Think historically? What's that? You may have heard the term but been puzzled by it. We're all familiar with historical stories we learn them from our textbooks, popular histories, movies, documentaries, and grandparents and neighbors. Historical thinking is the reading, analysis, and writing that's necessary to tell these stories.

It's not only what we know about the past, it's how we know it. Because the past is hard to retrieve, we can't travel back in time to see what happened at the Boston Massacre or at Wounded Knee, to hear Sojourner Truth's words, or understand how César Chávez and Dolores Huerta mobilized the Farmworkers Movement.

But thinking historically helps us get closer to that past to retrieve and construct a more accurate picture of what happened and what it meant. This video focuses on five aspects of historical thinking.

**Multiple Accounts and Perspectives**
Many people think of history as a single account; but in fact, we must use multiple sources to get as accurate a picture as possible of events in the past. Whether we use textbooks, original documents, photos, drawings, or film, teaching for historical thinking demands that students work with multiple accounts and learn to analyze and synthesize them. No single account written from one perspective captures the complexity of the past.

**Analysis of Primary Sources**
Primary sources are original documents and objects created at the time under study and they are vital to reconstructing the past. Historical thinking includes learning how to read, question, contextualize, and analyze these sources, as they can tell different stories about the same event. So, when we study what came to be known as the Boston Massacre, we can read a report from the commanding British officer that says that soldiers fired on the crowd of colonists without orders. We can then read a contrasting account from someone in the crowd who remembers that officer giving orders to fire. But we can't just assume that one is lying and the other isn't; instead, we have to ask questions about what these two eyewitnesses had to lose or gain with their accounts. What interests were at stake? We consider how soon after the event and for what audience each account was recorded. We look for points of agreement and disagreement between the two contrasting accounts. To be useful in retrieving the past, primary sources need to be questioned and read closely.

**Stop!**
Okay, you may be saying, "Wait a minute, this all sounds good but what about my state standards? And the fact that I'm expected to cover my textbook's 26 chapters? How does that fit in? Isn't this some 'pie in the sky' way to teach history?" Actually, teaching kids
how history is known may very well be in your state standards—at least 38 specify this learning outcome. For example, various state standards say students should be using multiple sources and learning to analyze those sources for purpose and perspective, credibility, and validity—analysis akin to what we call sourcing.

Sourcing
Sourcing is about identifying and asking questions about the origin of the source; about the author's purposes and perspective; when the source was created and for whom; about its trustworthiness. Imagine your students are working with two accounts related to the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. The first, a textbook, says, "Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. African Americans heard this and decided to boycott the buses." The second, a letter written by English professor Joan Robinson in May 1954 to the mayor of Alabama states, "There has been talk from 25 or more local organizations of planning a city-wide boycott of busses...[E]ven now plans are being made to ride less, or not at all, on our busses." This letter was written more than a year before the start of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A student who notices this learns that plans for a bus boycott preceded Rosa Park's arrest and can better understand the boycott and its causes. Alternatively, a student who ignores the date of Robinson's letter easily misses its real significance; the familiar story that depicts the boycott as an impulsive movement motivated solely by Park's arrest is left unchallenged. Sourcing the letter gets us closer to the fuller story.

Understanding Historical Context
Context is at the center of historical reasoning. Consider these words spoken by Abraham Lincoln in 1858, "I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races. I...am in favor of the race to which I belong having the superior position." Historians resist initial judgments to brand these words as bigoted and instead realize that they must ask questions. Such as, who was Lincoln talking to and for what purpose? What were the perspectives on race at the time? What political tensions was Lincoln navigating? They realize to get as accurate a picture as possible of the man, his times, and the event at which he spoke they have to contextualize these words; and this requires making connections. Lincoln did not live in a vacuum; his speeches and actions are deeply intertwined with what was going on in his own world. Context includes many different factors, from the ideologies of the day to the words that came before those under investigation. But in the big picture, historical context is about locating events and sources in time and space and asking questions to do so.

Taking a page from the math curriculum, we can say that the coordinates of history are space and time. These sources are not free-floating items that speak for themselves; their historical context matters.

Claim-Evidence Connection
When we write histories we tell stories and answer questions. To be called history, these stories must be supported by evidence. Sources, like the Lincoln speech and the Joan Robinson letter, provide evidence for claims made about the past. History isn't fiction. We can't change the story to create a more intriguing or satisfying plot. Truth claims in
history need to be supported by evidence. That is how we distinguish plausible claims from balderdash and good history from pure fiction.

Conclusion
These five elements of historical thinking are all integral to understanding how we know what we know about the past. But of course, there are more elements, concepts like causation, significance, change over time, and reading strategies like corroboration. Historical thinking is complex and it is vital to helping students become better readers, thinkers, and citizens. It's not separate from the content we want students to learn; instead, it is the vehicle that will help them master it. Explore the Clearinghouse to find teaching resources that will help you bring historical thinking into your classroom. It’s a gift your students will use for the rest of their lives.