

WOLFOS ACADEMY • STUDENT GUIDE

Ask Better Questions. Read Like a Historian.

A practical guide connecting the WolfOS Inquiry Cycle, the Right Question Institute's Question Formulation Technique, Reading Like a Historian, and digital source verification.

QUESTION	INVESTIGATE	EVALUATE	ARGUE
Generate and improve questions.	Examine sources and context.	Compare evidence and credibility.	Build a conclusion from evidence.

GRADES 9-12 • HISTORY, CIVICS & SOCIAL STUDIES

How to Use This Guide

Historians do not simply memorize facts. They ask questions, investigate evidence, compare accounts, and explain what the evidence supports. This guide gives you a repeatable process for doing that work in class, during research, and whenever you encounter a historical claim online.

THE BIG IDEA

Do not begin by asking, “Is this source biased?” Every source has a point of view. Begin by asking who created it, when, for whom, for what purpose, and what evidence supports or challenges it.

Your Inquiry Roadmap

Stage	What you do	What you produce
1. Question	Use QFT to generate, improve, and prioritize questions.	One strong inquiry question
2. Investigate	Source, contextualize, and closely read documents.	Useful evidence and annotations
3. Corroborate	Compare sources, explain agreements and conflicts, and verify online claims.	A stronger evidence set
4. Conclude	Make a claim, cite evidence, and explain your reasoning.	A defensible historical interpretation

Quick Navigation

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3	Connect QFT and Reading Like a Historian to the WolfOS Inquiry Cycle.
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12-13	Evaluate websites and social media claims.
14	Write an evidence-based historical conclusion.
15-16	Practice the complete process and reflect.

One Cycle, Two Powerful Methods

The WolfOS Inquiry Cycle is the complete learning process. The Question Formulation Technique (QFT) helps you generate and improve the questions that drive the inquiry. Reading Like a Historian gives you the tools to investigate sources, compare evidence, and build a defensible interpretation. Together, they move you from curiosity to informed action.



WolfOS stage	RQI / QFT contribution	Reading Like a Historian contribution
1. Observe	Notice a QFocus without judging or answering it.	Preview the source and attribution; record visible details before interpreting.
2. Question	Generate many questions, label open/closed, improve, prioritize, and plan next steps.	Turn curiosity into a central historical question that can be answered with evidence.
3. Investigate	Identify the information and sources needed to answer the priority question.	Source and contextualize documents; investigate creators and claims through lateral reading.
4. Analyze	Use questions to test assumptions and uncover missing information.	Close read, corroborate, analyze perspective, and determine usefulness and limitations.
5. Discuss	Share priority questions and listen for new questions raised by others.	Use evidence, compare interpretations, challenge ideas respectfully, and revise claims.
6. Reflect	Explain how your questions and thinking changed.	Identify what the evidence supports, what remains uncertain, and what additional sources are needed.
7. Act	Use what you learned to ask informed questions and make decisions.	Apply an evidence-based conclusion to civic choices, communication, or community action.

THE CONNECTION

QFT starts and strengthens the inquiry. Reading Like a Historian tests and answers it. The WolfOS Inquiry Cycle carries the learning into discussion, reflection, and informed action.

The Question Formulation Technique (QFT)

The Right Question Institute (RQI) created the Question Formulation Technique (QFT). The method helps you produce your own questions, improve them, decide which matter most, and reflect on how your thinking changed.

REMEMBER RQI is the organization. QFT is the technique you use.

1

Meet the Question Focus

Study the QFocus—a statement, image, quotation, object, map, graph, or other prompt. Observe before anyone explains it.

EXAMPLE

QFocus: a wartime poster that says “Food Will Win the War.” First, silently notice words, images, people, and symbols.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Study a QFocus provided by your teacher. Record three details you notice before anyone explains it.

2

Produce questions

Ask as many questions as you can. Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer them. Record every question exactly as stated. Change statements into questions.

EXAMPLE

Who created it? Why connect food to victory? Who was expected to respond?
Did the campaign change behavior?

TRY IT YOURSELF

Write at least six questions without stopping to answer or judge them.

3

Improve questions

Label each question C if it is closed-ended or O if it is open-ended. Practice changing one closed question into an open one and one open question into a closed one.

EXAMPLE

Change “Was food scarce?” (C) to “How did wartime shortages affect different groups?” (O).

TRY IT YOURSELF

Label your questions C or O. Rewrite one closed question as open and one open question as closed.

4

Prioritize

Choose the questions that best fit the task—for example, three questions that will guide your reading or research. Be ready to explain why you chose them.

EXAMPLE

Select “How effective was the campaign, and what evidence would prove it?” because it requires comparison and evidence.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Star three questions that best fit the task. Circle the strongest one and explain why it matters.

5

Plan next steps

Decide where answers might be found, which sources you need, and which question should be investigated first.

EXAMPLE

Seek ration records, household diaries, food-production data, newspapers, and other government messages.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Name three different sources that could help answer your priority question. Explain what each could contribute.

6

Reflect

Explain what you learned about the topic, your questions, and the way you think.

EXAMPLE

“At first I focused on the poster’s design. My priority question shifted my attention to whether the campaign changed behavior.”

TRY IT YOURSELF

Complete: “My questions changed when... One questioning habit I will use again is...”

Source: The Question Formulation Technique was created by Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, co-founders of the Right Question Institute (rightquestion.org).

QFT Worked Example

QUESTION FOCUS A 1917 government poster reads: “Food Will Win the War.”

First, generate without judging. A group might ask: Who created the poster? What war? Why was food important? Was food actually scarce? Who was expected to change their behavior? Did the campaign work? Why use the word “win”?

Improve the Questions

Original question	Type	Improved version
Was food scarce?	Closed	How did wartime food shortages affect different groups?
Why was food important?	Open	Did food conservation affect the war effort?
Did the campaign work?	Closed	How effective was the campaign, and what evidence would prove it?

Prioritize for Historical Investigation

Priority question: How effective was the food-conservation campaign, and what evidence would prove it?

Why this question? It requires more than identifying the poster. It invites students to compare the government’s message with evidence about food production, household behavior, wartime policy, and public response.

QUESTION TEST A strong historical inquiry question is focused, researchable, debatable, historically significant, and answerable with evidence. If everyone can answer it from one sentence, deepen it.

Try It

QFocus: “The same event can produce different historical accounts.”

Generate	Improve	Prioritize	Next source
Write at least 8 questions.	Label each C or O. Change two.	Star your best 3. Circle the strongest 1.	Name a source that could help answer it.

Reading Like a Historian

Reading Like a Historian, developed by the Stanford History Education Group and now offered by the Digital Inquiry Group (DIG), organizes history learning around central questions and sets of primary and secondary sources. Your job is to evaluate documents and build an interpretation—not merely collect quotations.

FOUR CORE MOVES

Sourcing + Contextualization + Close Reading + Corroboration. Skilled readers move back and forth among them instead of following them only once.

Move	Questions historians ask	Annotation code
Sourcing	Who created this? When? For whom? Why? What could the author know?	S
Contextualization	What was happening then? What ideas, events, or conditions shaped this source?	CTX
Close Reading	What does the source claim? Which words, details, tone, and evidence matter?	CR
Corroboration	Where do sources agree or disagree? Which account is better supported, and why?	COR

The Historian's Reading Order

1. Read the attribution first. Do not skip the author, date, source type, or audience. 2. Predict. Based on the source information, anticipate the author's perspective and purpose. 3. Read and annotate. Mark claims, evidence, loaded language, and uncertainty. 4. Compare. Put the document into conversation with other sources. 5. Revise. Update your answer when new evidence changes what you can defend.

Move 1: Sourcing

Sourcing means thinking about a document's origin before accepting its message. A source can be useful even when it is inaccurate, exaggerated, or one-sided. For example, propaganda may be weak evidence for what actually happened but strong evidence for what leaders wanted people to believe.

Ask	Why it matters	Useful sentence starter
Who created it?	Identity, role, experience, and access shape what the author could know.	Because the author was ___, they may have known...
When and where?	A source created during an event differs from a later memory.	Created in ___, this source reflects...
For whom?	Authors adjust messages for private, public, friendly, or hostile audiences.	Because the audience was ___, the author likely...
For what purpose?	To inform, persuade, justify, entertain, sell, recruit, or remember?	The author's purpose may explain why...

EXAMPLE

A 1917 U.S. government poster was created by an agency trying to persuade civilians to conserve food. Its public audience and persuasive purpose make it useful evidence of the government's message, but not enough to prove that families obeyed.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Source the next document: Who created it, when, for whom, and why? Then predict one strength and one limitation.

AVOID THIS TRAP

Do not write only "This source is biased." Name the perspective and explain how it affects the source's usefulness or limitations.

Move 2: Contextualization

Contextualization places a source in its time and place. People in the past did not know what would happen next, and they did not necessarily share today's assumptions.

Context lens	Look for
Time	Events immediately before and during the source's creation
Place	Local conditions, geography, institutions, and communities
Ideas	Beliefs, values, laws, customs, and language common at the time

Context lens	Look for
Power	Who had authority, rights, wealth, education, or access—and who did not
Change	What was new, contested, threatened, or becoming possible

Context sentence frame: At the time this source was created, ___ was happening. This matters because it helps explain why the author ___.

EXAMPLE In 1917, the United States had entered World War I and mobilized resources for soldiers and allies. That context helps explain why the poster presented household conservation as patriotic war work.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Write two facts about what was happening when your source was created. Then explain how one fact changes the way you understand the source.

Move 3: Close Reading

Close reading means slowing down to determine exactly what a source says, how it says it, and what evidence it offers. You are not highlighting everything. You are marking details that help answer the inquiry question.

Mark	What to notice	Annotation
Claim	The author's main point or explanation	Box it; write CL
Evidence	Facts, examples, observations, data, or quotations used as support	Underline; write E
Language	Emotionally loaded words, labels, comparisons, repetition, or certainty	Circle key words
Perspective	Values, assumptions, interests, and experiences shaping the account	Write POV
Uncertainty	Missing information, vague wording, contradiction, or a claim needing verification	Write ?
Connection	A detail that agrees, conflicts, or connects with another source	Write COR

EXAMPLE The phrase “Food Will Win the War” uses certainty and a direct connection between private behavior and military victory. That wording supports a claim about persuasion and urgency; it does not provide measured results.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Box the source's main claim, underline one supporting detail, circle one loaded or important word, and write one question in the margin.

Read Against the Grain

Sometimes a source reveals more than its author intended. Ask what the document assumes, leaves out, or treats as normal. A law may reveal who lawmakers feared; an advertisement may reveal social expectations; a complaint may reveal both a problem and the speaker's priorities.

EVIDENCE ≠ PROOF BY ITSELF

A quotation becomes useful evidence only when you explain how it supports your claim and why the source deserves weight.

Fast Annotation Routine

Margin 1: Write S and CTX notes before reading. Text: mark CL, E, POV, and ?. Margin 2: summarize each paragraph in five words or fewer. Bottom: answer, "What does this source help me know—and what can it not prove?"

Move 4: Corroboration

Corroboration means comparing independent sources. Agreement can strengthen a conclusion, but repeated claims are not automatically independent evidence. Five websites copying the same article still trace back to one source.

Compare	Questions to ask
Claims	Do the sources describe the same event or outcome in the same way?
Evidence	What specific facts, records, observations, or data support each account?
Access	Which author was in a position to know? Was the account firsthand, secondhand, or much later?
Purpose	Could the source's audience or goal explain the difference?
Context	Were the sources created at different times or under different conditions?
Silences	Whose experiences are absent? What evidence would help resolve the conflict?

EXAMPLE

The poster claims conservation helps win the war. A diary describing meatless meals agrees that some families changed routines, while food-consumption data shows whether that behavior was widespread. Together they answer different parts of the question.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Compare two sources. Write one exact agreement, one exact difference, and one reason the accounts may differ.

When Sources Disagree**1**

Name the exact disagreement

Do not say only “the sources are different.” Identify the conflicting claim, fact, interpretation, or emphasis.

2

Investigate why

Compare timing, location, audience, purpose, access to information, and the evidence each source uses.

3

Seek another source

Look for an independent record, data set, image, artifact, or account from another perspective.

4

Reach a qualified conclusion

State which interpretation is better supported, what remains uncertain, and what new evidence could change your answer.

**HISTORIAN
LANGUAGE**

Use suggests, indicates, supports, complicates, contradicts, likely, and based on the available evidence instead of claiming more certainty than the sources allow.

Reading Images, Maps, Graphs & Objects

Visual sources also make arguments. Treat their design choices as evidence, but do not assume a photograph, map, or graph is neutral.

Source type	Read closely	Verify
Photograph	Framing, angle, pose, caption, what is inside/outside the frame	Creator, date, location, staging, cropping, original caption
Political cartoon	Symbols, labels, exaggeration, irony, target, intended reaction	Publication, audience, event referenced, artist's perspective
Map	Title, legend, scale, boundaries, projection, categories, missing places	Who made it, data date, political choices, comparison map

Source type	Read closely	Verify
Graph/table	Axes, units, baseline, intervals, sample, categories, missing data	Original data, collection method, full time range
Artifact	Material, wear, size, design, function, owner/user	Provenance, location found, comparable objects, museum record

EXAMPLE

A photograph shows three demonstrators facing a police line. Observation: officers stand behind the marchers. Inference: officials may have expected conflict. Question: was the image staged, cropped, or selected because it was unusual?

TRY IT YOURSELF

Choose one visual. Write three observations, two evidence-based inferences, and two questions you must answer before trusting those inferences.

**IMAGE
RULE**

Describe what you can actually observe before interpreting what it means. Separate I see... from This may suggest...

The Observe-Infer-Question Routine

Observe	Infer	Question
List visible details without explanation.	Explain what those details might mean and cite the detail.	Ask what you need to know before trusting the inference.
"Three workers hold signs; a police line stands behind them."	"The police presence may suggest officials expected conflict."	"When and where was the photo taken? Was the scene staged or cropped?"

Perspective Check

Ask who is centered, who is pushed to the edge, and who is missing. Then ask whether the visual source represents a typical experience or an unusual moment selected because it was dramatic.

Verify Historical Claims Online

DIG's Civic Online Reasoning work adds an essential modern habit: read laterally. Instead of staying on an unfamiliar site and judging it only by appearance, leave the page and investigate what trustworthy, independent sources say about it.

1

Pause and practice click restraint

Before liking, sharing, quoting, or reading deeply, stop. Ask whether the claim matters and whether the source deserves your attention.

2

Investigate the source

Open new tabs. Search the organization, author, or account. Look for ownership, expertise, reputation, funding, and a record of corrections.

3

Find better coverage

Search for reporting, scholarship, archives, or institutional sources with stronger evidence and relevant expertise.

4

Trace the claim to its origin

Follow citations, reverse-search images when possible, find the earliest version, and check whether the original source actually supports the claim.

EXAMPLE

A post says a photograph shows a 1930s headline. A lateral search finds the image in a museum archive with a 1918 date and different location. The original claim is false even though the photograph itself is authentic.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Choose one online historical claim. Record: who posted it, what independent sources say about the poster, the claim's original source, and your final confidence level.

Red flag	What to do
A screenshot with no link	Search the exact wording and locate the original context.
A dramatic historical image	Check date, location, caption, and whether the image was reused from another event.
Many sites repeat the same claim	Trace them backward. They may all copy one unsupported source.
A verified-looking account	Investigate who controls it; visual polish and follower count are not evidence.
A claim that makes you angry or excited	Pause longer. Strong emotion can make weak evidence feel convincing.

CRITICAL IGNORING

Your goal is not to read every source carefully. Spend attention where it is earned; quickly leave low-quality or manipulative sources and seek stronger evidence.

Build an Evidence-Based Conclusion

A historical argument is a reasoned answer to an inquiry question. It should make a defensible claim, use carefully selected evidence, explain how the evidence supports the claim, address complications, and acknowledge limits.

Part	What it does	Sentence starter
Claim	Answers the inquiry question with a specific, defensible position.	The evidence indicates that...
Evidence	Provides relevant details from more than one source.	According to Source A...
Reasoning	Explains why the evidence supports the claim.	This matters because...
Corroboration	Shows how sources agree, conflict, or add different pieces.	Source B corroborates/complicates this by...
Qualification	States limits, exceptions, uncertainty, or a condition.	Although ___, the available evidence...

Model Paragraph

EXAMPLE

The food-conservation campaign likely influenced household behavior, although the poster alone cannot prove its overall effectiveness. The poster's direct command shows that the government wanted civilians to connect daily food choices to military victory. However, because the poster was designed to persuade, it is stronger evidence of the government's goal than of public compliance. Ration records, consumption data, diaries, and newspapers would be needed to determine how widely behavior changed. Therefore, the poster supports a claim about wartime messaging, while additional independent evidence is required for a claim about results.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Write a four-sentence mini-argument: (1) claim, (2) evidence from Source A, (3) corroboration or complication from Source B, and (4) qualified conclusion.

Final Check Before You Submit

✓	Ask yourself
☐	Did I answer the inquiry question—not just summarize the topic?

✓	Ask yourself
☐	Did I source and contextualize the evidence I used?
☐	Did I explain how each piece of evidence supports the claim?
☐	Did I compare more than one source and address disagreement or uncertainty?
☐	Did I avoid claiming more than the evidence can prove?

Complete Inquiry Practice

Use this page with any document set, image, graph, artifact, or online claim.

1. Question	2. Investigate	3. Corroborate	4. Conclude
Write 8+ questions. Label C/O. Change two. Choose one priority question.	Source and contextualize each item. Closely read for claims, evidence, language, and limits.	Create agreements/disagreements. Verify online claims and seek missing perspectives.	Write a qualified claim. Use evidence, reasoning, and corroboration. State uncertainty.

Inquiry Question

Source Notes

Source	Sourcing + context	Key evidence	Usefulness + limits
A			
B			
C			

Corroboration Notes

Sources agree that...	Sources disagree about...	I still need...

Working Claim

Reflection & Quick Reference

Reflection

Prompt	Your response
Which question changed the direction of your investigation?	
Which source did you trust most, and what specific reason earned that trust?	
Where did sources disagree, and how did you handle the disagreement?	
What did you believe at first that you later revised?	
What evidence would make your conclusion stronger?	

Quick Glossary

Term	Student-friendly meaning
Primary source	Evidence created during the period or by a participant/witness; its value depends on the question.
Secondary source	A later interpretation that analyzes primary and other secondary sources.
Perspective	The position, experiences, assumptions, and interests shaping how someone understands an event.
Reliability	How consistently and accurately a source supports a particular claim—not a permanent label for the whole source.
Corroboration	Comparing independent sources to test and strengthen an interpretation.
Lateral reading	Leaving a webpage to investigate the source and claim through other tabs and independent coverage.

Sources & Further Learning

Right Question Institute. “What Is the QFT?” rightquestion.org/what-is-the-qft/. The required attribution for adapted QFT materials appears on page 3.

Digital Inquiry Group. “Reading Like a Historian,” “History Assessments,” and “Civic Online Reasoning.” inquirygroup.org and cor.inquirygroup.org.

Reading Like a Historian was developed by the Stanford History Education Group. The same team now operates as the Digital Inquiry Group.

FINAL REMINDER

Good historical thinking is not about distrusting everything. It is about giving each claim the level of confidence its evidence has earned.