

Unpacking a Standard with Purpose: From Expectations to Instruction

Tra'Neisha LaRoche
Social Studies Subject Matter Expert

Teachers often begin planning by asking, “*What content do I need to cover?*” While content is essential, effective instruction begins with a different question:

“What do students need to know, understand, and be able to do to demonstrate mastery of this standard?”

Unpacking a standard answers that question. It moves planning beyond simply identifying historical topics to clarifying the concepts, skills, historical thinking, and evidence students must demonstrate.

Effective unpacking goes beyond identifying content or highlighting action verbs. It requires teachers to think carefully about the knowledge students must acquire, the Historical Thinking Skill they must develop, and the evidence they will produce to demonstrate mastery. When those elements are clearly identified before instruction begins, lesson planning becomes more focused, assessment becomes more intentional, and differentiation becomes easier to implement.

When combined with the Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs), unpacking transforms a standard into a practical instructional roadmap for designing aligned learning targets, instructional tasks, and assessments that maintain rigorous expectations while supporting every learner.

Step 1: Start with the Standard Statement

Begin by reading the full standard and identifying:

- **Key Concepts** (the essential people, events, ideas, themes, or concepts students must understand): These are usually the nouns in the standard.
- **Key Skills** (what students should do with these concepts): These are usually the verbs (for example, analyze, summarize, evaluate, or compare).

For example, USHC 4.P asks students to “summarize the changing role of the government in the economy during the period 1917–1945.” The concept is the government’s role in the economy, and the skill is summarizing how that role changed over time. Beginning with the standard ensures that every instructional decision remains aligned to the intended learning outcome.

Step 2: Identify the Historical Thinking Skill

Each indicator includes a letter code that signals the historical thinking skill it targets. Historical Thinking Skills shape how students investigate, interpret, and communicate historical understanding. Because every indicator includes an embedded Historical Thinking Skill, identifying that skill early helps ensure that instruction develops historical reasoning rather than just covering historical content.

For example, the “P” in USHC 4.P stands for **Periodization**, which refers to how historians summarize, analyze, and assess historical developments to define eras. To demonstrate mastery of periodization, students should:

- Identify major turning points in U.S. history
- Understand the characteristics that define an era
- Describe how historians categorize events into eras
- Summarize major developments according to historical eras and overarching themes

Recognizing the embedded skills helps you anticipate:

- The level of reasoning required
- The type of evidence students may need
- The kind of tasks or questions that best fit

Once you’ve identified both the content and the Historical Thinking Skill, the next step is determining what successful performance looks like.

Step 3: Identify What Success Looks Like

Now examine how student performance progresses across the PLDs. Ask yourself:

- What distinguishes one level from the next?
- How does the level of thinking deepen across levels?
- What are students doing with the content at each level?

For instance, in USHC.4.P:

- At **Minimally Meets Expectations**, students describe the changing role of the government.

- At **Meets Expectations**, they summarize that change using defined historical characteristics.
- At **Exceeds Expectations**, they analyze evidence and apply multistep reasoning to draw conclusions.

Understanding this progression tells you how to scaffold for each level of learner.

Step 4: Write Learning Targets That Reflect the PLDs

Translate each PLD level into a student-facing learning target. Well-written learning targets translate standards into language students can understand while preserving the rigor of the original expectation.

For example:

- **Minimally Meets:** I can describe how the government's role in the economy changed between 1917-1945.
- **Meets:** I can summarize how and why the government's economic role changed during major turning points.
- **Exceeds:** I can analyze evidence and justify how different events reflected changing government roles over time and contributed to broader historical eras.

These targets make success criteria visible to students while providing teachers with a clear focus for instruction, formative assessment, and feedback.

Step 5: Design Tiered Activities or Tasks

Now that you understand what the standard demands and how performance progresses, you can:

- Create **foundational activities** that build initial understanding.
- Build **mid-level tasks** aligned to Meet Expectations.
- Extend learning through **analysis tasks** that align to Exceeds Expectations.

Rather than creating different standards for different students, provide scaffolded supports and multiple entry points that help all students work toward the same rigorous expectation.

For example, for USHC.4.P:

- **Minimally Meets:** Complete a timeline with government actions in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, identifying whether each action increased or decreased federal involvement.
- **Meets:** Write a paragraph summarizing how government roles in the economy evolved across the Great Depression and World War II, including at least one cause-and-effect relationship.
- **Exceeds:** Analyze two primary sources, one from the New Deal era and one from WWII, and write a short argument explaining how these examples demonstrate a shift toward a command economy. Justify your claim using evidence and reference the characteristics of each era.

Final Thoughts

Intentional instructional planning begins with unpacking the standard. By identifying the essential concepts, Historical Thinking Skills, and expectations for student performance, teachers can design learning experiences that remain aligned to the standard while supporting learners at different stages of growth.

When standards are unpacked with purpose, differentiation becomes more intentional, assessments become more meaningful, and students are better prepared to demonstrate increasingly sophisticated historical thinking. Ultimately, unpacking a standard transforms it from a statement of learning expectations into a practical guide for daily instructional decision-making.