

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Thinking and Communicating Like a Historian Video Transcript

Steve Lazar:

One of the things we do as historians is talk about cause and effect, okay?
Another thing we do as historians is talk about how things are complicated.

To be an active, intelligent, thoughtful citizen involves the same skills that are involved in being an active, thoughtful, intelligent historian.

What we're gonna look at today are some simple words and phrases you can put in your writing that will make cause and effect reasoning explicit, okay? And these are all phrases that when you read writing by historians, these are phrases historians are using all the time, because explaining cause and effect is one of the main things we do when we write about history.

When I say, "Think like a historian, write like a historian," I want to demarcate for students that there's things they do in English class, and those are great in English class, but there are certain intellectual moves we make as historians that are unique to our discipline. So we had a set of questions that students had been working on answering over the past week, and then we'll do that again next Monday where they generate a new set of questions purely about the past. And then we'll organize those questions, and then the class moves on to, "Okay, how do we go about answering that?" So at that point, I'm teaching them disciplinary literacy, like, how do historians think about this, how do geographers think about this? If relevant, we'll get into economics and political science. After that, we do research, we evaluate sources, and then finally, we come bring it all back together and figure out, "How are we going to communicate what we learned?"

The first question, I want you to use the cause and effect transitions. The second question, I want you to use complicated. Okay?

Student:

Cool.

Lucara:

He gave us two questions about the Crimea conflict and had us answer them with a partner. So we had to figure out the cause and effect of what was

currently happening. When you have a good partner, for me at least, it helps me, like, expand my thoughts.

Student:

I mean, Russia was... Crimea was part of Russia before, right?

Lazar:

So because Crimea used to be part of Russia...

Student:

They want it back. I mean, that's one reason.

Lazar:

Some people in Russia want it back.

Student:

And then Ukraine did not want them.

Lazar:

The most basic level I was assessing, "I told you to do this, can you do this?" And I saw that they could in a highly scaffolded environment in the classroom. That's nice, good. Next step: can they apply it to the historical content that we're learning?

There was a revolution in Ukraine, right? And there was a new leader in Ukraine. Was that revolution based in Crimea or based elsewhere?

Lucara:

I don't remember.

Lazar:

At that point, I was able to conference with students, and they had the intellectual move down, but now we could really start talking about the content in a more concrete and meaningful way. So that allowed us to have a conversation using the language they now had and had practiced to think about the content in a more intentional and more intelligent way. So even though there's still work I know I need to do to make sure all the students have a thorough understanding of the content, they now have this category to place the content in that'll hopefully make it easier for them to learn. A third of the class will get this and will be good. A third of the class will be trying to do it, so they'll know what they're supposed to do but probably need some more support and feedback. And some portion of the class I'm gonna have to reteach it to

and continue to reteach and pound it in until they get it. It's a skill, and so any skill involves practice and intentional practice and practice with feedback.

And here's where this gets more interesting. So I want you to try to rewrite it that way. Okay?