

LEARNING TO THINK HISTORICALLY

by Peter Seixas

Thinking critically about history is essential because history is the result of human choices. As historians work, they make constant choices about what information to keep and what to leave out, which questions to pursue and which to ignore. No work of history—even about a short period of time—can include all information from all perspectives.

One historian writing about the Second World War might, for example, write about battles and political decisions. Another historian might look at the personalities of people who greatly influenced the war. Still another historian might explore how the war affected women's roles in Canadian society or the war's impact on French–English relations. As a student of history, your best approach is to view all historical sources as, at best, partial accounts. Consult many sources, much as you might look at an object from many angles.

Histories change over time. As attitudes, knowledge, and ideas in the present shift, so does our sense of the past. For example, at one time, people were taught that Christopher Columbus “discovered” the Americas, as though there were not already people occupying the continent. Today, history has been revised to acknowledge the continent's original occupants, the First Peoples. Although sometimes people object to “revising” history, there is really no alternative. History does not exist apart from the needs and ideas of the present. All histories are a revision of some other history.

HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPTS







In this book, you will learn about the events of history: what happened to whom, when, where, and why. You will also learn about the study of history: the work of a historian and how and why histories are created—and changed. To understand both the events of history and the study of history, you will need strong historical thinking skills. Historical thinking is the act of interpreting and assessing evidence from the past, as well as the narratives, or stories, that historians and others have constructed from this evidence.

In *Shaping Canada*, you will find many questions and activities that will help you develop your ability to think historically. In particular, six historical thinking concepts will guide and shape how you think about and study history in this course. Each concept is marked with one of the icons shown in the box to the right and is explained in greater detail on the pages that follow.

A Note About the Author

Peter Seixas is the director of the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness and a professor in education at the University of British Columbia. He has been a leader in developing the six historical thinking concepts you will read about on pages 7 to 13.

HISTORICAL THINKING CONCEPTS

-  Establishing **historical significance**
-  Using primary-source **evidence**
-  Identifying **continuity and change**
-  Analyzing **cause and consequence**
-  Taking a **historical perspective**
-  Considering the **ethical dimensions** of history

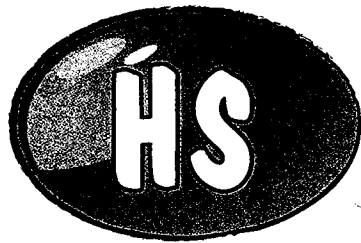


Figure P-9 First Nations people showed European settlers how to tap sugar maple trees to make maple syrup. Today, Canada produces more than 80 percent of the world's maple syrup.

ESTABLISHING HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The past includes everything that ever happened to anyone. No one can remember or learn it all. Choices must be made—and historians, teachers, and writers are often the ones who decide which events are historically significant enough to be included in courses of study and books.

But you, too, can think critically about historical significance. Are the actions of politicians and business leaders the only ones that count? Can the experiences of one Saskatchewan farmer during the Great Depression be historically significant? Can the attitudes of teenagers in various periods be historically significant?

As people's values change, judgments about what is historically significant may also change. A hundred years ago, for example, women, immigrants, and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples were barely mentioned in history books. Their stories were not considered significant. Today, however, this judgment has changed.

Judgments about historical significance may also depend on a person's point of view. An autoworker in Ontario and an environmentalist in British Columbia may have very different views on the significance of an event or issue, such as whether new automobiles should have stricter fuel emissions standards.

JUDGING HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Historians suggest that either—and sometimes both—of the following criteria can be used to judge historical significance:

- Does the event have serious, long-lasting consequences for many people? Using this criterion, you might decide that the Second World War was historically significant. What about your most recent history test? The result may be important to you, but it is probably not historically significant, because it will not likely affect many people.
- Does the event reveal or shed light on long-lasting or emerging issues? The experiences of a Saskatchewan farmer during the Great Depression may not have affected millions of people, but her personal story may show how people coped at the time. People today may have comparable concerns, so her story may be judged historically significant.

PRACTISE ESTABLISHING HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In 2008, the federal government declared that the development of the maple products industry was an event of national historical significance. To recognize this, the government pledged to place plaques in McDonalds Corners, Ontario, and Plessisville and Mont-Saint-Hilaire, Québec. Maple products are produced in these communities and many others.

Many Canadians agree that maple syrup is important. In 2008, the Dominion Institute announced that maple syrup ranked fortieth in a national survey of the 101 people, places, symbols, events, and accomplishments that define Canada.

1. Use the suggested criteria for judging historical significance to decide whether the maple products industry should be added to the Grade 11 history curriculum.
2. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = not influential; 5 = highly influential), rank the influence of the following on the judgment you made in response to Question 1:
 - the government's decision
 - the Dominion Institute survey

USING PRIMARY-SOURCE EVIDENCE

Primary-source evidence includes a wide variety of materials from the past, such as oral testimony, letters, maps, photographs, and radio and television broadcasts, as well as artifacts such as buildings, clothing, or tools. These types of evidence are called primary sources because they were created by someone who was involved in or observed the events you are examining. Primary sources provide first-hand evidence of what people were thinking, how they lived, and what was happening around them. This evidence helps build your knowledge of the past.

Primary sources are a part of the past in a way that *Shaping Canada*, for example, is not. *Shaping Canada* is a secondary source. It provides information *about* the past, and it was written for a specific audience: you. Primary sources are not *about* the past; they are part of it. When these sources were created, the creators were not thinking of you. They had other purposes.

In the same way that you must think critically about *Shaping Canada* and other books, you must also think critically and make inferences—draw conclusions—about what primary sources reveal.

LEARNING FROM PRIMARY-SOURCE EVIDENCE

Asking effective questions can help you analyze and learn from primary sources. Your first question might be, “What is the primary source (e.g., a journal, a painting, or a child’s toy)?” Other questions might include

- In what context—circumstances—was the primary source created?
- What was the point of view of the creator (i.e., the author, painter)?
- What was the creator’s purpose?
- What was the creator’s position in relation to the event?
- What does the primary source reveal about the creator’s values and ideas about the world?
- What evidence about its historical setting does the primary source provide?

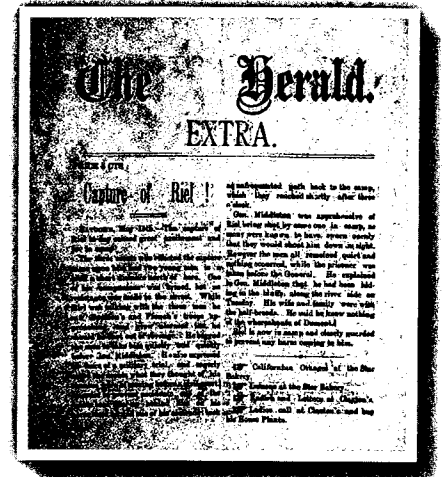
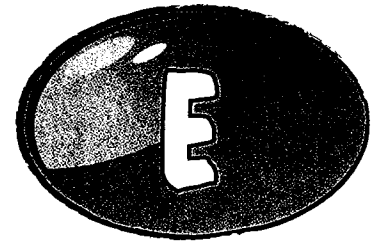


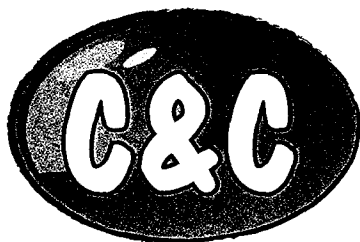
Figure P-10 Primary-source evidence can include a wide variety of objects, including newspapers, such as this front page article from the *Calgary Herald* on May 15, 1885.

PRACTISE USING PRIMARY-SOURCE EVIDENCE

In his 1969 book, *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*, Innew (Cree) leader Harold Cardinal wrote about the struggle of First Nations peoples to preserve their cultural identities in the face of government attempts to force them to assimilate—to ignore their own culture and become part of Canada’s dominant culture. His book is an important primary source about political thinking in First Nations communities at the time. Read the following excerpt from Cardinal’s book:

It sometimes seems to Indians that Canada shows more interest in preserving its rare whooping cranes than its Indians. And Canada, the Indian notes, does not ask its cranes to become Canada geese. It just wants to preserve them as whooping cranes. Indians hold no grudge against the big, beautiful, nearly extinct birds, but we would like to know how they managed their deal. Whooping cranes can remain whooping cranes, but Indians are to become brown white men.

1. Review the questions that can help you learn from primary sources. Use the information about Cardinal and the excerpt from his book to respond to as many questions as you can.
2. As a result of your responses, what inferences can you make about the situation of First Nations people in 1969?



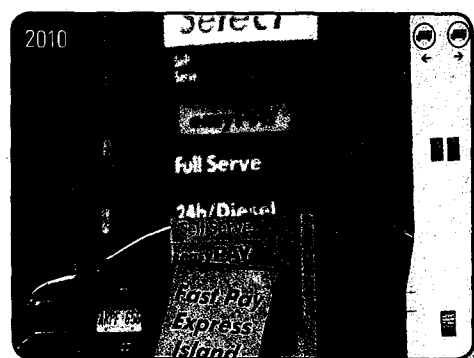
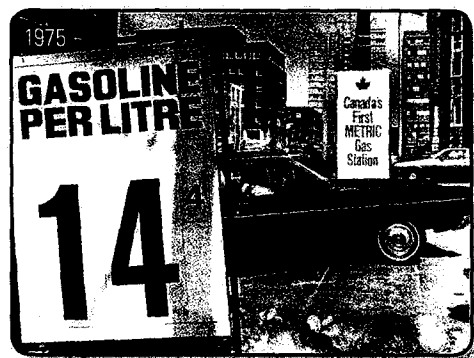
IDENTIFYING CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Thinking about the concepts of continuity—what remains the same?—and change—what is different?—provides an effective way of organizing the complexity of the past.

But identifying what has stayed the same and what has changed is not always as simple as it seems. Changes may occur at a different pace at different times, or many changes can occur at much the same time. An election, for example, might bring about a rapid change in government at a time when little change is occurring in the way people live as families. An invention might rapidly change how people live and work, but government policies might take more time to catch up.

Judgments about continuity and change can be made by comparing a situation at a specific point in the past with a similar situation today or by comparing two specific points in the past (e.g., the situation in Québec before and after the Quiet Revolution).

Figure P-11



ASPECTS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

- Continuity and change are interrelated. Change is usually a continuous process rather than an isolated event.
- Circumstances change more quickly at some times than at others.
- Change does not always mean progress. Measuring progress and decline are ways of evaluating change over time.
- Developing a chronology—the sequence in which events occurred—can help organize your understanding of continuity and change. You cannot understand continuity and change without knowing the order in which things happened.
- Thinking about history as specific periods (e.g., the Roaring Twenties or the Swinging Sixties) can help organize your understanding of continuity and change. A historical period shows continuity in at least one dominant aspect, such as the economic downturn that caused the Great Depression. A new period begins when this aspect changes, such as when the economy improved during and after the Second World War.

PRACTISE IDENTIFYING CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Figure P-11 shows service stations at three different times.

1. Examine the photographs and identify what has stayed the same. What is different?
2. On the basis of the similarities and differences you identified in the photographs, predict one thing that is likely to continue and one thing that is likely to change over the next ten years.

ANALYZING CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE

Analyzing causes and consequences is another effective way of organizing past events. This involves thinking about the role of, and limits on, individuals and groups in shaping events.

For example, if a player scores a goal in a hockey game played by the Canadian women's national hockey team, how would you decide what caused the goal? Was it the player's ability to get into scoring position? Was it the pass from another player at exactly the right time? Was the goalie out of position? Or was it a combination of these factors?

Underlying factors can also play a role in causing events. For example, an indirect cause of the player's goal might include her high fitness level, the guidance of her coaches, or even the funding received from Sport Canada and other organizations. And the goal could not have been scored if refrigeration technology had not enabled ice makers to create the ice—or if the game of hockey had never been invented.

This example shows that even a minor event, like a single goal in a hockey game, can be the consequence of a web of causes. And the consequences of a single event can be equally complex and far reaching. For example, a direct consequence of the player's goal might be that her team wins a game or championship. But the team's win might also have far-reaching or indirect consequences. It might, for example, inspire more young women to sign up to play hockey or encourage sport organizations to increase their funding to the national team.

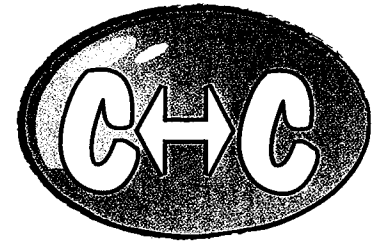
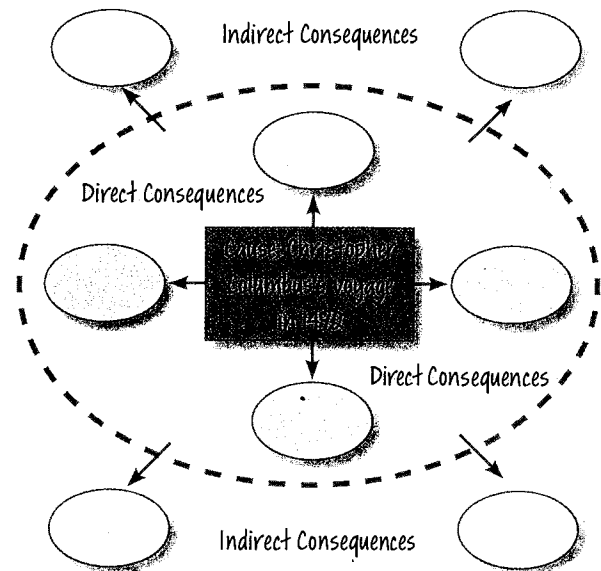


Figure P-12 Direct and Indirect Consequences

ASPECTS OF CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE

- Causes are often numerous and layered. They may involve long-term conditions and short-term actions.
- Human beings are the agents of change: they create or cause change through their actions or decisions. However, the changes they cause are often limited by circumstances, such as the natural environment, geography, and other people with different goals. As a result, agents of change are constantly responding to conditions as often as they change them. Many of these conditions, such as political and economic circumstances, are legacies of earlier human actions.
- Actions may result in unintended consequences.



PRACTISE ANALYZING CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE

In 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed west from Spain, intent on finding a new, western route to India. He landed on an island in the Bahamas Archipelago and famously mistook the island for the coastline of India.

1. Create an organizer like the one shown in Figure P-12. On it, record several direct and indirect consequences of Columbus's voyage. If necessary, add more bubbles to your organizer.
2. Select the direct consequence that you think is the most important. Explain your choice.



VOICES

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.

— L. P. Hartley, *British writer, in The Go-Between, 1953*

TAKING A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Many things about the past are so different from today that people sometimes conclude that those who lived in the past were ignorant, misguided, or both. But many historians argue that it is unfair to judge past actions by today's standards. They say that past actions should be judged according to the standards of the time.

People in the past differed from people today in many ways. Of course, they dressed differently. They did not have access to the range of conveniences that are available to people today. These are obvious differences. But the way they thought, the way they experienced the world, and perhaps even the way they felt were different—sometimes so different that it may be hard for people today to imagine.

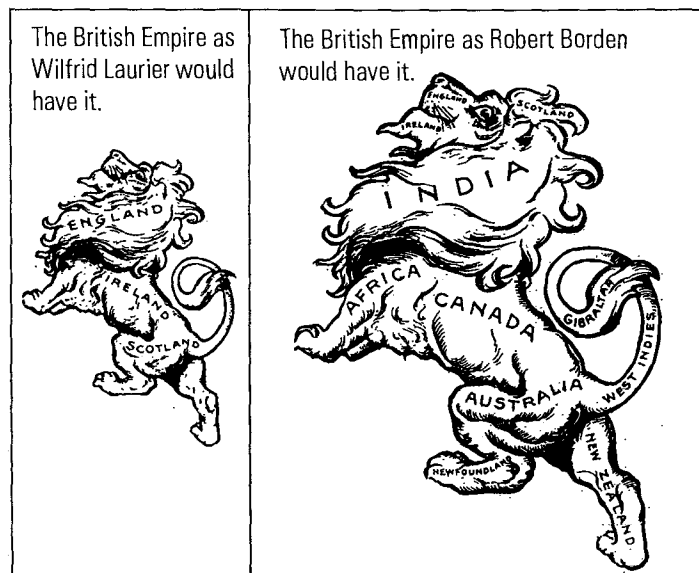
Taking a historical perspective means putting yourself in the shoes of someone in the past—but in a way that leaves behind, temporarily, some of the values and beliefs that shape your thinking today. Doing this helps you understand the forces that shaped people's thoughts and actions at the time.

Taking a historical perspective does not mean that you must agree or identify with the actions that were taken or the attitudes people displayed. But it does mean trying to understand them. Primary sources can sometimes help you do this, but you must be careful not to impose your own meanings on what you see and hear.

POINTS ON TAKING A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

- Gathering primary-source evidence helps you take a historical perspective by helping you infer how people felt and thought at the time.
- When considering historical events, remember that people's views on what was happening were probably as diverse then as they would be today. Understanding the diversity of perspectives among the people involved is key to understanding an event.

Figure P-13 This cartoon appeared in the *Halifax Herald* in 1915, when politicians and other Canadians were debating the country's future role in the British Empire.



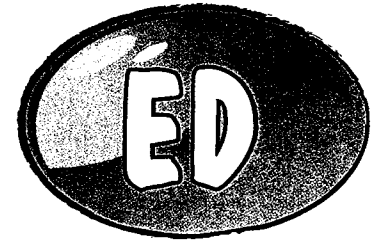
PRACTISE TAKING A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

When the First World War started in 1914, the United Kingdom controlled Canada's foreign policy. At the time, about 55 percent of Canadians were of British heritage. As the war raged, Canadians disagreed over Canada's future role in the British Empire.

Some people sided with Conservative Prime Minister Robert Borden, who wanted Canada to remain in the British Empire—but to have equal status with the United Kingdom. But Wilfrid Laurier, a francophone and a former prime minister who led the opposition Liberals, wanted more autonomy for Canada.

1. Compare the two views reflected in this cartoon. How are they similar? How are they different?
2. If you were asked to defend one view from the historical perspective of a Canadian in 1915, what ideas of your own might you need to set aside?

CONSIDERING THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF HISTORY



Most historians try not to make ethical judgments about past actions. This is because historians understand that today's ethical standards—the code people use to judge whether actions are right or wrong—may be different from the standards people used in the period they are describing.

But at the same time, if a story is to be meaningful, an ethical judgment may be involved. A history of the Holocaust, for example, is unlikely to mean much if it does not account for the ethical aspects of the Holocaust.

Studying and learning from past actions can help shape the way people think about ethical dilemmas today. Sometimes, history helps people honour a debt of memory—to ancestors, for example, who made sacrifices to ensure the well-being of those who came after them. Other times, history helps clarify whether an apology or other amends are due for past actions, such as the internment of Japanese people during the Second World War.

ASPECTS OF CONSIDERING THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF HISTORY

- In judging past actions, historians try to take a historical perspective and guard against imposing today's ethical standards on the past.
- The need to make an ethical judgment can conflict with the need to guard against imposing today's ethical standards on past actions. Historians often deal with this conflict by
 - asking questions that have an ethical dimension (e.g., Was the policy of assimilating First Nations people motivated by good intentions?)
 - suspending judgment to try to understand the perspectives of the historical figures
 - emerging from the study of historical actions with ideas about how the ethical implications of past actions should be applied today

PRACTISE CONSIDERING THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF HISTORY

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States affected many Canadian laws and foreign policies. For example, Parliament passed the *Anti-Terrorism Act*, which gave authorities greater powers to fight terrorism, such as

- allowing the police to detain suspected terrorists without charge for three days
- making it easier to conduct electronic surveillance of suspected terrorists

Yet the fight against terrorism is not always accurate in its targets. For example, in 2002, Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen of Syrian heritage, was accused of being a terrorist. Based on information from the RCMP, the United States deported Arar to Syria, where he was jailed and tortured for over a year. In the years following his release, a government inquiry found no evidence that Arar had any links to terrorist groups.

1. What are the ethical dimensions of the fight against terrorism? When should the rights of society outweigh the rights of individuals?
2. What are the ethical problems with legislation like the *Anti-Terrorism Act*?

