

IDs: Memory or Meaning? A Guide For Answering Identification Questions That Encourages Thinking Historically

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IDENTIFICATION QUESTIONS (or IDs), according to some critics, merely test factual knowledge (which involves only memorization), but for them to be effective learning tools for our students, we must also make sure that students develop their understanding of the significance or importance of people, events, and concepts both in the context of their times and with regard to ramifications. These are unlike essay questions, which rely on an ability to interpret historical events, use judgment, and include factual knowledge in appropriate ways to support a thesis and to draw conclusions based on evidence. Whether we teach at the secondary school level (including Advanced Placement courses) or the college/university level, regularly instructing students in how to respond to IDs, and integrating that instruction into daily activities, provides teachers with an opportunity to strengthen students' ability to think historically, and—dare I suggest—even to become better informed citizens.

Unfortunately, typical written responses by students to exam identification questions often include only enough information to show they are vaguely familiar with the person, event, or concept, but little or nothing that reveals their understanding as to why the item is important historically and why we as teachers chose those items for testing. Thus, in a curious way, the word *identification* is a misnomer; it can easily be—and

often is—defined narrowly to mean nothing more than the ability to simply recognize or show ephemeral familiarity with the item. In many a student’s mind, the charge *to identify* does not involve analyzing significance. What follows are suggestions to assist teachers who recognize the importance of guiding their students both in knowing how to study for exams and in improving ways to use what they have read and discussed so as to respond effectively with their answers to identification questions.¹

These suggestions (offered here in two variations or approaches) should not be especially taxing for students to follow, with practice, but they do require teachers to demonstrate the methodology regularly. Not only do teachers need to understand what to focus on, they must also practice enough with students until, ultimately, the students are able to incorporate the thinking behind these suggestions into their own exam preparation and written answers. When we are teaching about the people, events, and concepts we deem to be vital for students to understand, in order to mine the most from our courses, we should start by modeling identification-type explanations (such as with thinking out loud) when we introduce new figures, events, and concepts. Modeling makes it possible for students to witness how we think historically and how we articulate why we think the item in question is important; this involves not only identifying the item, but also placing it in context (and relating that to causes) and looking for and developing short- and long-run consequences that help to clarify significance. In short, it requires us as teachers to invite students into our minds so they can see and hear how we think historically and then to help them follow our lead.

Once teachers have demonstrated several times how they would respond to IDs, the entire class, acting as a variation of a committee of the whole, should next be given ample opportunity to do the same. This process can often be turned into a class discussion or debate, with the teacher encouraging all students to participate at one time or another and drawing attention to student responses that illustrate different forms of thinking historically, with the result being akin to a collective ID response. Eventually, teachers should ask individual students to “volunteer” to be the sole responders to potential IDs as they are introduced into class lectures, discussions, or presentations. After sufficient practice, this broader way of studying and thinking should become easier for students, if not second nature, and it will likely also result in improved grades and, one hopes, more fulfilled teachers.

Approach 1: What, Who, Where, When, Why (Five Ws)

One approach follows the journalistic principles of *What*, *Who*, *Where*, *When*, and *Why*.² These five principles are easy enough to teach, as they

guide students toward covering the areas necessary in order to write a thorough identification response that will reveal a thinking mind at work. By way of example, let's use the Spanish Armada of 1588.

What is the identification term (i.e., event, concept, or person)? Identify what it was (or who it was if the term refers to a person). This is the simpler part of the response, as it's where students begin to reveal their familiarity with the term—it's the cornerstone alongside which the rest of the response is built. In the case of our example, the Spanish Armada was a naval flotilla sent against England by Philip II of Spain with the initial aim of picking up seasoned Spanish troops in the Netherlands, then invading England, and ultimately overthrowing Queen Elizabeth I and returning England to the Catholic faith.

Who were the people involved, under what circumstances, and with regard to what relevant background? This should be specific yet concise, as it provides the historical context and addresses causes, both of which are vital to historical thinking. Our example includes Philip II, Habsburg King of Spain; Elizabeth I, Tudor Queen of England; the Duke of Medina Sidonia, who was a last-minute replacement as admiral of the Spanish fleet; and Sir Francis Drake, one of the commanders of the English navy. The intended attack by the Spanish Armada was part of the war between Spain and England that was itself the result of years of increasingly intense rivalry, mutual harassment, and conflict—religious, military, economic—between the two countries. Students should be instructed to include a couple of brief examples of this larger conflict that would demonstrate their fuller understanding of the key issues and causes involved that led to the launching of the Armada.

Where is the setting? Instruct students to provide just enough information to demonstrate their familiarity with and understanding of the course of events; in turn, this advances evidence of students' comprehension beyond surface-level familiarity with the term. In our example, the Armada sailed north from Spain toward England and then east through the English Channel for a planned rendezvous with the Duke of Parma along the northern French coastline. The Duke's troops were then to be ferried on the ships of the Armada back across the Channel to England, where the actual invasion and assault would begin. But the Spanish ships were attacked successfully in the Channel, then at Calais, and then again at Gravelines, where the English used *hellebranders* (hellburners or fireships) to damage the fleet further. After this Spanish defeat, the remaining ships of the Armada, in retreat, sailed north (to avoid encountering the English in the Channel) and then around the British Isles, suffering further losses, including the grounding of ships on the Irish coast—especially due to storms and rough seas—before finally wobbling back to Spain.

When did the event happen, or when was the concept formulated or introduced, or when did the person live? Some terms or names elicit an exact date, others an era: in this case, it's the year 1588. If students do not remember specific date(s), they should be instructed to try to estimate as close as possible to the date(s) in question; sometimes the use of the relevant part of the century will be sufficient (e.g., late-16th century in the case of the Armada). Many teachers, however, in an effort to render history more about understanding and meaning than about memorizing dates provide the necessary dates alongside the term to be identified, on the exam page.

Why is the term significant? This is the heart of an ID response, and teachers should stress that this is where students' understanding is best evidenced, beginning with their asking the following questions about the ID being answered: Why is the event, person, or concept important, both in and of itself and in a broader historical sense? Why is it important laterally (i.e., both in its own location and elsewhere), for the immediate future, and in the long run? Responses to these questions are critical for demonstrating an understanding of historical thinking. Teachers can model such analysis while they instruct students, both when they introduce new terms and on the eve of the exam, by addressing additional questions during inquiry: What led up to or caused the event, or helped set the stage for the concept, or made it possible for the person to achieve what has made him or her significant or memorable in history? What were the short- and long-term influences and consequences? Who or what was affected, and in what ways? Teachers should train students to think in terms of *causes and effects*, *impacts upon*, *short- and long-term results*, and *connections or relationships* when significance is being analyzed. Thus, the Armada was launched as the culmination of the growing conflict between Queen Elizabeth and King Philip II, especially over the fate of the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots (cousin of Elizabeth and her possible successor) and the religion of England. The Spanish defeat was a blow to Spain's prestige and finances, whereas it helped to crystallize English feelings of pride and nationalism. In this regard, the defeat of the Armada signaled the beginning of the decline in the fortunes of Spain (i.e., the end of Spain's Golden Age), even as Spain continued to be the dominant European power into the first quarter of the 17th century. In contrast, England's long rise to European preeminence can be marked by the event, while the unsuccessful attack by the Armada also added to negative perceptions held by English Protestants toward English Catholics—perceptions that would linger for centuries. Once again, students should be urged to include examples or specifics to further strengthen the impression of their understanding. This section, with its emphasis on significance, is—as noted above—the

critical part of responses to identifications, and it should be the longest, most detailed, and best supported; it should reflect the student's thinking and feel for history.

In responding to identifications by using the Five Ws approach, all information and analysis should be combined into one or more smooth-flowing, essay-like paragraphs; that is, students should be advised not to answer each of the parts separately or one at a time in a Question/Answer format. In addition, most teachers would likely consider any references to books, articles, or class lectures/discussions students might make to support their analysis an added bonus.

As a study aid for exams that include IDs, I provide students with a blank worksheet form for the Five Ws approach (see Appendix A). Such forms can be duplicated as needed and then filled out by students, one sheet for each possible ID that might be on the exam. In my classroom, typically, a couple of weeks before an exam, I give students a list of about twenty names, events, and concepts from which I will choose a smaller number that will be on the actual exam—students will be required to respond to a yet smaller number, say three out of five or five out of eight. These worksheets then become the equivalent of flashcards, only more detailed and specifically focused on responding to IDs as I expect them to.³

Approach 2: Identify, Before, After, and During (I-BAD)

An alternative approach to the above journalistic principles is one that can be remembered easily via the acronym “I-BAD,” with the letters representing *Identify*, *Before*, *After*, and *During* with regard to identifying and analyzing the significance of a person, event, or concept. Thus, if we use “mercantilism” as our sample ID term, we could train students to **identify** it as the economic concept (i.e., a set of ideas or policies or even a doctrine, really, rather than a formal theory) that argues in favor of placing the nation's economy in the service of the state in order to add to the state's power and wealth by regulating as much of the national economy as possible. The doctrine also accepts as fact the erroneous belief that the amount of wealth in the world is finite and that a nation must attempt to secure as much of that wealth as possible in order to sustain and increase its power; we should note as well that this could only be made to happen at the expense of other nations, either through competition or war.

The background—the **before**—involves students in utilizing such historical thinking skills as providing context and explaining causes or motivations. In the case of our example, it is that mercantilism developed in western Europe from the latter part of the 16th century and prevailed during the early modern period, when states such as France and England began to

become more centralized and unified in an effort to improve their military and industrial strength as they competed with other states for dominance in Europe; in fact, it was also believed that war could help to advance the economy and strengthen the state simultaneously. Examples could come from the reigns and policies of Henry IV and the Duke of Sully as well as of Louis XIV and Colbert.

For the **during** segment of the I-BAD approach, students should be taught to call attention to the ways mercantilism was implemented, thus revealing the extent to which they can demonstrate an understanding of the concept, including some of its more sophisticated nuances. Mercantilism involved accumulating as much gold, silver, and other precious metals as possible (as these, like trade, were also mistakenly considered to be finite and thus limited in quantity; this aspect of mercantilism is known as bullionism); exporting more than importing in order to improve the balance of trade; building a strong navy; encouraging the growth of domestic industry so as to increase the potential tax base; implementing domestic reforms, such as improving roads, revising the tax structure, and establishing standards for weights and measures; and acquiring colonies to provide raw materials and, eventually, protected markets for goods produced by the parent country. Providing examples of these means and practices—say, by referring to Colbert’s measures in France under the reign of Louis XIV, England’s navigation acts, and the creation in several countries of East and West India companies—would demonstrate a student’s understanding of the concept as a once-living, functioning phenomenon.

The **after** segment—the consequences and significance of mercantilism, with in-class attention focused on historical thinking components such as how different ranks and groups in society were affected in both the short- and long-term, and what national and international consequences there were—should call attention to how mercantilism led some governments to regulate commerce during the 17th and 18th centuries as well as to engage in economically motivated wars. Along with specific examples, the shortcomings of mercantilism (e.g., how the cost of the wars also contributed to some mercantilist goals not being fulfilled, as was the case with Colbert and France), the reasons behind the unevenness of success among mercantilist countries, as well as its critics (e.g., the Physiocrats and others advocating an economic system characterized by *laissez-faire*) should comprise what is addressed as part of an analysis of significance.

Just as with the journalistic approach as noted above, students should write one or more coherent paragraphs—in short-essay fashion—incorporating the specifics that the I-BAD approach calls to mind, with each of the four parts flowing from one to another and with references made to reading materials and class discussions.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this essay, one goal of these two approaches is to assist teachers as they instruct students in how to demonstrate their ability to think historically. Another is to help students to understand people, events, and concepts not as isolated from the course they're taking or the world around them—something to be memorized yet little comprehended and soon forgotten—but instead as integral to the time period in which they live, to their pasts, and to connections with the future. Thus, it would not be farfetched to say that learning how to respond effectively to identifications—along with essays, tests, constructive discussions, research papers, and critical book reviews—contributes to creating better-prepared students and, ideally, wiser and more involved citizens. To paraphrase the French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, nothing is understandable except through history. Learning how to think historically and critically contributes to an informed and thinking citizenry.

Notes

1. The directions I provide include the charge to “identify and analyze the significance of” two (or three, or five) of the following four (or five, or eight). Then, I append the following note: “Analyze” means to determine the nature and relationship of the component parts, to explain the importance of something or someone in order to bring about understanding. Think in terms of “causes and effects,” “impacts upon,” “results” (both short-term and long-term), and “connections” or “relationships” as you determine the significance of each of your choices. Be focused and to the point—but *also detailed and thorough enough so the significance is clear*; include only what is relevant in order to identify and to analyze the significance.

2. I liberally adapted this description of the use of these journalistic principles from Dr. Carol Pixton, my wife and a history teacher at the Polytechnic School in Pasadena, California; she also has long AP experience, including as a grader of exams for more than two decades and as a College Board consultant.

3. Also useful educationally would be to encourage (or assign) students to work in groups of three or four, thus dividing the study preparation work and then exchanging this information and discussing it among themselves in order to help one another to fine-tune their skills.

Appendix A

Worksheet for Preparing to Answer Identifications (Identify and Analyze Significance using the Five Ws Approach)

Item (event, concept, or person):

What:

Who:

Where:

When:

Why:

Causes and Effects:

Impacts Upon:

Results (short-term):

Results (long-term):

Connections/Relationships: