

Framing Inquiry: Designing a Coherent Learning Experience

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Coherent U.S. History instruction develops historical thinking across a purposeful sequence of learning rather than through isolated activities or assessment items. In this article, you'll explore how to organize a 2–3-lesson learning experience around a high-leverage instructional anchor, sequence inquiry through Hook → Explore → Apply → Synthesize, integrate formative assessment, use Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs) to inform instructional support, and design a culminating evidence-centered task.

Sequencing for Inquiry

Organize your 2–3-lesson learning experience into four phases: Hook, Explore, Apply, Synthesize, each aligned to the historical thinking required by the indicator and your instructional anchor:

- **Hook:** Activate prior knowledge and spark curiosity.
Example: Show students a political cartoon from 1820 and ask, “What crisis do you see brewing?”
- **Explore:** Dive into primary and secondary sources to uncover facts and perspectives.
Example: In small groups, analyze the Missouri Compromise text and a contemporary map of free/slave states.
- **Apply:** Practice the historical thinking skill with scaffolded tasks.
Example: Use an EBSR checkpoint: Part A asks for the Compromise’s purpose; Part B demands evidence from the text.
- **Synthesize:** Bring the learning together in an evidence-centered task that requires students to apply the intended historical thinking.
Example: Students write a short constructed response explaining how the Compromise foreshadowed later sectional conflicts.

Organizing your learning experience this way ensures each activity builds purposefully toward deeper understanding and the final performance task.

Formative Item Integration

Strategically drop in EOCEP-style checks to gauge learning and guide instruction:

- **SR Check:** Use a selected-response item when it provides an efficient measure of the intended content understanding or historical reasoning.
- **EBSR Check:** Use a two-part item when students need to connect an answer or conclusion with supporting evidence or reasoning.

- **TE/TECR Check:** Use an appropriate technology-enhanced format when students need to organize, classify, sequence, or analyze historical information.

By embedding purposeful formative checks, you can gather evidence of the historical thinking students are developing and use that evidence to adjust instruction and support before synthesis.

Using PLDs to Inform Differentiation

Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs) can help educators anticipate differences in the depth of students' historical reasoning, evidence use, and independence while maintaining a common rigorous task and historical thinking target. Rather than assigning different levels of cognitive demand to different students, use PLDs to plan responsive supports and extensions.

For example, within a common evidence-centered task:

- **Minimally Meets Support:** Provide structured source annotations, guiding questions, or sentence frames that help students identify relevant evidence and develop the intended historical reasoning.
- **Meets Support:** Provide opportunities for students to organize and explain relevant evidence with increasing independence.
- **Exceeds Extension:** Prompt students to deepen the same historical reasoning by connecting, corroborating, or evaluating additional evidence.

These supports maintain a consistent historical thinking expectation while providing different levels of structure and independence based on student need.

Culminating Performance Task

The culminating task should require students to apply the same historical thinking and evidence use intentionally developed throughout the learning experience.

Prompt Example:

"Using the 1820 Compromise text and the state-line map, evaluate how the Missouri Compromise addressed sectional tensions and set the stage for future conflicts. Support your answer with evidence and multistep reasoning."

Design Tips:

- Align the task to the historical thinking and cognitive demand required by the selected indicator.
- Use clear scoring criteria that describe the quality of historical reasoning and evidence use; consult PLDs to anticipate student performance and inform feedback and support.
- Require students to synthesize relevant content, evidence, and historical reasoning.

Reflection & Revision

End with an opportunity for students and educators to revisit performance:

- **Student Self-Evaluation:** Students reflect on the quality of their historical reasoning and evidence use using the task's scoring criteria and set a goal for continued growth.
- **Teacher Adjustment Plan:** Analyze formative assessment evidence to identify pacing or scaffold gaps, then adjust the next iteration of the learning experience.

By making reflection and revision explicit, educators can use evidence of student thinking to strengthen future instruction. Over time, this cycle helps students develop historical reasoning they can transfer to new sources, questions, and historical contexts.