysis of primary and secondary sources.

For example, using primary and secondary sources on the experience of 19th-century immigrants, teachers can look for different points of view or bias (for instance, in comments by immigrants themselves compared to comments about immigrants by the press or politicians). Weighing the representativeness of certain kinds of sources such as diaries and considering a mixture of quantitative and qualitative (visual as well as textual) sources would be another important exercise on this kind of topic. Discussing how to rate different levels of reliability in sources on the immigrant experience might round off an exercise on this skill.

• An understanding of historical debate and controversy.

Working on the diverse interpretations of United States involvement in the Cold War, for example, could focus the issue of how to sort out conflicting interpretations, including examining the ways different "sides" build their argument and adduce evidence.

• Appreciation of recent historiography through an examination of how historians develop differing interpretations.

For example, shifting concepts about race have changed the way historians interpreted key aspects of slavery and reconstruction in United States history, as well as the kinds of evidence and theories they used. What, in fact, are the main differences from earlier approaches?

• Analysis of how historians use evidence.

For example, examining recent articles in leading historical journals in several different fields—political history, diplomatic history and social or gender history—would be a good way to look at different kinds of evidence but also to examine any patterns in the ways historians build arguments from evidence.

• An understanding of bias and points of view.

This skill applies most obviously in assessing primary sources, but it is vital also in dealing with secondary accounts. Teachers can compare textbook treatments of controversial topics, such as slavery, and how they have changed over time, as a means of testing for bias or point of view.

• Formulation of questions through inquiry and determining their importance.

There might be two ways to work on this aspect of historical thinking: first, take a work regarded as seminal, such as several of the pathbreaking studies of slavery, and tease out

which two or three major questions guided the work; or second, simply think through two or three questions about U.S. history that seem open-ended, not yet answered or even directly addressed, and discuss how their importance might be assessed.

• Determination of the significance of different kinds of historical change.

For example, a teacher might take any 25-year slice of U.S. history, undoubtedly filled with new developments, and determine which two or three of these developments are the most important changes—and how these can be defended against other options, discussing, for instance, how other outcomes or changes are less likely given the initial conditions.

• Sophisticated examination of how causation relates to continuity and change.

For example, how does one go about explaining the historic shift in the work patterns of married women in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, which so dramatically altered women's lives and family structures? And how does one determine, amid such a striking shift, elements in women's roles that persisted—and why they persisted?

• Understanding of the interrelationship among themes, regions, and periodization.

For example, a topic such as the nature and role of cities can be explored in terms of major American regions (south, west, northeast), using comparative techniques, and also in terms of periodization. Two questions that can be asked are: When did major changes take place? What is the relationship between periodization for this topic and conventional survey history periodization more generally?

• Understanding that although the past tends to be viewed in terms of present values, a proper perception of the past requires a serious examination of values of that time.

For example, what aspects of the Federalist Papers seem particularly hard to understand in terms of current political issues and values, and how can we appreciate why they were important at the time? How can we appreciate why many parents tried to "break the will" of disobedient children, by isolating them in their rooms often for days, in the early 19th century—and how can we try to understand the impact of this experience on children themselves?

Excerpted from:
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The complete document can be found at
http://www.historians.org/teaching/policy/Benchmarks.htm
(Google: American Historical Association Benchmarks)