

Teaching with Instructional Anchors: How to Organize Content to Deepen Thinking and Strengthen Alignment

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Every standard in the U.S. History and the Constitution course represents a span of years, a set of concepts, and a collection of developments. But what makes a lesson stick, and support EOCEP success, isn't just what is covered. It's how it's taught.

Standard 2 is centered on expansion, conflict, and reunion. Teaching this standard well requires more than covering a sequence of events. Students need an organizing concept that helps them connect historical developments, evidence, and the historical thinking required by the indicator.

An instructional anchor provides that organizing structure. Depending on the indicator, an effective anchor might be a turning point, historical development, recurring theme, compelling question, constitutional issue, historical problem, or another organizing concept. This article models the process using the Missouri Compromise as an instructional anchor for USHC.2.CE. Although the Missouri Compromise functions as a turning point, the same planning process can be applied across Standard 2 using the type of instructional anchor that best supports the historical thinking required by each indicator.

Step 1: Choose a Meaningful Anchor for Each Indicator

Begin with the historical thinking required by the indicator, then select an instructional anchor that helps organize the content students need to apply that thinking. The anchor might be a turning point, historical development, recurring theme, compelling question, constitutional issue, historical problem, or other organizing concept appropriate to the indicator.

Indicator	Suggested Anchor	Why It Works
2.CO	Comparison of labor and economy in the North and South	Illustrates deep economic and cultural divergence; connects directly to causes of sectional tension and Civil War.
2.CE	Missouri Compromise	First major national attempt to resolve slavery in westward expansion; links geography, politics, and sectional balance; sets a precedent for future breakdowns in compromise.
2.P	Technological change: The cotton gin	Demonstrates the relationship between innovation and the growth of slavery; connects to plantation economy and economic dependency.
2.CX	Dred Scott decision or 14th Amendment	Explores the federal government's failure or later attempt to define and protect citizenship and rights; powerful anchor for natural rights and government role.
2.CC	Reconstruction	Represents federal effort to reunify the nation and expand

	Amendments	rights; encapsulates the post-war redefinition of citizenship and union.
2.E	Civil War primary source set (Lincoln, soldiers, press)	Provides rich opportunity for evidence analysis and contextual thinking; supports multiple perspectives and source evaluation.

For example, USHC.2.CE asks students to evaluate the causes and consequences of economic and geographic expansion. One strong anchor is the Missouri Compromise, which reflects how territorial growth fueled debates over slavery and sectional power. Other indicators may be better organized around a historical development, recurring theme, compelling question, constitutional issue, historical problem, or another high-leverage anchor.

Step 2: Define the Historical Thinking Skill

Each indicator includes a specific historical thinking skill. This should shape the type of thinking and reasoning students are asked to do.

Use this chart to guide your lesson framing:

Skill Code	Thinking Skill	Student Focus
CE	Causation	Analyze causes and effects of events or developments
CO	Comparison	Compare across regions, groups, or time periods
CX	Contextualization	Situate developments within broader historical contexts
CC	Continuity & Change	Identify and explain patterns of change or continuity over time
P	Periodization	Define and evaluate historical eras and turning points
E	Use of Evidence	Analyze sources to support claims or justify interpretations

For USHC.2.CE, your questions and tasks should require students to explain why expansion occurred, what its effects were, and why it mattered, not just recall what happened.

Step 3: Align the Content Using the SC Social Studies Alignment Guide

Once you've selected an instructional anchor, the next step is to identify the content that best supports the historical thinking required by the indicator. Use the *South Carolina U.S. History Alignment Guide* to locate the relevant events, developments, and policies tied to your indicator and anchor.

For example, if your anchor is the Missouri Compromise (1820) for USHC.2.CE, consult the *Alignment Guide* to determine which events connect to the causes and consequences of geographic and economic expansion.

Relevant content includes:

- Louisiana Purchase (1803) - Territorial growth that raised questions about slavery in the West
- Growing and diversifying population - fueled westward migration and settlement pressure
- Technological advancements - cotton gin, factory system and transportation that supported regional economies
- American System (1815) - Federal attempt to unify economic growth
- Missouri Compromise (1820) - first national political compromise on slavery expansion
- Monroe Doctrine (1823) - Framed expansion within foreign policy goals

Teachers may also draw on additional content, such as the Indian Removal Act, Compromise of 1850, or John Brown's Raid, for broader context, comparison, or continuity, depending on the historical thinking skill they're targeting (e.g., causation, comparison, change over time).

Step 4: Map the Content Around the Instructional Anchor

Before asking students to analyze the relationships surrounding an instructional anchor such as the Missouri Compromise, give them the context and evidence needed to understand why it mattered and what resulted.

Visual Tool: Content Mapping Around an Anchor

Role in the Lesson	Aligned Content
Causes	• Louisiana Purchase (1803) • Expansion of slavery into new territories • Growing sectional and political divisions
Instructional Anchor	Missouri Compromise (1820) – first major legislative attempt to resolve the expansion of slavery
Short-Term Effects	• Maintained balance of power • Temporarily eased sectional tensions

	Set precedent for future compromises
Long-Term Consequences	- Compromise of 1850 - Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) - Heightened tensions leading to the Civil War
EOCEP Alignment	- Historical Thinking Skill: Causation (CE) - DOK 2-3 item potential - More advanced performance demonstrates multistep reasoning
Suggested Source Materials	- Excerpt from the Missouri Compromise legislation - Map of free vs. slave states - Period newspaper editorial or speech

Step 5: Plan PLD-Informed Supports

Use the Performance Level Descriptors to anticipate differences in student reasoning, evidence use, and independence on a common rigorous task. Then plan appropriate scaffolds, feedback, and extensions while maintaining the same historical thinking goal for all students.

To bring this step to life, let's walk through an example that connects a common evidence-centered task to anticipated student performance and PLD-informed supports.

Prompt for All Levels:

Use at least two sources (e.g., a map and excerpt) to evaluate how the Missouri Compromise addressed the expansion of slavery and sectional division. Support your response with evidence.

PLD Level	What Student Performance May Look Like	Support Tools	Sample Student Response
Does Not Meet	Minimal or inaccurate understanding of the compromise or task	Basic sentence starters	"The Missouri Compromise was about slavery. It was a law that didn't work."
Minimally Meets	Identifies one cause and one effect with limited explanation or evidence.	Sentence stems, cause/effect template, labeled U.S. map	"The Missouri Compromise let Missouri join as a slave state and Maine as a free one. It tried to keep things equal."
Meets	Explains how the Missouri Compromise addressed sectional conflict and supports the explanation	Timeline, comparison organizer, background	"The Missouri Compromise tried to solve sectionalism by keeping the balance of free and slave states. But it only worked for a while and didn't

	with relevant evidence.	summary	fix the bigger problem.”
Exceeds	Develops a well-supported explanation that connects the Compromise to broader or longer-term sectional consequences using evidence across sources.	Source set, guided claim-evidence chart, scaffolded rubric	“The Missouri Compromise helped keep the balance between slave and free states, but it only worked for a while. Later events like the Kansas-Nebraska Act showed that compromise wouldn’t last. This proves that westward expansion caused more division than unity.”

Step 6: Ensure Assessment Mirrors Instruction

Even when classroom tasks are rich and multistep, they should also help students become comfortable with the kinds of thinking and structure they’ll face on the U.S. History EOCEP. After designing the evidence-centered task, consider how assessment can provide evidence of the same historical thinking students practiced during instruction while also reflecting appropriate EOCEP item structures and cognitive demand.

Ask yourself:

- Could this task be adapted into an EOCEP item type (e.g., selected response, evidence-based selected response, drag-and-drop)?
- Does it require students to analyze a historical development using multiple sources?
- Does it reflect the historical thinking skill and DOK level targeted in the indicator?
- Does it ask for conclusions, comparisons, or contextual reasoning supported by evidence?

Quick Example:

A classroom task on the Missouri Compromise might ask:

“Use at least two sources (e.g., a map and excerpt) to evaluate how the Missouri Compromise addressed the expansion of slavery and sectional division. Support your response with evidence.”

That same thinking could appear on the EOCEP as:

Part A: What was a key purpose of the Missouri Compromise?

- A. To abolish slavery in all U.S. territories
- B. To grant citizenship to enslaved people
- C. To maintain a political balance between free and slave states**
- D. To repeal earlier compromises about slavery

Part B: Which source best supports your answer to Part A?

- A. 1820 Congressional map showing free/slave state division**
- B. Excerpt from the Emancipation Proclamation
- C. 14th Amendment (1868)
- D. John Brown's speech at Harper's Ferry

Designing tasks that mirror EOCEP structure builds not only historical understanding, but also test readiness.

Final Reflection: Teaching for Transfer

This model centers on one turning point, one thinking skill, and one instructional pathway, but the framework is flexible. Teaching for transfer means students apply historical thinking across content and question types.

Each lesson should:

- Emphasize historical thinking
- Engage students in analyzing, not just recalling
- Build from scaffolded support toward increasingly independent historical reasoning
- Use assessments that reflect the historical thinking practiced during instruction and appropriate EOCEP expectations

You don't need a new strategy for every indicator, just a clear structure that helps students see patterns, apply skills, and explain historical significance.

Apply this planning process across Standard 2 by selecting the instructional anchor and evidence-centered learning experiences that best support the historical thinking required by each indicator. Over time, you'll build a course that scaffolds both deep understanding and test readiness.