History as a Human Creation
Designed by Catherine Denial
Assistant Professor of History ¤ Knox College, Galesburg IL

Many students think of history as 'everything that happened in the past,' rather than as a human creation that weaves fragments of surviving documents, artifacts, and memory into a narrative whole. This can present a real challenge in fostering historical thinking among our students, as they are often unfamiliar with the types of evidence historians use, the ways in which historians weigh the value of that evidence, and the process by which historians write plausible, compelling arguments as a result.

The following is one way to prompt students to think of history as a complex, messy, human construction. It works well as an exercise to undertake on the first day of class, as it requires no prep work on the students' part. It has the added benefit of altering their perception of what history 'is' from the very beginning of the semester.

1. Collect your Sources

For this exercise you'll need five or six sources related to a topic in history that's relevant to your class. Two examples are linked below – a collection of sources related to the American Revolution, and one related to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

When selecting your sources, it's important to do two things:

a) Focus on visual, rather than written, sources. This is for the practical purpose of making the exercise manageable in terms of time, and in order to make the sources as accessible as possible to students who have different levels of reading comprehension and familiarity with historical analysis. You can add one or two written sources also, but keep them short, and make sure the language is not impenetrable.

b) Settle on a core set of sources that everyone will work with, but then find an additional source or two that stand to substantially influence the narrative a student would tell when viewing the source packet as a whole. For example, the linked sources about the American Revolution tell a familiar story about guns, battles, and key leaders. Add a short excerpt from Abigail Adams' 'Remember the ladies . . . ' letter, however, and students have to consider women's stories. Replace Paul Revere's 1770 illustration of the Boston Massacre with one circulated by abolitionists in 1856 – placing Crispus Attucks front and center – and racial issues become important. Similarly, add the photo of Cuban soldiers to the packet on the Cuban Missile Crisis, and you prompt students to consider the conflict from more than an American perspective.

 ✧ American Revolution sources
 ✧ Cuban Missile Crisis sources

2. Instruct Your Students

a) In class, divide your students into manageable groups – four or five students a group is a good number.

b) Give each member of each group a source. Remember to give at least one group a packet with an additional source that's different from what all the other groups see.

c) Ask the students to order the sources in whatever way makes sense to them. Assure them there is no right or wrong way to make order from the evidence in front of them.

d) Ask them, as a group, to then tell the story the sources tell them. Emphasize that this does not mean holding up the sources one by one and describing what they see – it means treating the sources as a whole, and writing a story. (If they need help, they can begin with 'Once Upon a Time . . .') These stories will be shared, so they should write down the story they agree upon.

e) Give the students 15 to 20 minutes to write their narratives.

f) At the end of that period, have the groups share their narratives with the rest of the class. You will end up with as many different interpretations of the sources as you have groups.

3. Analyze the Results

Ask the class why the stories differed from each other to such a degree. Students will commonly hit upon the following reasons (and there can be many more):

1. They brought prior knowledge to the exercise
2. That prior knowledge differed between individuals and groups
3. They interpreted the sources according to concepts and ideas that were important to them (patriotism, for the Revolutionary documents, for example, or a political commitment to peace)
4. They were influenced by their personal identity (their race, class, gender, nationality, and faith systems, for example)
5. They were limited by the amount of time they had to complete the exercise

This allows you to point out that these considerations also shape the history that professional historians write. You can talk about the research historians do in order to contextualize their primary source research. You can ask students to consider the way that historical scholarship has changed over the last several decades as the academy has slowly

opened up to a greater number of individuals from different backgrounds. You can prompt students to imagine what else historians do, other than write books, and how that might shape time and energy they can devote to research.

Hopefully the groups with the slightly different source packets will have told a slightly different story. When students are then asked why the stories differ, it's easy for them to spot that some groups had different sources than others and wrote their narrative accordingly.

This allows you to talk about what archives and museums keep and throw away, and how this shapes what historians can hypothesize about the past. If you don't have any documents about women, you don't tell their story; if you are illiterate, your story is often lost. It's a good idea to ask students to imagine how they would find the stories of a wide variety of groups – where would we look to find the stories of slaves, for example? How would we ethically seek the history of Native American peoples? This allows you to demonstrate that there are multiple kinds of sources that historians should consider when doing their work, and to stress that history is not just 'what happened' but 'what we are motivated to find evidence of' and equally 'what we have available to us' because of cultural values that shift over time.