Thinking Historically by Tom Holt for the College Board

Students’ misconceptions of history must be explored not ignored. Students believe history to be a time lines, dates, names and battles, they must unlearn this when they go to college.

Begin with unlearning what history is. Must go beyond facts toward the making of narrative.

Know now:
Ask them what they know about their topic? Ask them how the topic relates to them?

Introduction:

- History is about people, including the small people, those without a voice – these people should be a focus of research for what they tell us about human experience.
- We are all historians. History is human experience recollected. We all have memories and so we are all contributors and participants in history. To create coherent stories about experience is to create histories.
- Stories – histories have power. The power to change things. Thus history is not dead but alive.
- Historians cannot return to the present of their subjects, they cannot have complete knowledge of that past experience. They must rely on the “leavings”, letters, diaries, reports, maps, photographs, etc. to reconstruct the larger story of which these artifacts were merely a part.

Instructions to kids:

- Read between the lines.
- Remember that documents were created and shaped by human minds.
- Imagine what is missing or not said. How might the doc be different?
- Behind the words in the document are doubts, fears, visions and beliefs.
- Answers are not in the book, but in the environment of thought that is created through examination of a variety of sources, discussions, and analyses.
- Remember that you have a point of view, which you may limit, but will impact what you find and determine. The choices you make and the values you hold influence the conclusions you will draw from what you find.
- History is incomplete! It is filled with competing narratives, what voices are left out?
- History is an experience in problem solving… of using evidence: documents, secondary sources, and the problems they hold to piece together a “story” not the “story”.
- You must question and imagine!
- You are creating a story, based on the information you find, that answers a question. You can tell many different kinds of stories in many different ways.
- History is created by people

Forming a question from background reading:
• What do you want to know about the subject?
• What seems interesting – what would you like to investigate?
• Is there something in the reading that can connect to your life, that you know something about. Often asking a question that is relevant to your life can make your research more interesting and fulfilling.

Organization
• What point do you want to make?

Sourcing:
• Is it a primary or secondary source, that is, is it produced by an eyewitness or participant, or by a commentator after the fact?
• What is the point of view of this source?
• How and why was this document produced, and how does that affect its trustworthiness?
• What are the documents silences?
• What does it leave out?
• What does it assume?
• Even professional historians bring who they are to the research process. The process can also change by what you learn as you research, as your perspective changes.

Contextualization:
• What is the context of the documents prior existence?
• What was the social and cultural environment of the creator?
• What is the documents relation to other documents?
• What impact do you imagine the doc had in its context?

Instead of teaching you to be a consumer of someone else’s stories, “someone else’s facts” Watson will help you create stories of your own from the raw materials of history, the actual documents and artifacts from which historians construct their narratives.

In order to evoke as “true” an image of an event as possible, when you write your narrative or tell a historical “story” it isn’t about inventing facts, but about choosing the right facts. What does it seem an audience is likely to respond to, does it seem right?

Encyclopedia Sourcing:
• Encyclopedia sources are not often wrong or incorrect, however what is selected and how it is told tells a particular story without acknowledging that there may be an alternative version of events. What voices are missing in the story? What is implied by the article? Remember that encyclopedia versions of history are not inaccurate factually, but they are closed, stunted versions of the history of the period presented. Their closure misrepresents the dynamism of history.