

The Stages of Historical Analysis

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Teach students a deep analysis of historical sources that goes beyond superficial observation to produce complex arguments.

Writing Focus: *analysis*
Project Stage: *analyzing evidence*
Teacher Preparation: *medium*
Student Preparation: *none*
Estimated Time: *30 minutes*
Home Discipline: History

EXERCISE

Prep Work: Instructors may wish to compile their own version of the “Stages of Analysis” handout reflecting the themes of their course. Advice on this process appears in the “Reflections” section. Alternatively, the version provided will work perfectly fine. Students should ideally have read several primary and secondary sources and be in the process of composing a paper but this exercise can be done any time.

Step One: (5 minutes) Open by discussing the importance of continually analyzing one’s sources throughout the writing process: while brainstorming an argument, during drafting, and when refining one’s thesis through revision. The purpose of this exercise is to enable students to model their process of analysis on the steps employed by a practicing scholar.

Step Two: (5 minutes) Distribute the handout and explain how it works. Though it is a single document, the shifting formats signal a series of draft stages with increasing analytical sophistication. Statements in regular font are from stage 1, underlined text is added in stage 2, italicized text is added in stage 3, and bold text is added in stage 4, the final revision. Strikethroughs signal text that has been discarded in the revision process. The aim of the exercise is to read the stages sequentially, identify what analysis has been done, what has changed from previous drafts, and what should happen to improve the analysis in the next revision.

Step Three: (2-3 minutes) Have a volunteer read the first stage, and then lead a discussion asking students to evaluate the quality of the analysis. It won’t take much nudging for them to realize that the analysis is incomplete.

Step Four: (15 minutes) Select different volunteers to read remaining stages, and be ready to help interpret the formatting to ensure each stage is read correctly. After each reading, lead a discussion on what has changed/improved, what the writer did with evidence to produce the improvement, and where there remain opportunities for continued revision.

Be sure to draw attention to the substantial change in the main claim of the paragraph as a result of the deep dive into the evidence. While the first stage merely introduces evidence, leaving it to speak for itself, the later stages do more sophisticated analytical work. Stage 2 expands upon and interprets the evidence. Stage 3 introduces secondary sources to contextualize the scholarly debate about the meaning of the primary source. Stage 4 finally plays off the evidence to lead the writer to his (or as it happens in this case, my) own conclusion.

Step Five: (2-3 minutes) Wrap up by emphasizing that good analysis entails substantial revision. Encourage students to use the four stages as a technique to determine whether their analysis is fully formed or incomplete as they write, and as a guide to advance their analysis to a deeper level.

REFLECTIONS

By analysis, scholars mean the interpretation of source evidence in pursuit of an original claim. Many students have difficulty understanding what instructors mean by analysis, even after the term is defined for them. Instructors may also struggle to teach analysis since it feels like second nature. These dynamics contribute to underdeveloped analysis in student papers and confusion about what instructors mean when they ask for “more complete” analysis or push students to “go deeper.” This exercise demystifies the process by demonstrating how a practicing scholar analyzes sources in progressive stages, thereby empowering students to incorporate new techniques into their own writing.

In history courses, I’ve found this exercise particularly useful in teaching the necessity of using multiple pieces of evidence, and demonstrating the connections between them, to support historical arguments. Breaking this process into individual steps allows students to easily see the shortcomings in the earlier stages where multiple pieces of evidence are either not present or not related to each other in a clear fashion. The different stages show how to avoid simplistic or superficial readings of evidence, avoid selection bias in source use, and help students become more attuned to complexity as a historical concept. Used to this end, the stages can motivate students to think as historians in ways that carry over to reading comprehension and class discussions. Finally, while the exercise shows students the importance of establishing context for their evidence, it also illustrates how the author’s analytical voice must remain present in order for the reader to understand how the evidence supports a claim of causality or change over time.

The right handout is the crucial piece of prep work. Though you’re free to use the one provided, the exact number of stages, and the way the different stages are defined, may differ according to your pedagogical needs. It is easiest and most effective to use something you have written yourself, which allows you to reflect for your students on how you constructed a particular piece of analysis and offer an insider’s perspective on the strategies at play in moving from one stage to the next. Students are usually excited to read something their instructor wrote, especially when they have the opportunity to see drafts that show how you encountered challenges similar to what they confront in their own writing. It makes the scaffolding of the stages seem more real and achievable, while modeling what you see as the bullseye for their own analysis. While

created for use in a history course, the techniques of this exercise are transferable to any disciplinary setting and can be adapted to fit the needs of any subject matter.

When creating your own handout, format it as a series of nested stages with titles, so students benefit from a concrete language for identifying and remedying issues of analysis. The stages should show an increasingly complex engagement with evidence, progressing from the obvious and superficial to deeper analytical work in service of an argument. In this way, the handout models how to move from merely reporting on source content to demonstrating the meaning of evidence for their claims. From my experience in class, students will retroactively realize that their analysis stalled in stage two or stage three on previous assignments, and they now see why that was problematic. In my history senior research seminar, a student who had struggled with analysis all semester declared during the exercise, “I finally get it! I finally understand what your comments about deeper analysis meant!” Her analysis on the final paper, which focused on eighteenth-century female pirate trials, improved dramatically. On the draft, she had left whole sections of evidence where the female pirates on trial claimed to be pregnant unanalyzed, which missed a golden opportunity to make a claim about gender expectations in the trials. On the final revision, she deftly interpreted these passages and connected them directly to her claim about the ability of female pirates to adapt male or female identities based on their specific needs. While not all students experience such epiphanies, most improve their ability to identify insufficient analysis after doing the exercise, even if they haven’t fully transitioned into applying the lessons to their own writing yet.

In teaching this exercise, I’ve been struck by students’ ability to identify the incomplete analysis at each stage, but they often struggle to explain precisely *why* it is problematic. In that sense, student engagement with the handout at first mirrors the analytical difficulties the exercise is designed to address. I’ve found it useful to ask them what more they as readers would like to know about the writer’s thinking at each stage of the process. This helps them imagine the audience for their own papers and gives them practice deepening their observations.

Beyond the benefits during class time, I’ve found that naming the different stages of analysis doubles as a useful language for commenting on papers, pinpointing for students how far their analysis has progressed and what they still need to do to fully engage their evidence.

THE STAGES OF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS (HANDOUT)¹

Key

Normal = First stage of analysis: Introduce initial evidence

Underlined = Added at second stage: Expand on and begin interpreting evidence

Italics = Added at third stage: Introduce secondary sources or additional primary sources

Bold = Added at fourth stage: Play off evidence to advance your own conclusion

~~Strikethrough~~ = Insufficient conclusions deleted at next stage

What was the nature of the relationship between the imperial cities Augsburg and Donauwörth? Donauwörth had a long history of orienting its religio-political policies toward the example of Augsburg. During the 1530s, Augsburg played a particularly important role as a proxy for Donauwörth's interests at regional and imperial diets. The exact nature of their relationship on the eve of Donauwörth's introduction of the Reformation emerges from two instances of intercity correspondence in 1537-8. In January 1537, shortly before Augsburg's abolition of the Latin mass, Donauwörth's council wrote its neighbor for guidance in initiating a "reformation of our statutes, old customs, and traditions.... Since we and our forefathers have emulated the statutes and ordinances of the praiseworthy city Augsburg in such affairs," Donauwörth hoped Augsburg would send a copy of its statute books to assist the council.² Augsburg's magistrates agreed to help Donauwörth, "which we wish to show good neighborliness."³ ~~Good neighborliness, therefore, was the basis of their relationship. For Donauwörth's council, the logical first step in reforming its statute books was to seek advice from its larger neighbor. It hoped to secure Augsburg's support, in the process obtaining external models to guide and legitimize its own magisterial initiatives. The norm of good neighborliness guided this process.~~

¹ Adapted from Christopher W. Close, *The Negotiated Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111-13.

² StadtA A, RA 571, 1537 January 13.

³ StadtA A, RA 571, 1537 January 18.

*Conversely, Augsburg's council wished to display "good neighborliness" to Donauwörth. This emphasis on neighborliness appears throughout sixteenth-century urban correspondence, underscoring the significance of regional relationships among imperial cities. Indeed, its frequent use as a social norm has led several scholars to examine how neighborliness operated in different contexts. Rolf Kiessling has described the importance of the neighborhood for the interaction of imperial cities with surrounding polities,⁴ while Pascale Sutter has asserted that neighborhoods played a central role in regulating relations among burghers in the late medieval period.⁵ In the context of the urban Reformation, Emily Fisher Gray has argued that within individual communities, "good neighborliness" served "as a standard on which the two competing confessions could negotiate the practical challenges of physical proximity."⁶ ~~Thus, good neighborliness shaped the relationship between Augsburg and Donauwörth in fundamental ways.~~ **This could occur on the regional level as well, as the invocations of neighborliness in Augsburg's correspondence with Catholic Bavaria and the bishop of Augsburg imply. Between imperial cities, however, good neighborliness was not limited to matters of religious reform or confessional conflict. Rather, it signified the importance of regional support networks to the introduction of any type of reform, religious or secular. On the intercity level, good neighborliness served less "as a principle of [confessional] coexistence"⁷ than as an acknowledgement of the interdependencies that linked cities together. Neighborliness was a complicated norm that could mean different things in different contexts. For Augsburg's council, good neighborliness meant it had a***

⁴ Rolf Kiessling, "Die 'Nachbarschaft' und die 'Regionalisierung' der Politik," in *Europa 1500*, eds. W. Eberhard and F. Seibt (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986), 262-78.

⁵ Pascale Sutter, *Von Guten und Bösen Nachbarn. Nachbarschaft als Beziehungsform im spätmittelalterlichen Zürich* (Zurich: Chronos, 2002).

⁶ Emily Fisher Gray, "Good Neighbors: Architecture and Confession in Augsburg's Lutheran Church of Holy Cross 1525-1661" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 13.

⁷ Gray, "Good Neighbors," 39.

responsibility to aid Donauwörth both in its statute reform and in later times of religious need. Good neighborliness, therefore, could both enable different confessions to live together and encourage polities to agitate for the introduction of their confession in neighboring communities.