Guideposts to Historical Thinking

**Historical Significance** *How do we decide what is important to learn about the past?*

**Guidepost 1** Events, people, or developments have historical significance if they **resulted in change**. That is, they had deep consequences, for many people, over a long period of time.

**Guidepost 2** Events, people, or developments have historical significance if they are **revealing**. That is, they shed light on enduring or emerging issues in history or contemporary life.

**Guidepost 3** Historical significance is **constructed**. That is, events, people, and developments meet the criteria for historical significance only when they are shown to occupy a **meaningful place in a narrative**.

**Guidepost 4** Historical significance **varies** over time and from group to group.

**Evidence** *How do we know what we know about the past?*

**Guidepost 1** History is **interpretation** based on **inferences** made from primary sources. Primary sources can be accounts, but they can also be traces, relics, or records.

**Guidepost 2** Asking **good questions** about a source can turn it into evidence.

**Guidepost 3** Sourcing often begins before a source is read, with questions about **who** created it and **when** it was created. It involves inferring from the source the author’s or creator’s **purposes, values, and worldview**, either conscious or unconscious.

**Guidepost 4** A source should be analyzed in relation to the **context of its historical setting**: the conditions and worldviews prevalent at the time in question.

**Guidepost 5** Inferences made from a source can never stand alone. They should always be **corroborated**—checked against other sources (primary or secondary).

**Continuity and Change** *How can we make sense of the complex flows of history?*

**Guidepost 1** Continuity and change are **interwoven**: both can exist together. **Chronologies**—the sequencing of events—can be a good starting point.

**Guidepost 2** Change is a **process**, with varying paces and patterns. **Turning points** are moments when the process of change shifts in direction or pace.

**Guidepost 3** Progress and decline are broad evaluations of change over time. Depending on the impacts of change, progress for one people may be decline for another.

**Guidepost 4** Periodization helps us organize our thinking about continuity and change. It is a process of interpretation, by which we decide which events or developments constitute a period of history.