

Content Application: Historical Significance

Competing Timelines

This activity can be used as a supporting scaffold within a unit that focuses on the historical thinking concept of **historical significance**.

Essential Question: *How do we decide what is important to learn about the past?*

Goal: At the end of this activity, students should have a clear understanding that historians make choices about historical significance, due both to the types of questions they ask and the evidence they prioritize. They should also understand that:

- Historical significance is **constructed** as it is expressed through historical narratives
- Historical significance changes over time and may vary depending on the perspectives of different groups

Teacher Note:

- **Activity 1:** Give students one comprehensive timeline that could be disaggregated to focus on different aspects of a given topic OR find 4-6 timelines that focus on different aspects of the topic of study. For example, you might find a political, religious, cultural, economic, and social timeline of WWII (example WWII timelines can be found here: [World War II Timelines: Historical Significance Content Application](#)). Have students choose the six most important events on their timeline (post-its can be a very helpful tool for students as they narrow down events of significance). Then choose one of the culminating activities below.
- **Activity 2 (Option A):** This option focuses on how different historical questions can lead to different narratives. After students complete questions 1-4 on Activity 1, you may have students present their narratives to the class using **Activity 2 (Option A)**. Focus on the types of questions that each group might be answering with the particular narrative they constructed. After students present their timelines, discuss how historical narratives are influenced by a historian's questions and the evidence they prioritize.
- **Activity 2 (Option B):** This option focuses on narrowing significance based on a single focus question. Provide the class with one focus question and ask them to re-examine their timelines with the provided focus question in mind. Organize students into groups with students who studied other timelines. Direct students to share what they learned from their assigned timelines and create a synthesized timeline of the period. After presenting, discuss how the synthesized timelines differ from one another, and what conclusions students can draw about how historical narratives are constructed.

The description of historical thinking in this exercise is informed by the scholarship of Peter Seixas and the Historical Thinking Project (<http://historicalthinking.ca/>).

Content Application: Historical Significance

Activity 1: Historical Significance and Timelines

1. Your group will receive a timeline. As a group, agree on the six MOST historically significant events on the timeline, and write them below.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2. How did your group decide what was historically significant? Was this difficult for the group? Why or why not?

Historians often use the following criteria to determine historical significance:

- a. Something is historically significant if it **resulted in change**.
e.g. *The bombing of Pearl Harbor is a significant turning point because it caused the U.S. to enter WWII.*
- b. Something is historically significant if it is **reveals something about the experiences of regular people during that time**.
e.g. *The popularity of "flapper" fashion revealed the changing role of women in the 1920s.*
- c. Something is also historically significant if it fits into a **narrative**. In other words, each historian determines what is significant based on the question they are asking of the evidence.

3. Analyze the six historically significant events you chose above, and put a star (*) next to items that resulted in change, and a plus (+) sign next to items that reveal something about the experiences of regular people during that time. What do you notice about the types of significant events your group chose?

4. What **narrative**, or story, do your events tell?

Content Application: Historical Significance

Activity 2 (Option A): Questions and Narratives

1. What question do you think your group's narrative answers?

2. Choose one representative from your group to share the narrative you constructed to the class, ONLY using you six most significant items. As each group tells their story, complete the graphic organizer.

	Similarities to your group's narrative	Differences from your group's narrative	<i>What question does this group's narrative answer?</i>
Group _____			
Group _____			
Group _____			
Group _____			
Group _____			

Application and Reflection on Historical Thinking: *Why do historical narratives differ?*

Content Application: Historical Significance

Activity 2 (Option B): Focus Questions

Focus Question _____

1. In your new group, share the narrative you each constructed from your different timelines (question 4 on **Activity 1**). How is the narrative of your timeline similar or different from others in your group?
2. Using chart paper, create a synthesized timeline with your group that answers the focus question above. Your group's timeline may only include **ten** events. As a group, you must agree on which events from each individual's timeline will be included. The timeline should include at least 1 event from each individual's timeline.
3. Present your synthesized timeline to the class, and listen to other groups' presentations. How did other groups' timelines differ from your group's? How were they similar?

Application and Reflection on Historical Thinking

- Did your group disagree on which events were most significant? Or from those prioritized in other groups? How might this be similar to the work and scholarship of historians?