

# Strengthening Student Thinking and Writing about World History

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Five years ago, our school district embraced Understanding by Design as the organizing framework for curriculum.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on enduring understandings and essential questions led the sixth grade social studies teachers to reevaluate what we were teaching in our World History Curriculum. Together we worked to identify the essential questions and challenges that would be the underpinnings of our curriculum:

- How has geography shaped history and culture?
- How do art and architecture reflect the values of a society?
- How has religion shaped the historical and cultural development of civilizations?
- Evaluate the role individuals played in history
- How have societies tried to achieve and maintain order?
- Evaluate the impact of technology on the way people live

In each unit, we tailored these questions to the region of the world under study. The first question “How has geography shaped history and culture?” is used in almost every unit. For example, when learning about Ancient Egypt, students consider how the geographic features of Egypt (for example, the desert, the Nile River and delta, and the Mediterranean Sea) have shaped its history and culture. Similarly, when studying Greece, we revise the fourth statement above to read, “Evaluate the role that Alexander the Great played in Ancient Greece.”

## A Template for Writing

Many of these essential questions became writing prompts. When students arrived in the sixth grade, we aimed to strengthen their writing skills. They often made broad, general statements that they did not substantiate, and they frequently failed to elaborate on their ideas. As a result, we undertook an initiative to help students strengthen both their writing and thinking. We wanted to ensure that, by the time students left the sixth grade, they would have a solid writing foundation. Instead of focusing on writing an entire essay, we introduced students to a template for writing a paragraph that we refer to as a TEES paragraph.

## TEES Template

**T** stands for topic sentence. Students state clearly the main idea of their paragraph.

**E** stands for evidence. Students provide evidence (information) that supports their topic sentence.

**E** stands for expansion. Students expand on their evidence with additional facts and details (time period, place, people, etc.) in order to provide the reader with more information about the topic. Students are encouraged to try to include at least two extra pieces of specific information, such as examples.

**S** stands for summary sentence. Students wrap up the paragraph with a sentence that shows a relationship between the topic sentence and the evidence.

We used the writing template in Handout A when we introduced them to this more structured approach to writing (**Handout A**, Pullout p. 1). It helped ensure that during the drafting stage students included all the elements we were looking for in their paragraph – they could do a self-check and if something was missing they could rethink their responses and add the necessary information prior to writing their final drafts.

We introduced the TEES template during our study of Egypt. We told students to respond to the prompt: “Analyze how the geography of Ancient Egypt shaped its history and culture” We found that students described the physical geography of Egypt very well, but most really couldn’t link the geography to the history and culture of Ancient Egypt. In other words, they struggled with the part of the task that demanded higher-level thinking. We concluded that our students’ writing deficiencies were sometimes reflections of deficiencies in their ability to think critically. We addressed this issue in two ways: by integrating pre-writing grids into the writing process (**Handout B**, Pullout p. 2) and by asking students to do higher-level thinking in our classes. If we demand that students think critically and analytically each day, then students’ written assignments and assessments will begin to reflect that level of thought.

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**Soldier from the terra cotta army of Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi near Xian, China.**

(Photo: D.E. Andor/  
commons.wikimedia.org)

### A Kinetic, Thinking Activity

In an effort to improve students' thinking skills (and, ultimately, their writing skills), we began to embed the essential questions into our daily lessons more overtly. For example, during our unit on China, we study Shi Huangdi, Emperor of the Qin Dynasty (also referred to as Qin Shi Huang, 259-210 B.C.E.) We spend two days reading primary and secondary sources to ascertain what Shi Huangdi did in China and to identify the policies he implemented. The statement, "Evaluate the role \_\_\_\_\_ played in history" is on the wall in our classrooms (along with many of the other essential questions and challenges). As students uncover information about his rule they consider the extent to which his policies/actions had a positive or negative impact on China – both in the short term as well as the long term. Over the course of the two days, the students engage in considerable debate about Shi Huangdi's role in Chinese history—rather than just simply listing what he did. At the end of the unit, we want students to evaluate the impact that this "first emperor" had on China's history and culture. In the past, our "exit slip" question to a lesson about Shi Huangdi might ask students to write three things they had learned about him, or to state whether they thought he was a good ruler. Many students would comment that Shi Huangdi was a "bad ruler because he was so mean."

This year, the "exit slip" at the end of the unit engaged students in a "four-corners activity." We put the statement "Shi Huangdi was an effective leader" on the board and gave students a slip of paper that read:

**Statement:** "Shi Huangdi was an effective leader."

Circle the term that best represents your view of this statement:

**Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree**

Provide information that supports your opinion on the back of this slip of paper. Be ready to explain your opinion.

As students wrote their brief, individual opinions, we posted signs in the four corners of the room echoing the four opinions, "Strongly Agree . . ." etc. Then we asked students to walk to the corner of the room that best represented their view.

In a minute, there were students at all four corners of the room, and a lively, whole-class discussion about the question ensued. One student said, "I think he was a little mean, but,

when he created the standard way to measure things, it did help unite the country, which was good." Another student said, "A little mean? He tortured the scholars, and killed people, and forced them to work on the Great Wall; that's horrible." Another countered that creating a single written [official] language for the whole nation was also good for China.

After about five minutes, we stopped the discussion and gave students the opportunity to consider what their classmates had said, and then walk to a different corner of the room if their opinion had shifted. We made it clear that there was no indisputably "correct" answer to this essential question.<sup>2</sup> Many students changed their position.

When the four-corners activity was completed, we gave students a similar question as an essay prompt. We also gave them a pre-writing grid to help them organize their thoughts and ideas for their written work, which would be graded. For example, on **Handout C**, Pullout p. 3, students can outline how Shi Huangdi affected the history of China through the imposition of a national language, the establishment of common units of measure and currency, the building of a vast network of roads, and the burning of books.

### Debate and Interpretation

As a result of our efforts to teach specific writing skills, integrate essential questions into daily lessons, and use instructional strategies that demanded a higher degree of cognitive engagement, we saw dramatic improvement in students' writing. Students still had to learn "facts," but because we demanded more of them in class with regard to their analysis and evaluation of events and individuals, their essays began to include more detailed examples and expansion points (**Rubric**, Pullout p. 4). It was exciting, in subsequent units, when we asked students to evaluate the impact of a ruler, that some began to distinguish between short-term and long-term consequences of one leader's reign. Because we integrated the essential questions into our lessons in a more comprehensive and overt way, students began to realize that historical events and the actions of individuals can be debated and interpreted in a variety of ways; that history is "messy," and that's part of what makes it interesting. 🌐

### Notes

1. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (New York: Prentice Hall, 2001).
2. Of course, during this exercise, students should not be graded on their opinion about whether Shi Huangdi was an effective leader. Being free to change one's mind is part of the setting for this activity. But students are graded afterward on the quality of their written opinion on the matter: How well does the student back up his or her opinion (pro or con) with examples, evidence, and careful reasoning?

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