

From Indicator to Skill: Identifying Disciplinary Thinking in Social Studies Indicators

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Understanding social studies indicators requires more than identifying the content students will learn. Indicators also communicate the type of thinking students must demonstrate. In secondary classrooms, this thinking is reflected through disciplinary skills, how students use knowledge to reason about historical, political, geographic, and economic ideas.

Identifying these skills is essential for designing instruction that moves beyond content coverage and toward meaningful student thinking. This shift helps teachers move from identifying what students will learn to understanding how students are expected to think.

What is a Disciplinary Skill?

In social studies, a skill describes how students think with content, not just what they know. These skills require students to engage in reasoning such as:

- Explaining relationships between events
- Analyzing causes and effects
- Comparing perspectives
- Evaluating historical significance
- Constructing evidence-based arguments

While content provides the context for learning, the skill defines the thinking students must apply. Without attention to the skill, instruction may focus on recalling information rather than developing deeper understanding.

Using Verbs to Identify Skills

Indicator verbs often signal the primary skill students are expected to demonstrate. Words such as *analyze*, *explain*, *compare*, *evaluate*, and *examine* point to the type of reasoning required.

However, identifying the verb is only the first step. Teachers must also consider what the verb requires students to do with the content. For example:

- *Explain* requires describing relationships and processes
- *Analyze* requires breaking down information and identifying connections
- *Evaluate* requires making judgments supported by evidence

Understanding the thinking behind the verb helps clarify the expectations of the indicator.

Look for Implied Thinking

In secondary social studies, indicators often include expectations that are not explicitly stated. Students may be expected to:

- Analyze historical context
- Consider multiple perspectives
- Evaluate the reliability of sources
- Support claims with evidence

These disciplinary practices are often embedded within the indicator, even when they are not directly written. Recognizing this implied thinking helps teachers fully understand the level of reasoning students must demonstrate.

Recognizing Multiple Layers of Skill

Many indicators include more than one skill. An indicator may require students to:

- Analyze a historical development
- Explain relationships between factors
- Evaluate impact or significance
- Support conclusions with evidence

Identifying these layers ensures that instruction addresses the full complexity of the indicator rather than focusing on a single skill in isolation.

Connecting Skill to Evidence

A critical question for teachers is:

What evidence would demonstrate that students have mastered this skill?

In secondary classrooms, students demonstrate their thinking through observable evidence such as:

- Written explanations
- Source analysis
- Structured discussions or debates
- Evidence-based arguments

The format may vary, but the response must clearly show the reasoning described in the indicator. When skills are clearly identified, it becomes easier to determine what student work should look like.

Avoiding the Content-Only Trap

A common challenge in social studies classrooms occurs when instruction emphasizes content without explicitly addressing the skill. Students may remember key facts, events, or dates but struggle to analyze relationships or explain significance.

When this happens, students possess information but have not yet demonstrated the thinking required by the indicator.

Identifying the skill helps prevent this mismatch by ensuring that instruction focuses on both what students learn and how they think.

Example in Practice

Consider the following indicator:

Explain the economic, political, and social factors surrounding the American Revolution.

The primary skill is explaining relationships between historical factors and events. The inclusion of economic, political, and social factors requires students to consider multiple dimensions of causation.

Students must do more than recall information about taxation or colonial governance. They must explain how these factors interacted to create conflict between Great Britain and the American colonies.

Evidence of mastery might include:

- A written explanation describing how taxation policies affected colonial economic interests
- A discussion connecting colonial political grievances to British actions
- A structured response explaining how multiple factors contributed to revolutionary sentiment.

In each case, students demonstrate reasoning about relationships, not just recall of facts.

Conclusion

Identifying the skills embedded in social studies indicators allows teachers to design instruction that is more focused, aligned, and rigorous. When students are asked to demonstrate reasoning, explain relationships, and support their thinking with evidence, they engage more deeply with content and develop the disciplinary skills essential to social studies learning.

Reflection and Application

- When you read an indicator, how do you determine the skill students must demonstrate?
- What thinking is implied in the indicator, even if it is not explicitly stated?
- What type of student evidence would demonstrate mastery of the skill?
- How might identifying the skill change the tasks you design for students?