

AP United States History

Summer Task: “Doing History”

2. How the Historian Inquires into the Past

Paul L. Ward, a past executive secretary of the American Historical Association, history is “... inquiry, examining a piece of the past systematically in hopes of getting an answer to questions which honestly matter to us.” But how would this be done?

Most historians start with a question on a topic of interest to themselves. Frequently, these questions are influenced by the personal experiences of the historian. They then proceed to seek out the answers to their questions in a systematic way. In this, the historian is little different from the scientist. They first must develop a hypothesis and find the evidence that validates it or causes it to be further revised.

The process involves a number of steps:

- Formulate the hypotheses (a tentative answer to a question)
- Seek out and accumulate data to provide evidence
- Interpret the data – How does the data “answer” the question?

How does the historian know what data to look for? How will they know that they have not overlooked something vital? How will they relate one fact to other facts? These are the issues involved in forming hypotheses.

These issues are the focus of the essay “Social Science Concepts and Analytical Questions”. While you are reading, ask yourself the following questions [these do not need to be answered as part of the graded task]:

1. What are concepts? What are analytical questions? How are concepts and analytical questions related?
2. Why do investigators ask analytical questions?
3. Restate, in your own words, the concepts listed in the essay. What other questions do these concepts suggest?
4. If you were to study the laws of an ancient kingdom, how would you apply the analytical questions listed in this reading?

Modified from:

Bartlett, I., Fenton, E., Fowler, D., & Mandelbaum, S. (1969). An introduction to the study of history. In *A new history of the United States* (pp. 1 – 16) [Introduction]. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

Social Science Concepts and Analytical Questions

[Source: Bartlett, pp. 4 – 5; information in brackets updated original text]

How would you go about answering the question: “Why did the Roman Empire decline?” The problem is so complex that it is difficult to know where to begin. Some obvious questions will occur to you. Did the government weaken? Did the economy collapse? Did something disrupt the social structure? Most of us can think in terms of major divisions of a society – government, the economy and social structure. In the case of Rome, the government had indeed become weak. It could no longer enforce its own laws. The economy had collapsed. Food production had fallen to alarmingly low levels. The social structure had been disrupted. Small farmers, unable to compete with the large landowners, had flocked to Rome seeking relief and reform.

But such simple answers would not satisfy most historians. Why had the government weakened? What brought the collapse of the economy? What caused the social disorder within the Roman Empire? To investigate these questions, historians often use concepts from social science disciplines as tools for analysis. These social science concepts help historians to isolate the facts they need to develop hypotheses.

Although all societies have unique features, certain activities and forces exist in every society. Investigators classify these common activities and develop concepts around them. Then they use these concepts to analyze events or social conditions. Take the concept “leadership” from political science, for example. A political scientist knows that all societies have people who make decisions for the entire community. What these people are like, how they became leaders and how they maintain their support are important considerations in the study of a political system.

You could develop some interesting hypotheses by asking questions about leadership in Rome during its declining years. You would discover that many of Rome’s leaders had been generals interested primarily in selfish gains. By focusing on the concept of leadership in Rome, it is possible to discover some of the reasons why the government had weakened.

Concepts suggest a number of analytical questions the investigator can ask of data to make facts come to life. The fact that [Ben Roethlisberger has an 8-year, \$102 million dollar contract for playing football] is only a passing, if awe-inspiring, curiosity. However, when the investigator asks how values influence the distribution of income in American society, [Ben Roethlisberger’s] salary becomes important evidence.

The following list of concepts and analytical questions contains only a few of the categories investigators use to analyze a society. These concepts and questions should help you formulate hypotheses about western society. This list does not even attempt to suggest all possible concepts and questions.

- **Decision-Making** – the process by which a political system makes, interprets and enforces its rulings
Questions: What are the rules for making decisions? In what institutions are decisions made? Who determines which decisions will be made? How does information reach the decision makers? How do they see that their decisions are enforced?
- **Citizenship** – the role an individual plays in the political system
Questions: How does a citizen influence the use of public power? To what degree can a citizen influence the government? How does he gain access to decision-makers? What are a citizen’s obligations? How does government regulate a citizen’s life?

- **Resources** – the supply of raw materials, capital goods and human skills available to a society
Questions: What natural resources are available? What capital resources are available? What human resources are available? How are the resources used to produce goods and services?
- **Distribution** – the process by which consumers in a community receive goods and services
Questions: Who are the consumers in a society? How do they obtain goods? What institutions distribute goods? Who in the society obtains the most goods? Who obtains the least?
- **Norms** – the standards of behavior expected of people in their social relationships with other members of the society
Questions: What norms are assigned to given roles? (How are fathers expected to behave toward their children? Toward their wives?) How are people with lower status expected to treat people with higher status, and vice versa? (What behavior is expected of employees toward their supervisors? Of supervisors toward their employees?)
- **Social Class** – a broad group of people who share the same general status and social position and who are classified by others in the society as belonging to the same group
Questions: What are the various social classes in a community? What criteria are used to place people in different social classes? What privileges are given to each social class? Can membership in a social class be earned or must one be born into a class?

Instructions:

1. Think about how you might apply the concepts and analytical questions to current events.
2. You are a historian in the year 2309 who is writing an essay on life in 2009. You have found a great collection of newspapers from 2009.
3. Using a non-tabloid newspaper, find an article from a newspaper that might be used to provide evidence for three of the concepts listed above. (That means three articles.)
4. Write a brief explanation of how each article relates to the concept.

The College Board has concepts they refer to as “themes” that they believe, in analyzing United States history, it is important that students are able to identify. The following are the AP United States History themes:

- American Diversity – diversity of the American people and the relationships among different groups; roles of race, class, ethnicity and gender
- American Identity – views of the American national character and ideas about American exceptionalism; recognizing regional differences within the context of what it means to be an American
- Culture – literature, art, philosophy, music, theatre and film; popular culture
- Demographic Changes – changes in birth, marriage and death rates, life expectancy, family patterns, population size and density; economic, social and political effects of immigration, internal migration and migration networks
- Economic Transformations – changes in trade, commerce and technology over time; effects of capitalist development, labor and unions and consumerism
- Environment – consumption and conservation of natural resources; impact of population growth, industrialization, pollution and urban/suburban expansion
- Globalization – interaction with the world from the 1400’s to the present; colonialism, mercantilism, global hegemony, development of markets, imperialism, cultural exchange
- Politics and Citizenship – colonial and revolutionary legacies, American political traditions, growth of democracy and the development of the modern state; defining citizenship, struggling for civil rights
- Reform – various movements including antislavery, education, labor, temperance, women’s rights, civil rights, gay rights, war, public health and government
- Religion – variety of religious beliefs and practices from prehistory to the 21st century; influences of religion on politics, economics and society
- Slavery and Its Legacies in North America – systems of slave labor and other forms of unfree labor such as indentured servitude and contract labor in Native American societies, the Atlantic World and the American South and West; economics of slavery and its racial dimensions; patterns of resistance and the long-term economic, political and social effects of slavery
- War and Diplomacy – armed conflict from precolonial to the 21st century; impact of war on American foreign policy and on politics, economy and society