



Reading for Context

The BHH Five Processes

History begins and ends with the question WHY. As we explore the past, we seek explanations for why people acted as they did, why societies developed as they did, why elements of life changed over time in the particular ways that they have changed, and why some things have not changed but stayed much the same. At its most authentic, history is perplexing and engaging and even exciting. It involves closely reading or examining visual and written sources of evidence, contextualizing that evidence with accounts written by others who have asked their own questions of the evidence, developing a sense of chronology of events that are related by cause and effect or similar themes, situating historic events and trends geographically, and finally putting all these pieces together to try and answer our own *why* questions and create our own accounts.

By nature, history is evidence-based and interpretive. This means that when we do history, we must determine which pieces of evidence are best suited to answer our particular questions. It also means that we need to recognize accounts for what they are; the results of other people's encounters with evidence as they attempted to answer particular questions. In other words, "...stories are not so much copies of the past as ways of looking at it."ⁱ

Even when we recognize this is the nature of history, as teachers we also face a chicken-and-egg conundrum... narratives help students understand cause and effect and chronological flows of events, but they also too easily become students' only way of understanding history. Whichever account students first encounter about a history topic can become THE story instead of A story.ⁱⁱ To help students conceptualize history as various perspectives on the past, the BHH units include multiple trade books, each of which informs just one dimension of the topic at hand. These stories help students contextualize and make sense of other types of sources such as statistics, written and visual pieces of evidence, and maps.

The BHH trade books provide excellent opportunities for students to practice their literacy skills. As BHH teachers read aloud with students, they ask them to form questions, [predict and infer](#), summarize, make connections with their prior knowledge and experiences, and identify themes and events in the new story that they have previously encountered in other resources. All of these activities develop essential and transferable skills. And when we make transparent for students how they are using familiar literacy strategies when they study history, we truly engage them in transferring those skills. We're no longer simply calling a skill transferable, but are making it so.

ⁱ Lee, P.J. (2005). Putting principles into practice: Understanding history. In *How students learn: History, mathematics, and science in the classroom*, eds. Donovan, S. & Bransford, J., Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, p.60.

ⁱⁱ Barton, K. & Levstik, L. (2004). *Teaching History for the Common Good*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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