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Writing Essays that Make Historical Arguments

Even though teachers do sometimes ask students to argue in their essays, simply telling students to argue seldom enables them to do so.

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For the valuable purpose of improving their students' critical thinking skills, history teachers are frequently urged to assign essay writing (1). There is, however, little critical thinking in most "reports" and other narratives which only summarize textbooks and other sources. Essays that testify to desirable citizenship attitudes or that promote particular political, social, or economic causes are often more polemical than thoughtful. Such writing too often and too easily fits Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* definition of an essay: "A loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition." There must be a better way.

The essay that makes a historical argument may offer that better way, for it is hard to make an effective argument without expressing higher-order thinking skills. Yet even though teachers do sometimes ask students to argue in their essays, the results are often disappointing. The trouble is that simply telling students to argue seldom enables them to do so. For how, exactly, are students to compose these arguments? How, exactly, are they to put them in writing? What is needed is an approach to historical argumentation that can be explicitly taught, performed, and evaluated (2). This paper suggests a method of essay instruction that can help teach

history through argumentation.

History teachers might agree that an essay that argues should include the following. It should:

1. Ask a question of historical interpretation that invites controversy.

"Was the New Deal successful in handling the Great Depression between 1933 and 1930?" is such a question. However, "Discuss the main features of the New Deal" is not; discussion is not necessarily argument.

2. Claim a controversial hypothesis answering the question.

For example, "The New Deal was mainly successful in handling the Great Depression between 1933 and 1940," or "The New Deal was mainly unsuccessful. . . ." are hypotheses that invite argument, since both cannot be simultaneously believed.

3. Claim controversial and logical reasons for believing the hypothesis.

For example, one logical reason for believing that the New Deal succeeded might be: "The New Deal successfully alleviated unemployment." Another reason might claim that "the New Deal successfully achieved its professed aim of preserving capitalism." These claims of

reasons are conceptually narrower, and thus easier to defend than the overarching hypothesis they logically support. If we can be made to believe these reasons, we can, at least provisionally, be made to believe the hypothesis that the New Deal succeeded.

4. Apply specific and relevant factual evidence to support each reason and, if necessary, explain how this evidence supports the claimed reasons.

For example, supporting the claim of New Deal success with unemployment are the facts that unemployment declined from about 24% of the total labor force in 1933 to 14% in 1937 (3). By 1936 the WPA alone employed 3.4 million out of a total working labor force of 44.4 million (4). At this point we have a *prima facie* case for the claim that the New Deal eased unemployment through such agencies as the WPA.

5. Make claims that oppose the supporting claims, give evidence for this opposition, and then rebut this opposing argument with new evidence in order to restore the arguer's original claim.

Here is the heart of the argument, and it is where students need the most guidance and practice. Many students resist the notion that they should reveal claims and evidence that oppose their own claims and evidence. They have to be convinced that there is far more to argument than merely supporting their own side; they must also fairly present opposing arguments and defeat them.

Thus, the opposing claim that the New Deal failed to ease unemployment might be supported by evidence that by 1938 recession again set in spite of the New Deal, with unemployment rising from 14% to 19% of the total labor force in one year (5). This counterargument—this package of claim and evidence—cannot be allowed to stand if the student is to sustain the unemployment success claim; it must be rebutted. This rebuttal might claim that the “Roosevelt recession” of 1938 shows that the New Deal actually succeeded because it was the weakening of its programs

that brought back unemployment with a vengeance. For evidence, in the single year 1937 the Roosevelt Administration slashed government spending on the WPA and on other New Deal programs from \$4.1 billion to a mere \$800 million (6).

The very success of the New Deal between 1933 and 1937 made its leaders so understandably optimistic that they reduced New Deal activity, thus allowing the recession.

But how “understandably”? As the process of argument drives the arguer deeper into the historical subject, facts that at first may have seemed irrelevant can become very relevant indeed. In his 1936 presidential campaign FDR told Chicago businessmen, “Today those factories sing the song of industry; markets hum with bustling movement; banks are secure; ships and trains are running full” (7). Yet only three months later in his Second Inaugural Address on 20 January 1937 FDR told the country, “I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished”—and this was before the government spending cuts that were said to have brought about the 1937-1938 relapse (8). Could it be that New Deal publicity flew in the face of economic realities? Was hypocrisy at work here? A new argument might now address this interesting new question, one that arose only because the student set out to argue rather than simply to describe or “discuss” the New Deal.

Now the student's original hypothesis and its supporting reasons may need to be rejected, revised, or further strengthened. Perhaps the hypothesis will become “The New Deal mainly failed between 1933 and 1940;” and one reason for believing this might be that “New Dealers were hypocritical about economic realities.” Though this claim is rather more sophisticated than the original claim about unemployment, it is probably not too sophisticated for young students who are, or who say they are, hypersensitive to hypocrisy—especially the hypocrisy of their elders.

All the evidence presented to this point is usually found in standard textbooks or in easily available reference works. The

ambitious student may find an even more sophisticated claim about the main cause of the 1937-38 recession in, for example, Jordan A. Schwarz's *The New Dealers*. Schwarz argues that the timidity of investors caused a capital shortage which arose in the political climate of 1936-37, when many businessmen attacked the New Deal (9). The complexity of the capital shortage claim lies in requiring of students rather more economic knowledge than many of them are likely to possess. Ideally, an economic historian might weigh both claims by asking, “Which was more responsible for the 1937-38 recession: reduced government spending, or a shortage of private investment capital?”

But just because the capital shortage claim is more sophisticated than the government-spending claim does not make it necessarily a better argument. Effective argument can arise from cursory textbook evidence as well as from specialized sources. It is the process of argument itself—at any level of knowledge—that yields higher order thinking skill expression. The depth of the argument is limited only by the student's talent and by time and resources available for research.

The give-and-take of argument can serve a major purpose of studying history and of education itself. Through the structured expression of inferences, logic, and evaluation of evidence, students can learn that they can, and often must, change their opinions. Argument mounts a frontal attack on prejudice.

6. Write inferential questions asking for new and unknown facts that, by inference, would help test the claim already made.

Thus, to test the unemployment claim, the arguer might ask: “What percentage of the work force between 1933 and 1940 was employed by federal government agencies instead of by private business?” Those claiming New Deal success with unemployment would like to see—would infer—a low percentage in federal jobs. Those claiming New Deal failure with unemployment would like to see—would infer—a higher percentage of federal em-

ployment. For if the federal government addressed unemployment mainly by hiring workers into its own agencies it can hardly be said to have eased unemployment in the private sector, where most jobs would ultimately have to be found for recovery to occur. This inferential question assumes, of course, that the information it seeks was *not* included in available sources. If it were, the student should be expected to use it in the body of the argument.

Asking inferential questions also forces students to recognize that their available sources can never tell them all the facts they need to know to reach ironclad conclusions. There simply are no such conclusions about the New Deal or about any other historical question worth asking.

Almost by chance, argumentation often occurs in everyday classroom work. Writing arguments in an orderly fashion is more challenging. Where to begin? What comes next? How to organize the work? Such problems can easily overwhelm the novice student. It is perhaps surprising, then, that a one-page instruction sheet can ease many of the difficulties facing the writer of an essay that argues.

This instruction sheet is designed for essay tests written during one class period, when there is usually time to develop only two main reasons. It can be adapted for longer research essays prepared outside

the classroom by developing additional reasons and sub-reasons (10).

Instructions 2 and 3 in the sheet ask students to pack a great deal into the two central paragraphs. Though many teachers may want separate paragraphs for sepa-

stress of classroom essay testing.

Pacing classroom essay work

For students with little experience in writing arguments a good strategy is to build competence gradually. Suppose that during the academic year the teacher expects to assign five classroom essays, each on a different historical subject. The series might evolve in this way:

First essay

Ask students to offer a hypothesis and develop only one reason for believing it. Allow students to refer to their notes, textbooks, and to the "How to Write Your Essay" sheet itself. Announce the essay question in advance: e.g., "HYPOTHESIS: The main cause of the American Revolution was economic conflict. Do you agree?" In preparation, let students compose their essays at home, but insist that they leave them at home; all actual writing must be done during the class period.

From this first experience students often learn that relying on notes and other "crutches" during class

time encumbers more than helps them. This is a worthwhile lesson, for "open book" testing can tempt students to put off preparation instead of working out their arguments before they write. Pascal was surely right to advise that "the last thing one settles in writing a book is what one should put in first" (11).

How To Write Your Essay

1. In the first paragraph, write your historical question and claim your controversial hypothesis answering it. Say no more in this paragraph.
2. In the second paragraph, claim your first reason for believing your hypothesis in the first sentence. In the sentences that follow within this paragraph, write:
 - a. facts that support this claim and explain how they do this.
 - b. a claim that logically opposes the claim you have just made. Give and explain evidence for this opposing claim.
 - c. a claim that rebuts your opposing claim. Write evidence for this rebuttal claim. Explain how this evidence does what you claim it does.
 - d. an inferential question asking for new and unknown facts that will test the claims you made in this paragraph.
3. In the following paragraphs (except for the last one), do exactly what you did in the second paragraph for each additional reason you claim for your hypothesis.
4. In the final paragraph, simply restate your hypothesis. This is your "Q.E.D."

If you follow these instructions you will successfully show me what you think about the history you know.

rate parts of the argument, it is crucial for the student to keep always in mind the claim made in each paragraph's first sentence; this must be defended through all opposing and rebuttal claims and evidence. "Proper" paragraphing notwithstanding, paragraph indentations in mid-argument can sometimes let writers drift astray from their original intentions, especially in the

Second essay

Announce the essay question in advance, again require the development of only one reason, but rule out the use of notes, books and instruction sheet.

Third essay

Announce the essay question in advance, but require essays with two completely developed reasons for the hypothesis. Again, no notes, books or instruction sheet at hand.

Fourth essay

Remove all crutches. Ask students to complete two-reason essays without notes and without prior knowledge of the question, though students will, of course, know in advance the historical subject area on which they are to write. By this fourth essay, students should have gained some competence and confidence in developing arguments in writing and in everyday class work.

Fifth essay

Confirm the progress made. Once more, require full development, no outside materials at hand, and no prior question announcement.

A final examination essay might ask students for a grand sweep argument using evidence from various historical episodes they have studied. For example: HYPOTHESIS: Economic conflict more than racism best characterizes relations between Native Americans and white Americans. Do you agree? Argue for the period between 1789 and 1868 or between 1868 and the present.

HYPOTHESIS: Defending democratic ideals has been the main cause of the United States' foreign wars. Do you agree? Write your argument to cover any two U.S. wars with foreign countries.

Questions like these provide students with historical questions and suggest possible answering hypotheses. Also possible are open-ended assignments in which students develop their own questions and hypotheses. For example, a test item might say "Argue for a convincing hypothesis about the causes of the Civil

War;" or "Argue for a convincing hypothesis about the history of affirmative action between 1965 and the present." All independently prepared research papers composed outside of class would be of this open-ended variety.

Evaluating Essays that Make Arguments

To make expectations clear, a check sheet like the following might be shared with students:

1. Did you follow *all* the instructions in "How to Write Your Essay"? For example, did you make the claims your intended to make? Remember the big difference between a claim and a factual statement; don't expect one to do the work of the other (12).
2. Did you give specific, adequate and accurate factual evidence to support your claims?
3. Did you make a logically convincing argument?

To check, cover your hypothesis, revealing only your claims of reasons for believing it. From these reasons alone a reader should be able logically to infer your hypothesis.

Conclusion

There is good reason to believe that most students are well able to make arguments. They, in fact all of us, argue every day outside the classroom. To overhear students' conversations about ball games, their favorite music, about each other, and even about their teachers, is often to hear them express in irregular form all of the higher-order thinking skills of argumentation. Teaching history through argumentation gives structure to these skills so that students can use them in the classroom—which is where they belong. □

Endnotes

1. For example see National Center for History in the Schools, *National History Standards Project: Progress Report and Sample Standards* (March 1993), pp. 55-115, where most "Suggested Teaching/Learning Activities" include some kind of essay writing

and students are often asked to "make arguments" (though no specific instructions for making these arguments are given). For more information, write to: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, 10880 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 1610, Los Angeles, CA 90024.

2. For a wider view of this approach, including teaching methods beyond essay writing, see Ray W. Karras, *The History Teacher* 26 (August 1993): 419-438.
3. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C., 1960), 68. I cite this and other sources for convenience. Any classroom textbook may contain enough information to start argument and provoke the use of further sources.
4. Richard B. Morris, ed., *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York: Harper, 1953), 349; *Historical Statistics*, 68.
5. *Historical Statistics*, 68.
6. John M. Blum, Bruce Catton, et. al., *The National Experience* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), 697.
7. "Franklin Delano Roosevelt: What the New Deal Has Done for Business," *Encyclopedia Britannica, The Annals of America*, Vol 15 (1968), 379.
8. In Richard N. Current, T. Harry Williams, et. al., *American History: a Survey* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 767.
9. Jordan A. Schwarz, *The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 187-190.
10. See Ray W. Karras, "An Assembly Plan for Problem-Centered Research Essays," *The History Teacher* 10 (November 1976): 7-17.
11. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, #19.
12. On factual statements in relation to claims, see Ray W. Karras, "Coping with Mr. Gradgrind: History vs. the Epistemology of the Self," *OAH Magazine of History* 7 (Fall 1992): 9-12.