"It's not that simple": Re-Thinking Historical Writing Tasks Based on Insights from Disciplinary Experts

The standard response of any historian in almost every case is: it's not that simple. The challenge, of course, is the tension between exploring questions to their full complexity and ambiguity on the one hand and the fact that we know that you [teachers] only have one period...and have a lot of things to cover. That's a really hard thing to reconcile.[1]

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DRAWING CONCLUSIONS about the past is not straightforward. Those who investigate history conduct work with ambiguous information as they navigate sometimes-opposing views and construct interpretations about complex issues—work that is especially challenging within the constraints of primary and secondary schools. Yet students practiced in the work of history develop similar expertise. They learn to discriminate among sources of information, recognize multiple perspectives, and develop evidence-based arguments in the face of uncertainty. Further, understanding how knowledge is constructed and comes to be accepted as "truth" is a powerful tool that students can acquire through a disciplinary approach to history instruction. The practices embedded in the study of history hold value for everyday citizens, regardless of whether they will become experts in the field.[2]

Analytical reading and writing are embedded in a disciplinary approach to history instruction and present opportunities to extend

students' literacy practices. In the United States, adolescents struggle with reading and writing. On recent national assessments, only 24% of students demonstrated proficiency in writing and 34% to 37% in reading, depending on grade level.[3] These results show great disparity among socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups in the United States as well.[4] Yet literacy proficiency is important to success in college, the workplace, and civic life.[5] Social studies classes are prime spaces for extending students' literacy practices and historical understanding.

In the field of history, U.S. educators and researchers have come to rely on the Document-Based Question (DBQ) to assess and develop students' historical knowledge and argument writing. However, this task has been criticized for not being disciplinarily authentic and is often not accessible to lower grade levels.[6] Relatively recent policy initiatives in the United States emphasize disciplinary thinking and communicating conclusions through inquiry (in the C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards[7]) and argument writing (in the Common Core State Standards[8]). Thus, the time is ripe for developing a better understanding of what writing opportunities give students a chance to practice and convey their disciplinary thinking alongside their argument writing.

Figuring out this challenge would enable students and teachers to integrate literacy and history more effectively and address the demands of the Common Core and C3 Framework simultaneously. Success with the Common Core will require all subject areas to address literacy; success with the C3 Framework will require that social studies become a priority in U.S. schools. Here, we take both sets of goals seriously and attend to the need for assessment and curriculum materials that target historical thinking and argument writing. Through interviews with historians, we identify aspects of a common writing assignment (the DBQ) that are consistent and inconsistent with promoting historical thinking and writing in U.S. schools. We then use these interviews to propose guidelines for assignments and assessments that could give students more authentic opportunities to write and think historically. We also share assignments we have developed and tested that embrace such guidelines and explore the implications of those assignments for classroom use.

Literature Review

What Students Write in U.S. History Classes

When teachers assign reading and writing in secondary social studies classrooms in the United States, the focus typically involves reading comprehension and summary of information[9] and the use of textbooks as authoritative sources of information.[10] Indeed, in a questionnaire given to students as part of the 2014 U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress history assessment, students reported writing "long answers to questions or assignments for history/social studies" 32% of the time, writing "reports" 12% of the time, as well as "read[ing] material from a textbook" 64% of the time and "read[ing] extra material not in [the] regular textbook" 38% of the time.[11] These questionnaire results do not clarify the meaning of reports or long answers; however, Stuart Greene found that when asked to write "reports" in history classes, college students tended to summarize information rather than analyze ideas or develop an argument.[12]

If writing opportunities emphasize argument writing, there's a good chance they follow a document-based question format. The DBQ was first introduced as an assessment as part of the Advanced Placement (AP) American History exam in 1973, seven years after the initial launch of the AP American History exam in the United States.[13] Secondary students (primarily 16- and 17-year-olds) may choose to take the AP American History exam at the end of one year of study that is typically structured chronologically in a course designed to prepare for the exam. The DBQ tasks include a set of historical texts or artifacts and allow for interpretive or argumentative writing. Responses tend to use a five-paragraph structure. After the DBQ was introduced, the AP American History exam continued to include multiple-choice questions and an essay in response to a prompt without sources. Yet the introduction of the DBQ marked the commitment of U.S. testing agencies—Educational Testing Service and the College Board—to provide opportunities for students to practice doing the work of historians, despite the fact that the assessment item is not "an exact replication of the historical method."[14] The use of primary source sets and prompts calling for analysis had been introduced to many AP U.S. history teachers

through the U.S.-based Amherst Project in the 1960s and 1970s, which created curriculum materials that represent historians' work for classroom use.[15] The Schools Council History 13-16 Project in Great Britain similarly grounded historical study in disciplinary thinking and practice, but was more far-reaching at its height. Even though broad coverage of many topics persists in history classrooms in the United States, DBQs (or iterations of them) are used with some regularity as opportunities to periodically dig into a topic more deeply or work on literacy or historical thinking.[16]

Yet such assignments have generated critique. Upon its initial introduction, people criticized the artifice of the DBQ (e.g., limited time, use of pre-selected documents), which constrained its representation of true historical work.[17] More recently, S. G. Grant, Jill M. Gradwell, and Sandra K. Cimbricz argued that the standard DBQ approach to integrating writing in social studies lacks historical authenticity and therefore prevents students from engaging in or demonstrating disciplinary thinking.[18] One study suggests that the particular prompt of a DBQ can elicit different levels of historical thinking, such that designing interpretive writing tasks for high school students with historical thinking in mind can support their argument writing and disciplinary thinking.[19]

More recent efforts (such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-supported Literacy Design Collaborative) to develop historical writing tasks aligned with argument writing outlined in the U.S. Common Core have also not resulted in disciplinary thinking.[20] And sample Common Core assessments designed by Smarter Balanced, an assessment consortium in the United States, did not ask students to write arguments about history topics, much less think historically.[21] In none of these examples do we see students participate in real-world writing that they might use outside of school or writing for authentic audiences and purposes as literacy researchers champion.[22] Instead, students tend to write these five paragraphs with the teacher as their main audience and a grade as their main purpose.[23]

How Students are Prepared to Write in Classrooms

In addition to thinking about what students write, the structures and supports that facilitate students' learning of historical writing warrant attention. As Chauncey Monte-Sano found in one classroom, having

students write regularly was not enough to develop their argument writing and historical thinking absent instruction toward those goals.[24] High school students who only practiced writing tended to write summaries of information instead of drawing inferences or making arguments. In this classroom, the textbook and lecture notes were students' main resources, and history was treated as information to learn rather than to deliberate and construct.

In contrast with this approach, researchers have identified key features of instruction that facilitate students' learning of argument writing and historical thinking: approaching social studies as inquiry and interpretation, providing multiple sources to analyze and question, structuring and supporting students' reading, discussing the texts and questions that students write about, making the expectations for writing explicit, providing models of good writing, and modeling and coaching aspects of the writing process.[25] In other words, when teachers take a disciplinary approach to social studies and provide structured opportunities to engage with texts and develop arguments in a writing process, students' historical thinking and argument writing improve. When done well, writing in social studies can help students develop disciplinary thinking, understanding of the content, and written communication skills.[26]

What We Know About Historians' Writing Practices

Studies of writing in history have largely been grounded in philosophy of history or analysis of student work.[27] Writing an argument is the cornerstone of historians' work and embeds their disciplinary thinking.[28] To construct interpretations, historians analyze and question the documentary record with particular attention to recognizing biases in sources, comparing evidence, situating evidence in its context, and taking into account different perspectives and multiple causes.[29] Historical interpretations rely on the public display of evidence to substantiate claims: that is, a claim cannot stand without evidence to support it.[30] The inclusion of examples, details, footnotes, and quotations exemplifies this aspect of reasoning. Stating where evidence comes from (i.e., sources of quotations and information) allows others to understand and evaluate the basis for one's claim. Furthermore, historical interpretations must account for the available evidence.[31] This may involve altering interpretations

to accommodate contradictory evidence. Comparing different and contrasting documents is a visible form of this type of reasoning.

In a study of historians' writing, Jack Schneider and Sivan Zakai examined the writing processes of history doctoral students during a year when they were constructing their dissertations. The researchers identified "signature competencies" of historical writing, including identifying patterns, telling stories grounded in historical evidence, adapting conclusions based on compelling and challenging evidence, and translating the "foreignness" of the past for their audience.[32] This study lends empirical weight to ideas from philosophers of history about the importance of evidence-based interpretation and contextualization in historical writing. It highlights that disciplinary thinking comes across in historical writing and that a driving purpose of historical writing is to make arguments for particular interpretations. But we know little about what kinds of school-based opportunities might encourage *students* to do so at more accessible novice and intermediate levels.

One of the biggest differences between expert and novice writers is their sense of the task or the purpose of an assignment, as well as their goals in writing.[33] Greene's research found that this idea of task representation applies to history as well.[34] When faced with historical writing prompts, historians understood that their task was to construct an argument through analysis of information and situate evidence in context, but non-expert college students did not have the same understanding of the task, and typically recited or summarized information instead. The directions for these tasks—writing reports and problem-based assignments—called for argument and consideration of evidence, yet those directions were not enough to prompt interpretive work. This is similar to Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia's assertion that novice writers transfer information or take a "knowledge telling" approach to writing, whereas experts transform knowledge as they write by bringing their own knowledge and thinking to bear.[35] In the context of an AP U.S. history course, Kathleen McCarthy Young and Gaea Leinhardt observed the challenges for students in transitioning from reporting information from documents (e.g., "knowledge telling") to constructing their own interpretations on the basis of the documents (e.g., transforming knowledge) when completing DBQ assignments.[36] From these studies, it is clear that students do not conceptualize historical writing in the same manner

as experts in the context of history classrooms in the United States. And the tasks that researchers and educators typically offer are, by themselves, not enough to shape students' conception that classroom-based historical writing involves evidence-based argument.

Method

Design

To think further about what kinds of writing assignments might represent the work of the discipline in more authentic ways and support students' historical writing and thinking, we conducted a case study of historians' conceptions of and approaches to historical writing.[37] In this study, we ask: How did historians define good historical writing? What forms of writing did historians report they produced? What did historians attend to when engaging in a typical document-based writing task intended for secondary history students in the United States?

Participants

In order to ensure a range of perspectives, the eighteen participating historians reflected the most recent profile of history Ph.D.s in the United States in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity.[38] In particular, 56% of our sample was male, 44% was female, 83% were White, and 17% were from underrepresented ethnic and racial groups. Participating historians also represented a range of subfields (e.g., U.S. history, pre-1500 world history, modern world history, public scholarship), time periods in which historians earned a Ph.D., and current positions within and outside of academia (see **Figure 1**). Given the particularities of historians' areas of emphasis, we refer to historians by number (1 through 18) and do not share many demographic characteristics when discussing individuals in order to protect the identity of our research participants.

Data Sources

We interviewed eighteen historians twice about their writing process, the kinds of writing they produce, their ideas about good historical writing, and their reactions to a document-based question

Historian	Area of Expertise	Ph.D. Generation	Position at Time of Interviews
H1	U.S. history—Progressive Era	1990–1999	Full professor
H2	Global history, Pre-1500—Latin America	2010–present	Ph.D. candidate, online journal editor
H3	U.S. history—American west and environmental history	2000–2009	Associate professor
H4	U.S. history—Late19th-century social and cultural history	2010–present	Ph.D. candidate, columnist
H5	Global history, Pre-1500—Ancient Egypt and Greece	2000–2009	Associate professor
H6	U.S. history—Women's history and public history	2000–2009	Assistant professor
H7	Global history, Post-1500—Early modern Germany	Before 1990	Full professor
H8	U.S. history—African American history	1990–1999	Full professor
H9	U.S. history—Public history	2000–2009	Director of historical site
H10	U.S. history—Digital history	2000–2009	Director of online archive
H11	U.S. history—Early 1900s urban reform	Before 1990	Full professor
H12	Global history, Post-1500—East Asia	2000–2009	Associate professor
H13	U.S. history—Public history	1990–1999	Museum curator, preservationist, and researcher
H14	Global history, Pre-1500—Ancient China	1990–1999	Associate professor
H15	Global history, Post-1500—Modern Europe	Before 1990	Full professor
H16	Global history, Post-1500—Latin America	2000–2009	Associate professor
H17	Global history, Post-1500—Africa	2000–2009	Associate professor
H18	Global history, Post-1500—East Asia	2010–present	Assistant professor

Figure 1: Participants in the case study of historians' conceptions of and approaches to historical writing.

that represents a middle-school version of these historical writing assignments. Interviews included a combination of think-aloud protocols with examples of writing and writing assignments, as well as open-ended questions. In addition to interviews, historians shared artifacts of their writing processes as well as assignments they use to teach writing, and nominated examples of "good" historical writing.

The DBQ we asked historians to think aloud with and reflect on included a central question ("Were African Americans free after the Civil War?") and two sources (one letter to the New York Freedman's Association from an African American minister working in a Southern city at the end of the war and a second letter from a group of African Americans living in a small Southern town to the commander of their military district two years after the Civil War ended). This DBQ had fewer, but longer, sources than is typical of those created by the College Board and was used originally with eighth-grade students as an assessment (the College Board more often makes DBQs for high school students).[39]

Data Analysis

We transcribed interviews and used the software program Dedoose to facilitate analysis. We conducted multiple analytic passes of the data and identified patterns that emerged from the data[40] related to historians' conceptions of good historical writing, their own writing processes, their reflections on a typical document-based writing assignment given to students, and the genres of writing in which historians engage. We used these identified patterns as a set of codes. **Figure 2** shares sample codes with examples from our analyses of how historians thought about the writing task itself. In addition to coding for how historians thought about evidence in the sample DBQ, we also coded for how historians thought about the DBQ prompt and focal question, how they thought about the nature and role of argument, and the thinking they believed the task promoted and constrained, as well as structure and organization, definitions of key concepts, and word choices. In addition to coding historians' work with and thinking about the document-based writing task, we developed and applied codes related to historians' thinking about good historical writing

Code	Interview Excerpt
Parent Code: Evidence	
Child Code: Fit between evidence & question	But I think the sources actually do, do a good job showing—of showing—giving us a glimpse into what it must have felt like in these particular moments. So 1865, you know, the war is not over—has not been over that long and people are hopeful because, you know, the Union troops are there and they're, you know, the emancipation has happened and all of that. Two years later, things look different. Things look very much like African Americans are not going to be able to hold out or achieve the kinds of things that they had hoped. So it's a very, um, the question is provocative, the sources are really rich and provide a great kind of—to me, almost a visual—I have a visual image in my head of this sort of environment and, um—and because it's 1865 and 1867 it gives you a sense of change. (H17-2)
Child code: Headnote & attribution	We would like as much as possible the information about the person who wrote it. So, you know, James Lynch, he at least has a name. But it doesn't, there's not very much about him except that he's a, you know, who he is in terms of his occupation. But I would have loved much more about Lynch. Lynch—was he a former slave? Maybe he was a freedman. He's from Baltimore, that's in slave territory. Um, he worked as a missionary and teacher in Savannah, Georgia. I mean, how did that work? I mean, people were sent from, I mean, Baltimore is north of Savannah, but it's still kind of in the South. You know, Washington, so it's closer to the North. I—more about individuals is always good, I think. Because otherwise it's, well, this is just a representative African American, as opposed to, this is a person. (H15-2)
Child code: Important ways of working with evidence	"[reads source] Excerpt adapted from a letter written by James Lynch to the New York Freedman's Relief Association, January 4, 1865, Savannah, Georgia." Okay. Uh, "Letter from 24 African Americans." In 1867, so two years later—and students often don't pay close attention to time and the implications of that—"Congress divided the South into five military districts to ensure rights for African Americans. In this letter, African Americans from one town write the commander of their military district to describe their complaints and ask for protection." So, from Calhoun, Georgia rather than Savannah, so a different place. I'm not familiar with Calhoun, I don't know how big it is. Uh, Savannah was I think even at the time a decent-sized town, though it experienced quite a bit of destruction from Sherman. But, uh, I don't know what Calhoun's situation was. (H12-2)
Child code: Number of sources	And here where, um, they're really forced to use both of them, we only have two sources. Um, but that judgment's being made for them and I think it shortchanges the work of history which is a sifting process, um, not that these aren't vital and crucial sources, um, but there's ways in which…I think it limits the creativity. (H4-2)

Figure 2: Sample coding of historians' work with the DBQ.

Code	Interview Excerpt
Child code: Problematic ways of working with evidence	I mean I think the question of scale is a really important one, because we just, you know, I wouldn't want to just learn, like read a letter, or like—I would need to know something about this James Lynch guy, who strikes me as already very fascinating. But I would need to know so much more before I even approached this letter. Like, the letter on its own doesn't—it doesn't give me enough to go on. And I think professional historians know that there's—there have been, not lies in letters, but there are ways of describing situations that are completely alien to what's going on because someone has a particular agenda or, you know, is trying to make things seem better or worse than they are. So there's a whole lot of like meta-issues that would probably need to be covered and that are leeched out of or bleached out of this exercise. (H10-2)
Child code: Secondary sources	There is some idea that if you just have students working with primary sources, they can do history. When in fact, no scholar would actually approach the primary sources without either first…or at least in the, while you're working with those sources, very actively grounding him or herself in the secondary literature and trying to figure out the meanings from the different arguments and interpretations that scholars have put together. So, in that way, it is very different from the way historians would work. (H1-2)

Figure 2, cont'd.: Sample coding of historians' work with the DBQ.

and genres of historical writing. We then double scored 10% of the data to attain reliability before coding independently (i.e., Cohen's kappa of .87 for applying codes related to historians' analysis of the secondary school writing assignment).

We coded the data systematically using Dedoose, looked for evidence that challenged these codes, revised codes as necessitated by the evidence, and confirmed our findings. We then looked for patterns across historians' responses. We used Dedoose's analytical tools to look beyond the application of any one code and identify code co-occurrence, as well as compare code application across participants with different demographic characteristics. For example, this comparison allowed us to see whether there were patterns across historians from similar subfields or of similar academic rank. Through our analyses, we identified aspects of a common writing assignment (the DBQ) that historians defined as consistent and inconsistent with the nature of their work.

Findings

Overall, we found that writing arguments grounded in documentary evidence is fundamental to historians' work and to DBQs; however, historians' arguments differ significantly in form from the DBQ.[41] In addition, historians may write for multiple audiences and, therefore, their purposes for writing are broader in scope and more complex than students writing a DBQ. What counts as "good" historical writing in the discipline holds implications for what such writing might involve in the secondary history classroom.

According to historians, "good" examples of writing in their discipline demonstrate thorough examination of evidence, use of a wide range of sources, and transparency about their interpretation of those sources. As Historian 11 put it, "you want a sense of confidence that there's empirical completeness." Good historical writing should also capture the reader's interest, by "opening up questions in the reader's mind" (H2-2) and showing why "history is relevant here" (H3-1). When asked, historians held up a variety of examples of "good" historical writing that met these criteria, ranging from non-fiction scholarly works like *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern Word* (2013) by Giorgio Riello, to more experimental historical narratives like *The Unredeemed Captive* (1994) by John Demos, or even compelling historical fiction or non-fiction written by journalists, such as *Confederates in the Attic* (1998) by Tony Horwitz.

Similarities Between Historians' Conceptions of Writing and the DBQ

Engagement with questions and sources to construct arguments. According to these historians, writing begins with consideration of historical sources and the questions they bring to those sources. The ultimate goal is to develop an argument on the basis of evidence (found in the sources). As one historian said, "this seems like the most important and foundational way that historians work… reconstruct the basic raw material, think through it, and try to come up with an argument" (H1-2). A central part of developing arguments is questioning and analysis of the sources, which includes understanding the origins of the evidence (e.g., who wrote a source? when? why?). Another historian reflected on the sources, "we do read

things like this, we do try to look very carefully at it…you really do need to know who's writing to whom and what the framing is and who would be reading it. So, what we generally think of as audience" (H10-2). The DBQ sample struck historians as representative of the kind of work they do—students are presented with a set of historical sources and are expected to develop a claim in response. Understanding those sources and where they came from are key to constructing convincing claims.

Ways of working with primary sources. Another key part of historians' writing process is their questioning and analysis of primary sources. Historians seek original sources "actually written by the people" (H7-1) from a particular place or time, in order to compare perspectives and contexts. For example, one historian described researching almost 200 different mentions of one historical figure, each mentioning "coming from a different genre, and different author with a different political perspective, different historical contexts" (H16-1). As part of this process, historians ask questions of their sources in an iterative, back-and-forth manner. As one historian described, "what I ask myself when I'm reading is what is this text, what kind of text is this, what is it for, and how does it make sense?" (H14-1). Not unlike their work with primary sources, historians felt that the DBQ provided students with an opportunity to ask questions about the origins of sources, the author's perspectives, and the context in which they were created. Historians generally appreciated that the DBQ offered students firsthand primary sources that provided a "sense of what people on the ground were doing" (H10-2), as well as "evidence of what people thought and experienced at the time" (H15-2).

Evidence is foundational. Based on their questioning and analysis of primary sources, historians develop claims or interpretations grounded in the evidence. Although historians may have initial, general ideas on their topic, their arguments are ultimately grounded in their sources and may change as they conduct research. One historian explained, "I may discover that the sources don't speak precisely to the point I want to make, or that I have it exactly backwards" (H4-1). Another historian described the process of developing claims as "hypothesis testing," as he extracted different hypotheses from his "data," or sources (H11-1). Although historians shared concerns

about the limited scope of the DBQ sources provided, overall, they felt that the two sources would enable students to develop more than one interpretation in response to the DBQ prompt.

Differences Between Historians' Writing and the DBQ

Purposes that guide writers.   For historians, writing is an opportunity to learn and communicate with an audience, rather than an assessment as most writing is for secondary students. It is not surprising, then, that historians and students have different and more or less evident purposes for writing. When thinking through their own work and the DBQ, historians focused consistently and iteratively on their purpose for writing. In their own work, historians typically started with a purpose or question that guided their initial work and then refined that purpose or question as they researched, organized ideas, and wrote. One historian shared, "You start with a question you think is pretty simple and then as you think more about it you decide it's really complicated…And then you decide that because it's really complicated you have to narrow the question down…What these documents help you do is narrow the question down" (H7-2). In some cases, historians completely changed their purpose once they discovered sources that conflicted with or challenged their initial ideas. When working with the DBQ, historians took the central question ("Were African Americans free after the Civil War?") as their purpose and chafed at its lack of precision (e.g., which African Americans? where? when exactly?) and suggestion that a yes or no answer would suffice. As they read the sources, they refined their purpose by revising the question so that it suited the sources (e.g., "What did freedom mean for former slaves after the Civil War?"). Having and refining a purpose for writing was a typical component of writing for historians.

Even though the DBQ ostensibly provides students with a purpose for writing (e.g., the question or prompt), we know from research that students will often decide on a claim before reading the sources and then find evidence to support their claim rather than constructing their claim as they consult with the sources.[42] Especially given the timed nature of most DBQ writing exercises, students' purpose may be shaped more by the need or desire to get the writing done than by a goal to construct an argument that is grounded in consideration of the sources. This different sense of purpose and ways of working with sources could

be alleviated with instruction and different pacing. For example, one historian with experience with younger students suggested putting the sources first and the writing prompt after to try to address these concerns.

Greater complexity and nuance. We also noted important differences between historians' conceptions of writing and the conception of writing presented by the DBQ. Not surprisingly, historians' felt that truly disciplinary writing was more complex in that historians identify their own questions rather than being handed questions to answer, and they make more subtle arguments that account for greater nuance. As one historian shared:

> I have an issue with this two sides of the story kind of framing, because there's more than two sides to the story. I know maybe for eighth graders it's right to say "yes, they were free, no they were not free"…I wanted my students to recognize the unique aspects of the post-Civil War era…So, I might rephrase the question, if it were up to me. But maybe that would confuse students. (H3-2)

On a related point, other historians noted the need to consider specific groups of African Americans—formerly enslaved people or former freedmen—and particular regions or time periods to really answer the question.

Selecting from a range of historical sources with more information about them. Historians noted that they not only work with primary sources, but that they also spend a lot of time with secondary sources, especially as they begin and get oriented to their writing. Regarding the primary sources provided, historians were adamant that they would need much more information about the sources—both the authors and their context—in order to understand them and decide how they are useful to their writing. One historian's comments were representative: "We would like—as much as possible—the information about the person who wrote it. So, you know, James Lynch, he at least has a name. But there's not very much about him except…his occupation…Was he a former slave? Maybe he was a freedman…more about individuals is always good" (H15-2). With regard to the second document, she commented, "So this document would be really much more effective if there were a little more information about the city of Calhoun, Georgia. Is it 95% White and 5% Black? Is it 5% White and 95% Black? It looks

like African Americans are certainly a minority in this town, but it—I've never heard of Calhoun Georgia." Other historians shared similar sentiments, arguing that the context of the sources is key to understanding them.

Historians also wanted far more sources available and the ability to select which sources to use, rather than have that decision pre-made for them. They noted that this would involve more in-depth research that would take additional time and effort than might be intended by a DBQ. As one historian explained:

> I know it's a time-limited task, but there are ways in which it distorts the historical process, because it's pre-selected, because it's de-contextualized, because it's transcribed…They're really forced to use both of them—we only have two sources. But that judgment's being made for them and I think it shortchanges the work of history, which is a sifting process—not that these aren't vital and crucial sources—but there's ways in which I think it limits the creativity. (H4-2)

In this case, the historian argued that the act of selecting sources itself communicates to students that there is a right answer and may discourage them from figuring out their own thinking.

Audience and form. In addition to starting their writing process with their search for and analysis of historical sources, historians also started to explain their writing process by thinking about their audience. Consider these historians' comments:

> In academic writing, I start by assessing the significance of the claim I'm going to make, I sort of assume audience and try to find something significant to say to that audience and if I feel like I have something significant to say, I try to say it well. In my popular writing, I often say, "Well, maybe this is a significant argument, but if I can't find a way to convince an audience that this is significant…to convince them in the first few lines that it is significant, there is no point in my investing the time and effort in writing the piece, because I will fail." (H4-1)

> I wanted my book to be one that could be assigned in an undergraduate or graduate classroom, but also that interested people care to pick up and read. I didn't want to dumb it down. I didn't want it to be too simple. But I wanted to pose a question that was at that larger scale that people might be interested in. (H8-1)

Others shared their experience in considering the general public who attends museums when writing for museum wall text (H5-1)

or revising their dissertations based on their knowledge of their committee members' perspectives (H7-1). Regardless of whether the work was more academic or popular, audience permeated historians' descriptions of the work they produced at different points in their careers and shaped the goals they had as they wrote.

Alongside consideration of audience was attention to the form of their writing. Beyond academic books and articles, participating historians also wrote film and book reviews, memoirs, biography or trade books, textbooks, blogs, tweets, grant proposals, analytical or commentary pieces, legal or policy writing, museum wall text, newsletters, and proposals for historic preservation or commemoration. Not once did historians report writing five-paragraph essays, although they regularly attended to claim, evidence, and reasoning in discussing their writing process.

In much of their work, historians played an active role in current discourse, either by critiquing interpretations made by others or making connections between the past and present. For example, one historian shared her work in critiquing and influencing current policymakers and others involved with her topic (which we do not specify to maintain anonymity). She explained:

> These are very fraught topics in our time, and so, you know, if historians don't get out there and contextualize, then we've got nobody to blame when policymakers invent policy…as though nothing ever happened before…So, we are hoping to reach I think somebody…who may not have ever thought about any of this before, but also ultimately, you know, physicians or social workers or policymakers or somebody, to just make the current conversation about [this topic] a little bit more historically grounded. (H6-1)

Another historian shared his efforts to critique how politicians today are using a historical period and iconic figures from it to support their arguments about current issues. He shared:

> I'm really intrigued by…how both conservatives and liberals have really begun to battle over [this] era for the first time in a major substantive way. Usually, historical memory battles and politics have been about [other topics and eras]…So, this essay really tries to argue about why people care at all about things that happened 100 years ago in politics and how [this] era has become such a rich vein for discussion… (H1-1)

The audiences that historians targeted and the forms of their arguments differed significantly from the DBQ.

Extended process for writing. As participants talked through how they wrote two of their recent pieces, it was very clear that these historians engaged in a far more extensive writing process and that their process may provide educators with ideas for supporting students.[43] For example, historians' writing began with reading and consulting different primary and secondary sources and extended from there to include note taking (including transcribing and translation as well as tracking ideas), refining their guiding question or purpose, organizing and synthesizing ideas based on research, continued research, outlining, initial drafting, continued drafting, solicitation of feedback, revision, and so on. For participating historians, writing is an iterative process. As Historian 15 put it:

> Writing is a process. It's not a process where…first you figure out what you want to say and then you write it. But what happens, in my case anyway, is that first you figure out a problem you're trying to solve, you have some ideas about how you want to solve it, and in the process of writing it down and trying to be as clear as possible, you discover where the holes are in your argument and you make your argument better in the process of writing it.

And this process relied heavily on moving back and forth between reading, analytical thinking, and composing while working with historical sources and colleagues over a period of time. One historian characterized his process as follows:

> That process—research while writing, writing to organize, raising questions, meaning further research was necessary or back to secondary sources because a primary source had led me to a different direction— was really to the good of the project. And so, my bibliography was forever expanding because I'd go into different directions. (H9-2)

Such an extensive process may not be possible in most U.S. schools as they currently exist, but the iterative approach to writing and the connections between reading, questioning, and analysis hold promise for students.

Translating Research to Practice

Throughout these interviews, historians embraced evidence-based interpretation, questioning and selection of historical sources (both primary and secondary), and audience and purpose in their explanation of their writing process and critique of a

Authentic Form

In our current project, 6th graders are writing *e-mails*, 7th graders are writing *letters* that critique interpretations, and 8th graders are writing *letters or speeches*. We also experimented with *museum wall text* and *op-eds*. Students examine *mentor texts* to understand each form.

Audience

Students write to someone *other than the teacher*. We are experimenting with how "*real*" the audience needs to be or whether a "*pretend*" audience is enough to influence student thinking. For example, if writing an e-mail to an actual person who exists, how important is sending the e-mail and getting a response?

Purpose

In our tasks, we use a "*central question*" to guide students' analysis of sources and thinking as well as a prompt to guide their composing—this is comparable to a "compelling question" (see the C3 Framework). Most questions are *open-ended* with multiple possible responses and some are narrower with *yes or no* responses. In most cases, students make *connections between past and present* in their writing.

Authentic Materials

We are incorporating *primary and secondary* sources as well as more *detailed information about origins* and creation of the sources than simply noting author, date, and place (e.g., information about those details). Students also have anywhere from *four to fifteen sources* to select from as they write.

Scaffolding

We are building in opportunities for students to *question and analyze* sources *before* constructing claims, to *make choices* among the many sources, to *discuss* and *synthesize* ideas across sources, to *plan* their thinking, and to *reflect* and *revise*.

Figure 3: Features of discipline-based historical writing tasks to support reading, thinking, and writing.

sample DBQ. Based on these interviews, we propose a set of historical argument writing task features that align with the discipline and provide greater opportunities to construct claims, synthesize information from sources, identify textual evidence, and evaluate arguments (see **Figure 3**). With colleagues, we have used these features to develop and test writing tasks for grades 6-8 that support more complex thinking and writing, as well as greater motivation for writing (as part of the *Read.Inquire.Write.* curriculum, freely available at https://readinquirewrite.umich.edu/).

Topic	Prompt	Adapted Sources Included
The Ancient Inca Empire *How did the Inca maintain control over such a large empire?*	View the Field Museum's online exhibit about the Inca: "Empire Builders," http://archive.fieldmuseum.org/ancientamericas/empire_13.asp Make an *argument* about how the Inca were able to maintain a large empire and which 1-3 primary sources the curators should add to their website. Write your argument in an e-mail to the museum curators.	• *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru, Book One and Four*, written by Garcilasos de la Vega in 1602 • *An Account of the Antiquities of Peru*, written by Juan de Santacruz Pachacuti Yamqui Salcamaygua in 1613 • *Relation of the Discovery and Conquest of the Kingdoms of Peru*, written by Pedro Pizarro in 1571 • *Chronicle of Peru*, *Part Two*, written by Pedro Cieza de Leon in 1553
Reconstruction *Was Reconstruction mostly a story of triumph or tragedy for African Americans?*	Analyze the documents to learn more about the Reconstruction era and the experiences of African Americans during that time period. Develop an *argument* in response to the central question that is grounded in the sources. Write a letter to the curators of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and argue whether they should emphasize the story of triumph or tragedy in the section of the "Slavery and Freedom" exhibit on Reconstruction.	• *Letter written by the Committee of Freedmen*, Edisto Island, South Carolina. October 20 or 21, 1865 • *Marriage certificate* of Thomas and Jane Harris from Lebanon, Tennessee. April 1866 • *Report on the Lincoln School* by Louisa Jacobs, Savannah, Georgia. March 1866 • The *14th Amendment* to the U.S. Constitution, passed in 1866 and officially made into law in 1868 • *Group portrait of African American legislators* in the 41st and 42nd U.S. Congress. Published in New York by Currier & Ives, 1872 • *Testimony against the Ku Klux Klan* by Abram Colby. Given to a U.S. congressional committee in Washington, DC, 1872 • Photograph of the first African Baptist Church published in *Harper's Weekly* in New York. June 27, 1874 • *Red Shirts Battle Plan*, South Carolina, 1876 • Entry from the *Journal of President Rutherford B. Hayes*, written in 1877

Figure 4: Two writing tasks and accompanying sources.

Two tasks represent these features: an e-mail to Chicago's Field Museum curators of an online exhibit about the Ancient Inca and a letter to the National Museum of African American History and Culture about how they should represent Reconstruction in their exhibit (see **Figure 4**). The Inca task asks students to make an argument for an interpretation of how the Inca maintained control over such a large empire; specifically, they argue for the inclusion of sources that help explain this better than an existing museum exhibit on the topic. In this task, sixth-grade students work with up to four primary sources. The prompt begins with a real representation of a historical issue in an online museum exhibit and asks students to write an e-mail to an actual audience—the curators. Classes that first piloted this task selected one e-mail to send and enjoyed receiving a response from the Inca exhibit curators. The Inca prompt is open-ended, whereas the Reconstruction prompt is narrower, offering two clear responses. The Reconstruction task asks students to make an argument for an interpretation *after* considering and rebutting counterarguments or counterevidence; that is, they construct their own interpretation of the issue, but reconcile their view with others. The prompt begins with asking students to use historical sources to develop an overarching interpretation of an important time period to inform the design of an exhibit on the time period today, linking past and present. Students are asked to write in a real-world form: a letter. When piloted, eighth graders did not submit their letter to the National Museum of African American History and Culture; however, they could do so. Eighth-grade students consulted up to nine primary sources to survey the time period (in other investigations, students also consult secondary sources). For each source, we include detailed headnotes with information about the authors, audiences, and their contexts rather than a summary of the source, which has been more typical.

These tasks shape not only the product, but also the process of writing. They are the driver and culmination of one-week "investigations," and as such shape instructional activities for the week and present many opportunities to work on reading and analytical thinking, in addition to writing. The tasks are not just assessments, but opportunities to learn. Of course, these tasks take longer than a one-period assessment; however, students are able to more fully develop their disciplinary reading, thinking, and writing when engaged in a more complete writing process and avoid the
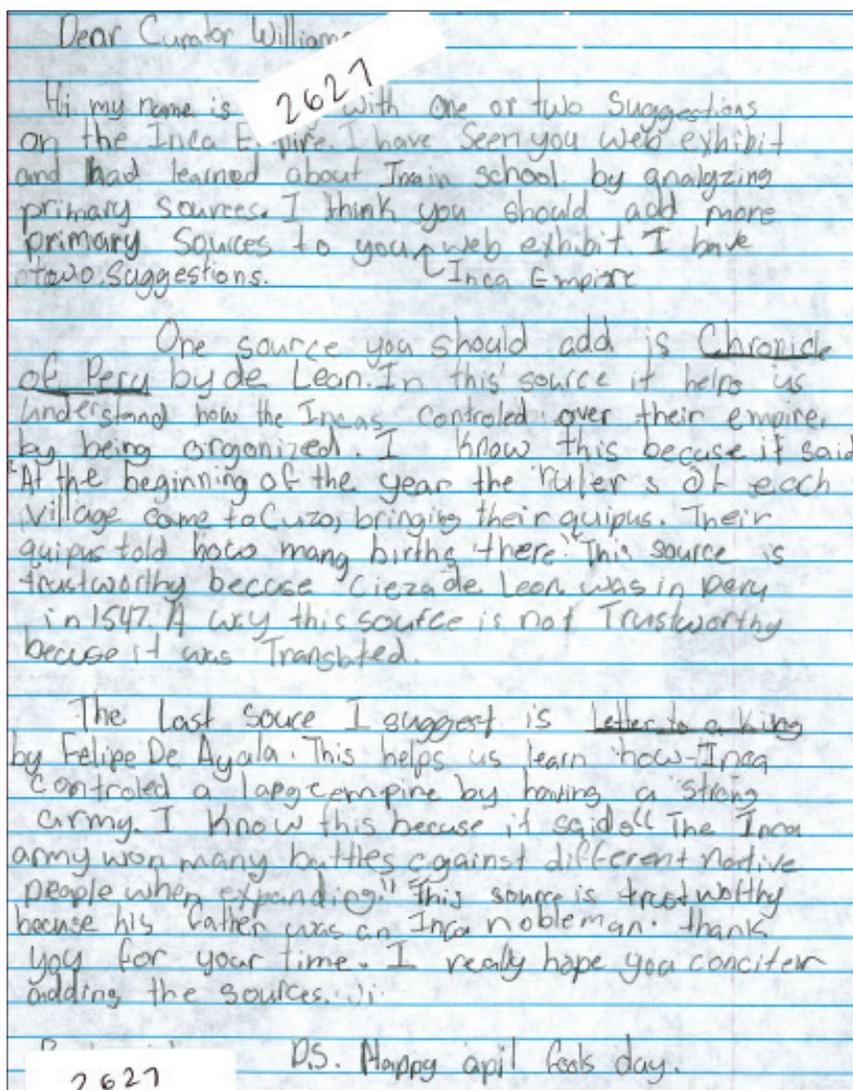
Figure 5: Sample of a sixth-grade student's e-mail about the Inca Online Exhibit (completed at the end of the third investigation).

limitations placed on their thinking and writing by more constrained tasks. In completing these tasks, students evaluate and synthesize different kinds of sources, and respond to more complex questions than have been previously given to middle-school students by researchers.

One week may seem like an impossible amount of time to sacrifice in social studies classrooms. However, after completing four of these one-week tasks, students have shown impressive gains in disciplinary reading, thinking, and writing as a result of this time investment.[44] We are currently tracking their growth as they continue participating in these tasks in eighth grade. In the end, shifting to extended writing tasks is a re-thinking of the pacing and purpose of social studies that emphasizes complex disciplinary literacy practices and understanding of content.

Work from a sixth-grade student who is an English learner and who reads at grade level highlights the kind of thinking and writing possible with an inquiry approach to social studies, more authentic writing tasks, and a supported writing process (see **Figure 5**). The student wrote an e-mail in response to the third task of the first year using this curriculum, and so had experienced three weeks of instruction related to historical reading, thinking, and writing beforehand. The student includes a claim in the first paragraph about making changes to the exhibit. The student's claim does not share a reason or justification in this task (but did so later in the year). The student selects and shares specific evidence that includes quotations and information about the authors, as well as preliminary reasoning about the origins and reliability of sources. Given time constraints, less attention was paid to style and rhetoric in order to pay greater attention to disciplinary thinking and argument structure. Although she could develop her reasoning further, the student crafts a coherent argument in response to an open-ended prompt and a set of eight sources: Complex work for a sixth grader.

Conclusions

The Document-Based Question and exercises like it have been ubiquitous as a tool to facilitate and assess learning in history classrooms for the purposes of both teaching and research. Given the renewed focus on disciplinary thinking and writing in the United States encouraged by the Common Core State Standards and C3 Framework, it's time to develop a greater range of writing opportunities in history and social science classrooms. This study suggests that revised writing tasks could more effectively promote historical thinking and writing. Such tasks could include many

of the features already embedded in DBQs, but also add several new features: a real audience and purpose, headnotes with detailed information about the sources and their context, secondary sources, opportunities to select sources, links between past and present, and a range of genres that rely on argument.

What we ask students to write doesn't always give them a chance to do the kind of reading, thinking, and writing that we hope to cultivate (as educators) or observe (as researchers). Using expert practice as a touchstone is one way to conceive of and carefully craft assignments that attend to the purpose, audience, and form of historical writing. Developing assignments with authentic materials and scaffolding can provide students with greater opportunity to develop and demonstrate their disciplinary thinking and associated literacy practices. Such writing assignments must address *what* students write, as well as *how* they write, to fulfill the potential of social studies classrooms as spaces for developing disciplinary literacy practices.

Notes

1.	Comment from case study participant (Historian 12-2).
2.	People can study or connect with history in a variety of ways and develop their expertise in *and* out of schools, such as with their family, as discussed in Roy Rosenzweig, "How Americans Use and Think about the Past: Implications from a National Survey for the Teaching of History," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 262-283). In this article, we focus on the study of history in schools and how those learning opportunities may be shaped to maximize student learning of disciplinary practices, knowing that students will bring a range of expertise and experience in studying history to these opportunities.
3.	National Center for Educational Statistics/National Assessment of Educational Progress, "The Nation's Report Card: Writing 2011" (2012), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2012470>; National Center for Educational Statistics/National Assessment of Educational Progress, "The Nation's Report Card: 2015 Mathematics and Reading at Grade 12" (2015), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_g12_2015/>.
4.	Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Sheila Nataraj Kirby, Heather Barney, Hilary Darilek, and Scarlett J. Magee, *Achieving State and National Literacy Goals, A Long Uphill Road: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005).
5.	See, for example, Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* (Washington, DC: Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, 2005); National Commission on Writing, *Writing: A Ticket to Work…Or a Ticket Out: A Survey of Business Leaders* (September 2004), <https://archive.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2540>; National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *College, Career, Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).
6.	S. G. Grant, Jill M. Gradwell, and Sandra K. Cimbricz, "A Question of Authenticity: The Document-Based Question as an Assessment of Students' Knowledge of History," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 19, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 309-337.
7.	NCSS, *C3 Framework*.
8.	National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) & Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), *Common Core State Standards*

for English Language Arts (Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

9.   Sharlene A. Kiuhara, Steve Graham, and Leanne S. Hawken, "Teaching Writing to High School Students: A National Survey," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 101, no. 1 (February 2009): 136-160.

10.   Robert B. Bain, "Rounding up Unusual Suspects: Facing the Authority Hidden in the History Classroom," *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 10 (October 2006): 2080-2114.

11.   National Center for Educational Statistics/National Assessment of Educational Progress, "The Nation's Report Card: 2014 U.S. History Assessment" (2014), <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/hgc_2014/#history/contexts>.

12.   Stuart Greene, "The Problems of Learning to Think Like a Historian: Writing History in the Culture of the Classroom," *Educational Psychologist* 29, no. 2 (April-June 1994): 89-96.

13.   John A. Valentine, *The College Board and the School Curriculum: A History of the College Board's Influence on the Substance and Standards of American Education, 1900-1980* (New York: College Board Publications, 1987).

14.   Michael S. Henry, "The Intellectual Origins and Impact of the Document-Based Question," *Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (February 1986): 16.

15.   Richard H. Brown, "Learning How to Learn: The Amherst Project and History Education in the Schools," *The Social Studies* 87, no. 6 (November-December 1996): 267-273.

16.   See, for example, "The DBQ Project" at <https://www.dbqproject.com/> and "Reading Like a Historian" at <https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons>. Also see Larry Cuban, *Teaching History Then and Now: A Story of Stability and Change in Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2016).

17.   Henry, "The Intellectual Origins and Impact."

18.   Grant, Gradwell, and Cimbricz, "A Question of Authenticity."

19.   Chauncey Monte-Sano and Susan De La Paz, "Using Writing Tasks to Elicit Adolescents' Historical Reasoning," *Journal of Literacy Research* 44, no. 3 (September 2012): 273-299.

20.   Avishag Reisman, "Evaluating 8th Grade Social Studies Teachers' Implementation of a Common Core-Aligned Literacy Intervention" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College and University Faculty Assembly, St. Louis, MO, November 20-22, 2013).

21.   See sample questions by Smarter Balanced at <https://sampleitems.smarterbalanced.org>.

22.   Nell K. Duke, Samantha Caughlan, Mary M. Juzwik, and Nicole M. Martin, "Teaching Genre with Purpose," *Educational Leadership* 69, no. 6 (March 2012): 34-39; Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, second ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2005).

23.   For critiques of teaching students the five-paragraph essay, see Nancy Flanagan's *Ed Week* blog, "Should We Teach the Five-Paragraph Essay?" from October 1, 2012, <https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teacher_in_a_strange_land/2012/10/should_we_teach_the_five-paragraph_essay.html>.

24.   Chauncey Monte-Sano, "Qualities of Historical Writing Instruction: A Comparative Case Study of Two Teachers' Practices," *American Educational Research Journal* 45, no. 4 (December 2008): 1045-1079.

25.   Susan De La Paz, "Effects of Historical Reasoning Instruction and Writing Strategy Mastery in Culturally and Academically Diverse Middle School Classrooms," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 97, no. 2 (May 2005): 139-156; Susan De La Paz, Chauncey Monte-Sano, Mark Felton, Robert Croninger, Cara Jackson, and Kelly Piantedosi, "A Historical Writing Apprenticeship for Adolescents: Integrating Disciplinary Learning with Cognitive Strategies," *Reading Research Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (January-March 2017): 31-52; Monte-Sano, "Qualities of Historical Writing Instruction"; Chauncey Monte-Sano, "Disciplinary Literacy in History: An Exploration of the Historical Nature of Adolescents' Writing," *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 19, no. 4 (2010): 539-568; Kathleen McCarthy Young and Gaea Leinhardt, "Writing from Primary Documents: A Way of Knowing in History," *Written Communication* 15, no. 1 (January 1998): 25-68.

26.   De La Paz, "Effects of Historical Reasoning Instruction"; Monte-Sano, "Disciplinary Literacy in History"; Jennifer Wiley and James F. Voss, "Constructing Arguments from Multiple Sources: Tasks that Promote Understanding and Not Just Memory for Text," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 91, no. 2 (June 1999): 301-311.

27.   Monte-Sano, "Disciplinary Literacy in History."

28.   Louis Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

29.   E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave, 1961); R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Clarendon Press, 1943); J. H. Hexter, *The History Primer* (New York: Basic Books, 1971); Mink, *Historical Understanding*.

30.   Collingwood, *The Idea of History*; Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1997); Hexter, *The History Primer*.

31.   Hexter, *The History Primer*.

32.   Jack Schneider and Sivan Zakai, "A Rigorous Dialectic: Writing and Thinking in History," *Teachers College Record* 118, no. 1 (2016): 1-36.

33.   Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 32, no. 4 (December 1981); 365-387.

34.   Stuart Greene, "The Role of Task in the Development of Academic Thinking through Reading and Writing in a College History Course," *Research in the Teaching of English* 27, no. 1 (February 1993): 46-75; Greene, "The Problems of Learning to Think Like a Historian."

35.   Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia, *The Psychology of Written Composition* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1987).

36.   Young and Leinhardt, "Writing from Primary Documents."

37.   The case study was modeled after Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014).

38.   Robert B. Townsend, "Who are the New History PhDs?" *Perspectives on History* 50, no. 3 (March 2012), <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/march-2012/who-are-the-new-history-phds>.

39.   See Chauncey Monte-Sano, Susan De La Paz, and Mark Felton, *Reading, Thinking, and Writing about History: Teaching Argument Writing to Diverse Learners in the Common Core Classroom, Grades 6-12* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014).

40.   The analysis was modeled after Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1967).

41.   Due to space limitations, we share more about historians' writing processes in "Bridging Reading and Writing: Using Historians' Writing Processes as Clues to Support Students" by Chauncey Monte-Sano.

42.   Young and Leinhardt, "Writing from Primary Documents."

43.   See Monte-Sano, "Bridging Reading and Writing."

44.   Chauncey Monte-Sano, Ryan E. Hughes, and Sarah Thomson, "From Form to Function: Learning with Practitioners to Support Diverse Middle School Students' Disciplinary Reasoning and Writing," in *Design Research in Social Studies Education*, ed. Beth C. Rubin, Eric B. Freedman, and Jongsung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2019), 31-57.