

NELSON

**THE
BIG
SIX**

HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPTS

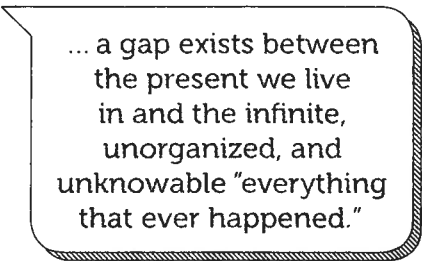
SEIXAS

MORTON

INTRODUCTION

Histories are the stories we tell about the past. They can be simple stories about going shopping yesterday; they can be complex stories about how nations formed or global trade developed. But the past itself is gone. By definition it is no longer present, so we can't observe it directly. We have a need for meaningful, coherent stories about what came before us. Yet a gap exists between the present we live in and the infinite, unorganized, and unknowable "everything that ever happened." How we overcome that gap gives rise to history.

But is the past really gone? As William Faulkner famously wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Whether or not we are conscious of it, whether it enters our minds at all, every aspect of the world we inhabit today is the product of yesterday. The chair you sit in as you read this page was designed, manufactured, sold, bought, shipped, and placed in its current spot at some point in the past—its existence today is thus an extension of the past. Not only the objects, buildings, streets, and cities through which you move, but also the social, political, and cultural worlds in which you navigate daily are the embodiment of everything that came before. And what is true of the world *around* you is equally true of *yourself*: your body—from the scars left by old injuries to the DNA in your cells left by your parents—and your mind—from the ideas you read about in this passage to the words you will use to write your next email. All is inherited. How can we become more conscious of the past that lies within every aspect of the present? Can understanding our ties to the past help us live in the present? How we answer these questions gives rise to history education.



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What Is Historical Thinking?

As the discipline of history has developed over time, certain principles of historical thinking have evolved as historians attempt to deal with these questions, as well as other questions fundamental to history: How do we know what we know about the past? How can we represent the knowledge of something that is no longer here (i.e., the past)? What are the relationships between us, today, and those who lived in the past? What do we believe when two accounts of the same events conflict with each other?

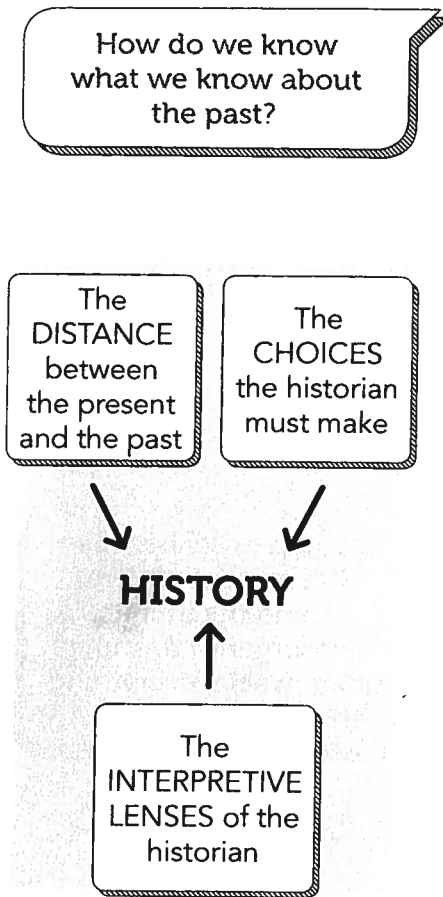


Figure 1 History is made when historians find solutions to three problems.

Recall the definition of history given in our opening: “Histories are the stories we tell about the past.” This definition sets up the most fundamental problem in the discipline of history: the relationship between the historian and the past that he or she is thinking, reading, or writing about. This problem can be seen in the *distance* between the present (in which the historian exists) and the past (which no longer exists); in the *choices* the historian must make in order to draw coherence and meaning from an infinite and disorderly past; and in the *interpretive lenses* that the historian brings as a result of being who he or she is. History is created through the solutions to these problems. It takes shape neither as the result of the historian’s free-floating imagination, nor as the past presenting itself fully formed in an already coherent and meaningful story, ready to be “discovered” by the historian. Rather, history emerges from the tension between the historian’s creativity and the fragmentary traces of the past that anchor it.

Historical thinking is the creative process that historians go through to interpret the evidence of the past and generate the stories of history. It would be naive to expect to find one universal structure of historical thinking that would apply to all cultures for all time. Different cultures have various ways of understanding the relationships between past, present, and future. The differences between oral and written histories are only the most obvious of examples. Consider the enormous challenge of constructing histories for our own moment—the most complex era in which human beings have ever lived. How do we, how *can* we, construct histories in a time of unprecedented mixing, mobility, and communication among different cultures while living with an accelerating pace of change, and while being driven by global economies and technologies that are revolutionized within years rather than generations or centuries?

The historian’s expertise lies in being able to handle this challenge creatively. Historians become experts in dealing with the problems of history through their academic training. As part of a community of inquiry, they know when their colleagues violate the norms of evidence, when claims of significance are inadequately argued, and when causal explanations omit relevant conditions or events.¹ Sometimes historians explain the rules of the game and show us the process they follow to construct history, but more commonly we read

¹ Seixas, P. (1993). The community of inquiry as a basis for knowledge and learning: The case of history. *American Educational Research Journal* 30(2), 305–24.

in their histories only the end product—their historical narratives. In some sense, they are like the directors of a play. Too often, our students see only the play. We want them to peer backstage, to understand how the ropes and pulleys work that make the play possible.

Rethinking the Teaching of History

Some students have been lucky enough to learn history from a truly great teacher. Generally, however, what has passed for history curriculum in schools has rarely paid close attention to historians' methods and ways of thinking. As educators, we have been content to tell stories about the past and to have students tell them back in essays or, in the creative history classroom, in projects and skits. This approach does not aim high enough.

Science curriculum does not work this way. Students learn about the scientific method and do increasingly complex experiments so they can understand the basis of scientific claims. The mathematics curriculum does not work this way. Students learn to solve math problems at a young age and, over the course of their schooling, are expected to become increasingly sophisticated at doing so. Why shouldn't the history classroom have comparably high goals?

In answer to this challenge, we present the historical thinking concepts in this book as a starting point for rethinking how we teach history. These concepts constitute a six-part framework for helping students to think about how historians transform the past into history and to begin constructing history themselves. The concepts give us a vocabulary to use while talking with students about how histories are put together and what counts as a valid historical argument. These concepts are relevant for the most elementary histories—those that a child might tell—but also for the most advanced texts that an academic historian with specialized training might write. Thus, this framework allows for *progression*: students can use the concepts to move from depending on easily available, commonsense notions of the past to using the culture's most powerful intellectual tools for understanding history.

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Six Concepts of Historical Thinking

The ideas that we refer to as “the big six” historical thinking *concepts* reveal *problems* inherent to constructing history. When carefully considered and thoroughly analyzed, each historical thinking concept reveals a tension, or difficulty, that may be irresolvable in any ultimate way. Taking an historical perspective, for example, asks us to take the viewpoint of an historical actor whose worldview was likely very different from our own. But our reconstructions of the world of the past are inevitably products of our own frames of reference—we can't escape them. Historians are therefore forced to reach workable accommodations. To address the problem revealed by the historical perspectives concept, for example, historians make limited but justifiable inferences based on available primary source evidence. Naive historical thinkers generally fail even to recognize the problems related to constructing

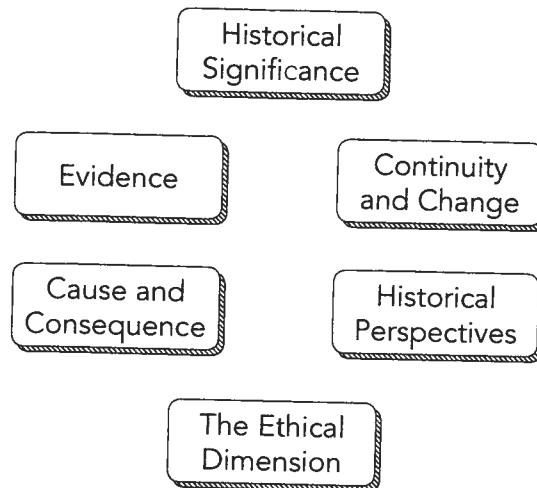


Figure 2 The six historical thinking concepts constitute a framework for helping students to think about how historians transform the past into history and to begin constructing history themselves. The concepts do not function independently; instead, they work together as various aspects of the thinking process.

history. Many school history curricula and most textbooks fail to define them. It should come as no surprise, then, that most students don't learn to grapple with the problems, and never learn the workable accommodations that historians use. Instead, they take intellectual shortcuts and, in so doing, miss out on both the challenge and much of the excitement of doing history.

If the concepts reveal inherent problems, confronting those problems can lead to competencies, to use a word common in current educational discourse. How successfully students grapple with the tensions, complexities, and problems embedded in historical thinking concepts is a basis for measuring their progress toward competency in historical thinking. The purpose of this book is to explore the concepts, articulate the problems, and suggest pathways for helping students achieve greater competency in historical thinking.

The six historical thinking concepts make no sense at all without the material, the topics, the substance, or what is often referred to as the "content" of history. For example, one key idea of the historical significance concept is that significance varies from group to group. This key idea makes sense only when tied to a real example: The year 1867 is significant for Canadians, but far less so for Americans (except, perhaps, for Alaskans, whose state was purchased from Russia in that year). Just as the concepts make no sense without historical content, historical content cannot be truly understood as anything other than a series of disconnected bits of data to be memorized without a grasp of the historical thinking concepts. The concepts and content are thus mutually dependent for historical understanding.

The six concepts can be presented as the strategies that historians use in response to six key problems. These problems are expressed in the questions that head the next six paragraphs.

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How Do We Decide What Is Important to Learn about the Past?

Historians **establish historical significance**. We can't know all of the past—there is simply too much there. Why do we care, today, about certain events, people, and trends in the past, and not others? Particular facts become significant when we see them as part of a larger narrative that is relevant to important issues that concern us today. Thus, for example, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham is significant for Canadians because it occupies a key place in the story of French–English relations in Canada, a narrative that continues to be a live issue for us today.

How Do We Know What We Know about the Past?

Historians **use primary source evidence**. Ultimately, the foundations for all claims in history are the traces left over from the times in which past events occurred. If we rely on the work of earlier historians, we do so knowing that these historians (or the historians *they* relied on) went back to primary sources. Making an historical claim that others can justifiably believe, then, requires finding, selecting, contextualizing, interpreting, and corroborating sources for an historical argument. For example, if we wanted to build an historical argument about wartime attitudes toward German Canadians, we might choose to refer to a reliable history of German immigration to Canada, a 1916 newspaper article from Berlin, Ontario (which would soon become Kitchener, Ontario), and a diary kept by a German immigrant during the period.

How Can We Make Sense of the Complex Flows of History?

Historians **examine continuity and change**. History is often defined as the story of change over time. But history is more complex: some things don't change at all; some things change quickly and then slowly; and, at any given moment, some things change while others remain the same. Sensitivity to all of these aspects of continuity and change is crucial to narrating history. For example, we might look for what *didn't* change over the tumultuous years of the French Revolution, or what *did* change through the placid 1950s in North America. Moreover, some changes have resulted in better living conditions for some groups of people, while leading to economic hardship, cultural impoverishment, or enslavement for others. The ideas of progress and decline are thus part of the discussion of continuity and change. Finally, periodization—the selection of a set of events that make up a period of history—helps make sense of the flows of continuity and change.

Why Do Events Happen, and What Are Their Impacts?

Historians **analyze cause and consequence**. Causation is fundamental to history, as it is to any storytelling: We want to know how certain conditions and actions led to others. Without a sense of causation, sets of events—even if organized chronologically—become mere disconnected lists. The role of human choice is a central problem here: How were particular decisions shaped, made possible, or constrained by the historical circumstances of the moment? How, in other words, does the interaction between human agency and existing conditions shape the course of events? For any event—as large as the colonization of India or as small as the birth of an individual child—we can trace both the conditions and the decisions that allowed, or precipitated, its taking place. Similarly, we can identify the short-term and long-term consequences that result from virtually any event.

How Can We Better Understand the People of the Past?

Historians **take historical perspectives**. “The past is a foreign country”² with its different social, cultural, intellectual, and even emotional contexts that shaped people’s lives and actions. Our ancestors were not simply early versions of us, differing only in their styles of clothing and their lack of cellphones. We can attempt to see through the eyes of the people of the past by making evidence-based inferences about what they thought and believed. Yet we examine the past through our own present-day lenses, with concerns and questions that arise from the present. Can we avoid “presentism,” the imposition of the present on the past? For example, what did it mean for Prime Minister John A. Macdonald to compare Chinese immigrant workers to “threshing machines” in 1886? The challenge is to figure out what Macdonald was thinking and why he used that metaphor, without calling him a racist and leaving it at that.

How Can History Help Us to Live in the Present?

Historians **attempt to understand the ethical dimension** of history. As we look back on the devastation of conquests or the injustices of enslavement, an ethical stance is unavoidable. By the same measure, an ethical judgment is involved when we try to decide what were the victories and achievements of the past. Yet those who were involved lived in circumstances so different from those of today that we must use caution in applying our own moral sensitivities. This raises a series of interrelated questions: How should we judge historical actors? What are the implications for us, today, of the horrors and heroisms of the past? How can we use the study of the past to inform judgments and actions on controversial issues in the present? All of these questions are relevant, for example, to an historical study of Canada’s residential school system for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children.

² The complete opening line of L.P. Hartley’s 1953 novel *The Go-Between* is “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

Our Approach to Historical Thinking in the Classroom

Our model of historical thinking—the six concepts—comes from the work of historians. It is rooted in how they tackle the difficult problems of understanding the past, how they make sense of it for today’s society and culture, and thus how they get their bearings in a continuum of past, present, and future. As history educators, our goal is to enable students to begin to do the same, in a step-by-step process that is challenging but not overwhelming. Otherwise, in their reading of history, they remain simply the passive, and often unwilling, recipients of someone else’s work.

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Seeing through the Eyes of an Historian: Thinking about the Concepts

The structure of *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts* flows directly from these ideas. We begin each chapter with an essay that explores one of the six concepts through the work of a particular Canadian historian. We made our selections in part on the basis of the historians’ academic reputations but also on their popular appeal. None of them is closeted in an ivory tower (or a dusty archive), oblivious to the issues that energize people today.

In addition to telling fascinating stories, each of our chosen authors opens a window for us to see the way they put their histories together, and how they got from the big questions of history, through the evidence that has been left from the past, to the interpretive achievement that we can recognize in the pages of their books.

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- In *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, historian Timothy Brook takes a detail from one of Johannes Vermeer’s paintings and shows its significance for the beginnings of globalization. We examine his work in order to understand historical significance in Chapter 1: Historical Significance.
- In *The Power of Place, the Problem of Time: Aboriginal Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Cauldron of Colonialism*, historian Keith Thor Carlson searches for, finds, and analyzes a mountain of evidence to answer a huge question about First Nations identities in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. Examination of Carlson’s use of evidence begins our consideration of the concept in Chapter 2: Evidence.
- Historian Margaret Macmillan showcases a turning point in world history in the title of her book, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*, and thereby opens her discussion of continuity and change surrounding the events that followed World War I. We use this discussion as our starting point in Chapter 3: Continuity and Change.
- Popular historian Charlotte Gray’s *Gold Diggers: Striking It Rich in the Klondike* features six “self-made” adventurers, thereby setting up a host of questions: How and when do individuals’ decisions cause historical change? What are the consequences down the road? How do conditions

shape those decisions in the first place? These questions frame our discussion of the concept in Chapter 4: Cause and Consequence.

- Historian and journalist Julie Wheelwright documents her efforts to peer into the world of her ancestor in *Esther: The Remarkable True Story of Esther Wheelwright: Puritan Child, Native Daughter, Mother Superior*. Attention to her meticulous historical methods sparks our consideration of the concept in Chapter 5: Historical Perspectives.
- And finally, in *The Book of Negroes*, historical novelist Lawrence Hill leads his readers on a painful journey through the historical crime that fuelled the early American economy—the enslavement of Africans. His confrontation with the ethical dimension of the slave trade opens the door to our own consideration of the concept in Chapter 6: The Ethical Dimension.

Marking a Path: The Guideposts

Each chapter essay is followed by discussion of the four or five “guideposts” to the concept that were revealed through discussion of the historian’s approach. Guideposts are the big ideas related to each concept—the “way in” to the historian’s way of thinking. They mark a path from the historian to the classroom. Of course, we don’t expect students to replicate the work of these mature academics and journalists who have spent years in training and a lifetime honing their craft. But, as in any apprenticeship, the masters provide the models.

Guideposts are the big ideas related to each concept—the “way in” to the historian’s way of thinking.

What *can* we expect from students? The guideposts pull from the historians’ methods what students need to know about the concept. We then translate these guideposts into students’ understandings. These appear in a table entitled “Generating Powerful Understandings,” which leads to the practical section of each chapter. Many students will arrive in the history classroom with very limited understandings of the way the discipline of history works. For each guidepost, we describe this possible “starting point” of limited understanding, as well as a demonstration of a powerful understanding of the guidepost.

Moving toward Powerful Understanding: Working with the Concepts

The final section of each chapter moves to the task of helping students develop competencies in each of the powerful understandings. This practical section includes (1) an activity for introducing the chapter concept to students, (2) guidance and three to five activities to help students develop powerful understandings of the guideposts, and (3) an activity to consolidate student understanding of the historical thinking concept. Some activities include blackline masters, which appear at the end of each chapter and in modifiable form on the DVD-ROM. The activities are either generic or model activities that you can revise to apply to the content of the courses you are teaching. As you work through the activities, students will generate measureable demonstrations of powerful understanding.

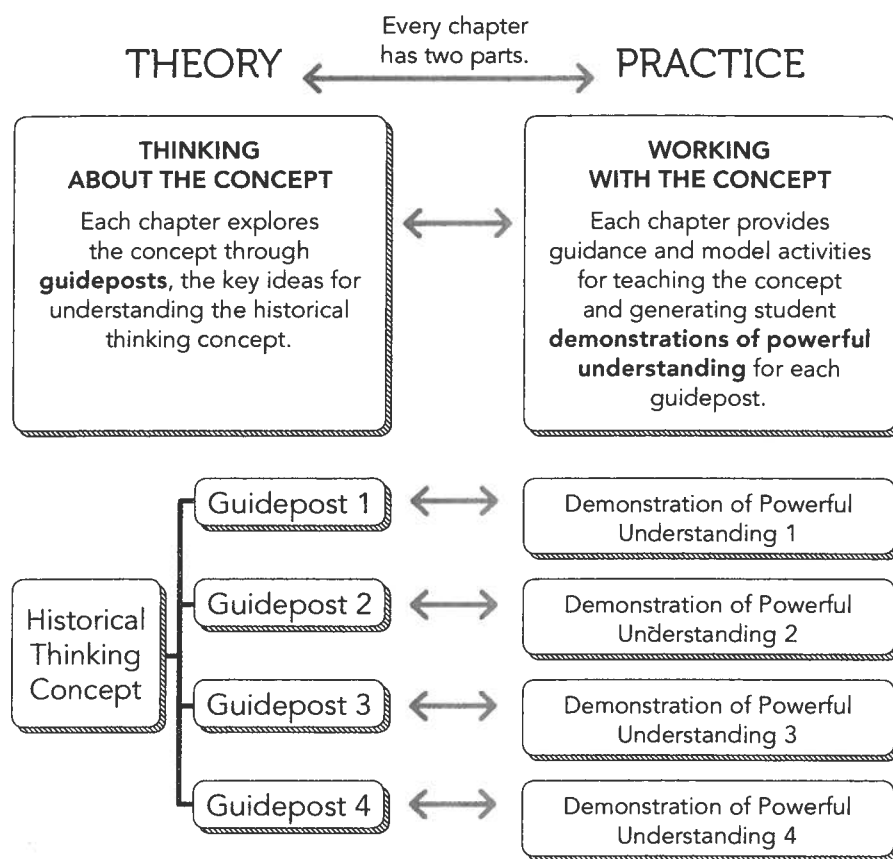


Figure 3 Every chapter helps you teach one historical thinking concept by providing the theory in the first half, followed by practical guidance. The two-way arrows indicate that you may wish to consult both sections as you expand the use of historical thinking in your history classroom.

Inquiry: Integral to Historical Thinking

Engaging students through thought-provoking questions is integral to our approach to teaching history. The right questions should prompt them to take an active stance toward engaging with the past. Inquiry questions demand more than memorizing pieces of information or looking up solutions. They involve grappling with evidence, weighing choices, and making interpretations.

So, we pose big questions to be answered and significant problems to be solved. These questions, which are woven into our lesson scaffolding, variously form the foundations for discussions, analyses, and whole lessons. Along the way, we provide students with guidance without eliminating the demand for creativity and deliberation. Like the historical thinking concepts, an inquiry-based approach takes as a model the questions that Brook asks about the origins of globalization, or that Carlson asks about First Nations identities, in a scaled-back and pedagogically appropriate way.

Doing history should be fun and serious, difficult and rewarding, meaningful and creative. If some of those elements are missing, students are not getting the whole package. We hope that you will find what follows useful in helping students develop active and fulfilling engagements with the past.

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Guideposts to Historical Thinking

Historical Significance *How do we decide what is important to learn about the past?*

- Guidepost 1** Events, people, or developments have historical significance if they **resulted in change**. That is, they had deep consequences, for many people, over a long period of time.
- Guidepost 2** Events, people, or developments have historical significance if they are **revealing**. That is, they shed light on enduring or emerging issues in history or contemporary life.
- Guidepost 3** Historical significance is **constructed**. That is, events, people, and developments meet the criteria for historical significance only when they are shown to occupy a **meaningful place in a narrative**.
- Guidepost 4** Historical significance **varies** over time and from group to group.

Evidence *How do we know what we know about the past?*

- Guidepost 1** History is **interpretation** based on **inferences** made from primary sources. Primary sources can be accounts, but they can also be traces, relics, or records.
- Guidepost 2** **Asking good questions** about a source can turn it into evidence.
- Guidepost 3** Sourcing often begins before a source is read, with questions about **who** created it and **when** it was created. It involves inferring from the source the author's or creator's **purposes, values, and worldview**, either conscious or unconscious.
- Guidepost 4** A source should be analyzed in relation to the **context of its historical setting**: the conditions and worldviews prevalent at the time in question.
- Guidepost 5** Inferences made from a source can never stand alone. They should always be **corroborated**—checked against other sources (primary or secondary).

Continuity and Change *How can we make sense of the complex flows of history?*

- Guidepost 1** Continuity and change are **interwoven**: both can exist together. **Chronologies**—the sequencing of events—can be a good starting point.
- Guidepost 2** Change is a **process**, with varying paces and patterns. **Turning points** are moments when the process of change shifts in direction or pace.
- Guidepost 3** **Progress and decline** are broad evaluations of change over time. Depending on the impacts of change, progress for one people may be decline for another.
- Guidepost 4** **Periodization** helps us organize our thinking about continuity and change. It is a process of interpretation, by which we decide which events or developments constitute a period of history.

Cause and Consequence *Why do events happen, and what are their impacts?*

- Guidepost 1** Change is driven by **multiple causes**, and results in **multiple consequences**. These create a complex web of interrelated short-term and long-term causes and consequences.
- Guidepost 2** The **causes** that lead to a particular historical event **vary in their influence**, with some being more important than others.
- Guidepost 3** Events result from the interplay of two types of factors: (1) **historical actors**, who are people (individuals or groups) who take actions that cause historical events, and (2) the social, political, economic, and cultural **conditions** within which the actors operate.
- Guidepost 4** Historical actors cannot always predict the effect of conditions, opposing actions, and unforeseen reactions. These have the effect of generating **unintended consequences**.
- Guidepost 5** The events of history were **not inevitable**, any more than those of the future are. Alter a single action or condition, and an event might have turned out differently.

Historical Perspectives *How can we better understand the people of the past?*

- Guidepost 1** An ocean of **difference** can lie between current **worldviews** (beliefs, values, and motivations) and those of earlier periods of history.
- Guidepost 2** It is important to avoid **presentism**—the imposition of present ideas on actors in the past. Nonetheless, cautious reference to universal human experience can help us relate to the experiences of historical actors.
- Guidepost 3** The perspectives of historical actors are best understood by considering their **historical context**.
- Guidepost 4** **Taking the perspective of historical actors** means inferring how people felt and thought in the past. It **does not mean identifying with** those actors. Valid **inferences** are those **based on evidence**.
- Guidepost 5** Different historical actors have **diverse perspectives** on the events in which they are involved. Exploring these is key to understanding historical events.

The Ethical Dimension *How can history help us to live in the present?*

- Guidepost 1** Authors make **implicit or explicit** ethical judgments in writing historical narratives.
- Guidepost 2** Reasoned ethical judgments of past actions are made by taking into account the **historical context** of the actors in question.
- Guidepost 3** When making ethical judgments, it is important to **be cautious about imposing contemporary standards** of right and wrong on the past.
- Guidepost 4** A fair assessment of the ethical implications of history can inform us of our **responsibilities to remember and respond** to contributions, sacrifices, and injustices of the past.
- Guidepost 5** Our understanding of history can help us make **informed judgments** about contemporary issues, but only when we **recognize the limitations** of any direct “lessons” from the past.