

Designing Learning Experiences for Historical Thinking

Tra'Neisha LaRoche
Social Studies Subject Matter Expert

You've unpacked your standard. You've analyzed its cognitive demand and Historical Thinking Skill. You've aligned or selected assessment items. Now comes the most important bridge: instructional alignment.

Designing instruction that reflects EOCEP expectations does not mean teaching to the test. It means intentionally planning learning experiences that develop the historical thinking, content knowledge, and reasoning students need to demonstrate mastery. Effective instruction begins with the historical thinking embedded in the standard and aligns instructional activities, sources, differentiation, and assessment to that same thinking.

In this article, you'll learn how to build or adapt coherent learning experiences using a six-step planning process. Along the way, you'll see an exemplar built from the indicator USHC.1.CX: Contextualize significant republican developments within North America's connections to the Atlantic World.

Before You Begin

Before using this planning process, make sure you have:

- ☐ A selected U.S. History indicator
- ☐ The South Carolina U.S. History Alignment Guide
- ☐ The indicator's embedded Historical Thinking Skill
- ☐ The intended Depth of Knowledge (DOK)
- ☐ The corresponding Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs)

These resources provide the foundation for designing coherent, standards-aligned instruction.

Step 1: Revisit Your Indicator and PLDs

Start by reviewing your chosen indicator and its associated PLDs. What knowledge and skills are students expected to demonstrate at the Minimally Meets, Meets, and Exceeds levels?

For example, the PLDs for USHC.1.CX say that students who

- **Minimally Meet** can describe significant republican developments in context.
- **Meet** can connect those developments to historical themes and developments
- **Exceeds** can analyze multiple developments and justify conclusions using evidence

Exemplar:

A student working at “Meets” would explain how Enlightenment ideas shaped the Declaration of Independence.

A student working at “Exceeds” might use Locke and the Magna Carta to justify how those ideas evolved across multiple documents, arguing how they contributed to a shift in American political identity.

Step 2: Identify the Thinking Skill and DOK

Each USHC indicator ends in a code that reflects its Historical Thinking Skill. These skills determine what kind of reasoning students must practice, not just what they must know.

Historical Thinking Skill	Sample Task Format
CE - Causation	Sort causes and effects, write a claim explaining which had the greatest impact
CO - Comparison	Compare two political systems or documents and justify differences
CX - Contextualization	Place a development in a broader historical context and explain its significance
P - Periodization	Define turning points and justify era divisions
CC - Continuity & Change	Identify what stayed the same vs. what changed over time and why

E - Evidence

Analyze a source and support a claim using evidence from it

Then determine the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) level your indicator requires:

- DOK 1: Recall of facts
- DOK 2: Basic reasoning and application
- DOK 3: Strategic reasoning, analysis, and justification

Your activity should fall at DOK 2 or 3, with scaffolds to help students progress between levels.

Exemplar

The CX skill for USHC.1.CX requires students to explain how Enlightenment political ideas in Europe shaped American political documents. A DOK 3 task might ask students to support the claim using specific excerpts from sources like the Magna Carta, Locke, and the Declaration of Independence.

Step 3: Design Learning Experiences That Develop the Historical Thinking Skill

Before designing classroom learning experiences, identify the instructional anchor that will organize the learning. An effective anchor, such as a compelling question, turning point, historical development, theme, or historical problem, helps students see how individual tasks fit into a coherent investigation rather than a series of disconnected activities.

Now design learning experiences that require students to apply the Historical Thinking Skill rather than simply recall information.

Exemplar:

You assign students excerpts from John Locke’s “Two Treatises of Government,” the Magna Carta, and the Declaration of Independence. Students must complete a graphic organizer that:

- “Identifies shared principles”
- “Traces their evolution”
- “Writes a claim explaining how these developments contextualize the emergence of American republicanism”

This task activates both contextualization and evidence use.

Step 4: Use PLDs to Tier and Scaffold

After building the core task, use the PLDs to create entry points and stretch goals.

PLD Level	Task + Scaffold
Minimally Meets	Match Enlightenment thinkers to ideas using an anchor chart or visual reference
Meets	Explain how Enlightenment ideas appear in the Declaration using sentence stems and a two-column organizer (idea → example)
Exceeds	Analyze multiple sources and justify a conclusion using multistep reasoning, supported with a graphic organizer and rubric checklist

This ensures every student works toward the same historical thinking while receiving appropriate supports and opportunities for extension. Scaffolds should support access to historical thinking, not lower the rigor of the task.

Step 5: Integrate Primary and Secondary Sources

To develop evidence-based historical reasoning, incorporate primary and secondary sources that require students to analyze, corroborate, and support historical claims. Purposefully selected primary and secondary sources deepen historical thinking and prepare students to analyze evidence in ways that mirror EOCEP expectations.

Exemplar:

Students are given:

- “A Magna Carta excerpt on limited government”
- “A Locke quote on natural rights”
- “A Jefferson excerpt from the Declaration”

Students must connect all three and explain how ideas developed over time.

Step 6: Make Thinking Visible

Whatever the format, written, verbal, visual, your activity should require students to show how they think, not just what they know. Students should regularly explain, justify, defend, or revise their thinking so teachers can gather evidence of learning throughout instruction, not just at the end of a lesson.

This might mean:

- Writing a short constructed response
- Discussing and defending choices
- Organizing claims using a visual model

Exemplar:

Students complete the graphic organizer, then write a short constructed response:

“Using evidence from at least two sources, explain how Enlightenment political ideas helped shape American republicanism.”

Sample Student Responses Across PLD Levels

To help you visualize how student thinking develops across PLD levels, here’s a set of example responses based on the exemplar task you just studied. These samples align to USHC.1.CX and demonstrate how different students might respond to this prompt:

Using evidence from at least two sources (e.g., Magna Carta, Locke, Declaration of Independence), explain how Enlightenment ideas helped shape American republicanism.

PLD Level

Sample Student Response

Does Not Meet	“The Declaration said people have rights. The Magna Carta also had rules. The colonists didn’t like England.”
Minimally Meets	“The Magna Carta and John Locke talked about ideas like rights and freedom. The Declaration also has those ideas. The colonists used these ideas to make the government fair.”
Meets	“The Declaration of Independence uses Enlightenment ideas, like natural rights and government by consent. These also show up in older documents, like the Magna Carta. This shows that American ideas about government came from earlier political traditions.”
Exceeds	“The Magna Carta limited the king’s power. John Locke argued that people had natural rights and governments needed their consent. Jefferson used both ideas in the Declaration of Independence. These examples show how American government ideas came from political traditions in Europe.”

Lesson Snapshot: Putting the Six Steps into Action

The planning decisions from the exemplar are summarized below to show how the six-step process comes together in a coherent instructional plan.

Element	Description
Indicator	USHC.1.CX - Contextualize significant republican developments within North America’s connection to the Atlantic World
Thinking Skill	Contextualization (CX)
DOK	3
Instructional Anchor	How did Enlightenment ideas shape the development of American republicanism?
PLD Scaffold	• Minimally Meets: Match Enlightenment thinkers to ideas • Meets: Explain how ideas appear in the Declaration • Exceeds: Analyze and support conclusions using multistep reasoning and evidence ○ Sources: Magna Carta excerpt, Locke’s Two Treatises,” Declaration of Independence ○ Student Task: Graphic organizer + constructed response explaining how Enlightenment ideas shaped American republicanism

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- Output: Claim supported by evidence from at least two sources

Final Thought

When you start with what students are expected to do, and design instruction that helps them practice doing it, you close the gap between instruction and performance. The key isn't complexity. It's clarity, alignment, and thinking.

Let the standard identify the historical thinking. Let your instructional anchor organize the learning. Let the PLDs guide differentiation. Let assessment provide evidence of student thinking. When these elements work together, instruction becomes coherent, purposeful, and aligned to meaningful historical learning.

Apply Your Learning

Use the planning process from this article to review a lesson you currently teach.

- Which Historical Thinking Skill drives the lesson?
- What instructional anchor organizes the learning?
- How do your learning experiences require students to practice the intended historical thinking rather than simply recall content?
- How do your scaffolds support all learners while maintaining the intended rigor?
- What is one revision you could make to strengthen alignment between instruction and assessment?

Looking for companion planning templates? Pair this article with the *Instructional Planning Tool* and *PLD-Tiered Task Template* from the *From Standards to Success* series to put these planning steps into practice.