Minnesota Humanities Center

Inquiry Lens Cards

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About

The Inquiry Lens Cards are a set of discipline-specific questions aligned with Minnesota's 2021 Social Studies Standards. They provide a framework for students to analyze sources using questions that mirror the thinking of historians, geographers, economists, and civic experts.

Designed to be printed, laminated, and used repeatedly across units, topics, and grade levels, the cards are content-neutral and work with any source. They build familiarity with disciplinary language, foster student independence, and reduce the burden on teachers to create new questions for every source.

Repeatable Routines

Routine 1: Same Card, Same Sources

Approximate Time: 15–20 minutes

All students work with the same source (or source set) using the same inquiry lens card. This structure builds familiarity with one discipline's way of thinking by focusing attention on a shared set of questions and ideas.

Best Used When:

- Introducing the routine and building familiarity with one way of thinking
- Sources naturally align with a particular discipline (e.g., maps with geography)

Set Up: Divide students into small groups and provide each group with the same source(s) and the same inquiry lens card.

Teacher establishes norms:

- "The point of the activity is to have a discussion about the sources."
- "Use evidence from the source to support your ideas."
- "You do not have to answer every question."

Activity: Students work in small groups to analyze the source(s) using the inquiry lens card. Each group selects a question from the card to guide their discussion and uses evidence from the source(s) to support their thinking. If conversation slows, groups choose another question to continue their analysis.

After working in small groups, each group shares their thinking with the class. As students share, the teacher names the disciplinary skills being practiced, such as contextualization, causation, or argumentation.

Routine 2: Stations – Different Cards, Same Sources

Approximate Time: 25–35 minutes

Students rotate through stations where the same source (or source set) is paired with different inquiry lens cards. This structure allows students to examine the same material through multiple disciplinary lenses and compare how each lens shapes understanding.

Best Used When:

- Practicing shifting between disciplinary roles and perspectives
- Comparing how different disciplines approach the same source
- Exploring the different types of information a source can reveal

Set Up: Create stations around the room, each with the same source(s) and a different inquiry lens card.

Teacher establishes norms:

- "Engage fully in the role at your current station."
- "Use the card's questions to guide your conversation."
- "Pay attention to how the lens you use shapes what information becomes visible."

Activity: At each station, students use the inquiry lens card to guide discussion or writing about the source. As students work, the teacher circulates to support transitions and deepen analysis.

After a set amount of time, groups rotate to the next station and take on a new disciplinary lens. Students leave their previous role behind and engage with the source(s) from a new perspective.

After all groups have experienced each station, the class debriefs to reflect on how. understanding changed across disciplines and what new insights each lens revealed.

Routine 3: Jigsaw – Different Cards, Same Sources

Approximate Time: 40–50 minutes

Students become experts in one disciplinary lens and then share their insights in mixed groups. This structure highlights how different disciplines contribute unique perspectives and build interdisciplinary understanding.

Best Used When:

- Practicing becoming an expert in one discipline and sharing insights with peers
- Introducing students to interdisciplinary approaches
- Highlighting how different lenses reveal distinct types of information from the same sources

Set Up: Divide students into home groups and provide each group with the same source or source set. Assign each group a different inquiry lens card.

Prepare for students to move into mixed groups with one representative from each discipline.

Teacher establishes norms:

- "Use the questions on your lens card to uncover what this source can tell you."
- "Use evidence to support your ideas."
- "Listen for what other disciplines notice that you did not."

Activity: In home groups, students analyze the source(s) using their assigned inquiry lens card. They work toward a shared understanding and prepare to explain how their discipline interprets the source, using evidence to support their ideas.

Students then move into mixed groups where each discipline is represented. Each student shares their group's analysis while others listen, ask questions, and note insights that differ from their own.

The class debriefs by reflecting on how each lens contributed to understanding the source and discussing what might be missed if only one perspective were used.

Tips for Implementation

- **Focus on time, not task completion.** Set a fixed amount of time for discussion or writing and hold to it. When students know they need to fill the time rather than finish the task, they shift from a completion mindset to an engagement mindset. This also prevents the early finisher problems without adding extra work.
- **Let students choose their questions.** As they get comfortable with the cards, have them decide which questions to discuss and explain why. This helps build metacognitive awareness of disciplinary thinking.
- **Build in time for students to record their own questions.** The questions students generate are as valuable as the ones on the cards. Learning to notice and name their own questions is a key habit of disciplinary thinkers.
- **Use physical props for younger students.** Simple role markers—like a hat, badge, or desk card—help elementary and middle school students make the mental shift between disciplinary roles. The physical transition supports the cognitive one.

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K–2 Inquiry Lens Cards

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Citizenship & Government

THE PROBLEM SOLVER

I study how people work together to make change.

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I'M THE PROBLEM SOLVER

How do people work together to change unfair rules or decisions?

How do people help their community?

What is each person's role?

What is important to different groups?

How do people make a change?

Who takes care of this community?

Minnesota Humanities Center

Economics

THE SYSTEMS THINKER

I study choices.

Minnesota Humanities Center

I'M THE SYSTEMS THINKER

How do different people make decisions?

What do people need? What do people want?

What good or service could help?

What is there not enough of?

What do people get, and what do they give up?

How does this help the community?

Where did this come from?

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Geography

THE EXPLORER

I study places.

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I'M THE EXPLORER

What connections do different groups have to this place?

How do we describe where this place is?

What is this place like?

How do people live in this place?

How do people connect to each other in this place?

How do people connect to nature in this place?

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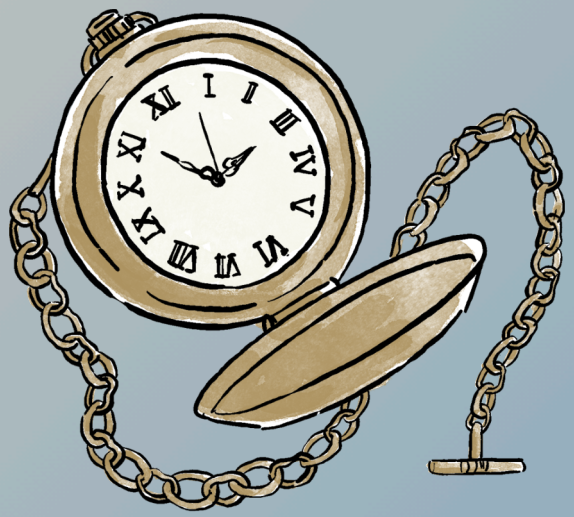
History



THE STORYTELLER

I study events.

Minnesota Humanities Center

I'M THE STORYTELLER

Whose story is told, whose is missing, and why might that be?

What does this source tell us about how people lived in the past?

How might this source make people feel?

What happened before and after this?

What was different in the past?

What is the same as now?

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3–8 Inquiry Lens Cards

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Citizenship & Government

THE PROBLEM SOLVER

I study how people work together, make rules, vote, and make sure that everyone is treated fairly.

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I'M THE PROBLEM SOLVER

I Ask...

Resistance

Ethnic Studies: *How do people work together to change unfair rules or decisions?*

Civic Skills: How do groups achieve their goals while treating everyone fairly?

Democratic Values and Principles: What are the group's shared values?

Rights and Responsibilities: What happens when someone doesn't have the same rights as others?

Governmental Institutions and Processes: How do groups decide on rules and consequences?

Public Policy: How do people take action to influence decisions in their community?

Tribal Nations: Who lived here first and how do they lead and take care of their communities?

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Economics

THE SYSTEMS THINKER

I study how people make choices about needs, wants, resources, and trade.

Minnesota Humanities Center

I'M THE SYSTEMS THINKER

I Ask...

Identity

Ethnic Studies: *How do people's identities shape the choices they make and the resources they have access to?*

Economic Inquiry: How do people decide if a choice is worth the cost?

Fundamental Economic Concepts: What choices do people make when there aren't enough resources?

Personal Finance: How do people decide what to do with their money?

Microeconomics: How do people decide what to make, use, or sell?

Macroeconomics: How do government actions affect people's well-being?

Global and International economics: How does trade help some people and create problems for others?

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Geography

THE EXPLORER

I study how places look, where they are, how they make us feel, and how people and nature connect.

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I'M THE EXPLORER

I Ask...

Identity

Ethnic Studies: *What connections do different groups have to this place?*

Geospatial Skills and Inquiry: How can maps reflect the different ways people see and understand this place?

Places and Regions: How do people describe this place and what makes it unique?

Human Systems: How do people shape the way communities grow?

Human-Environment Interaction: How do people shape places and how do places shape people?

Culture: How do traditions, beliefs and languages help us understand a group of people?

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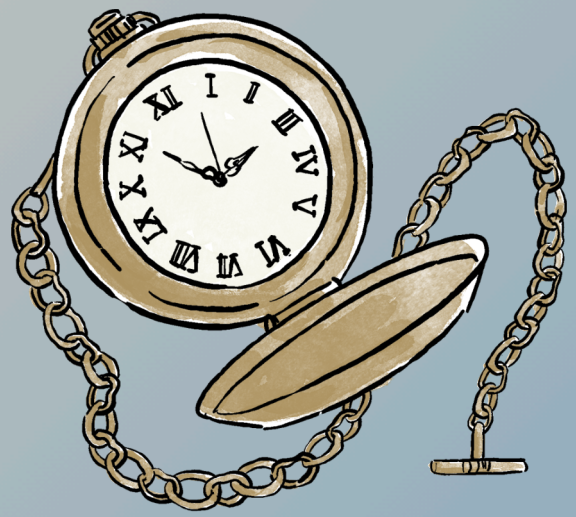
History



THE STORYTELLER

I ask questions about the past to learn what happened, why it matters, and whose stories are told.

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I'M THE STORYTELLER

I Ask...

Ways of Knowing

Ethnic Studies: *Whose perspective is included, whose is missing, and why might that be?*

Context, Change and Continuity: What is similar or different between now and the past?

Historical Perspectives: How does the story change depending on who is telling it?

Historical Sources and Evidence: What happened and how do we know it really happened?

Causation and Argumentation: Why did it happen and how do we know it's true?

Connecting Past and Present: How can learning about the past help us understand what's happening today?

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9–12 Inquiry Lens Cards: History

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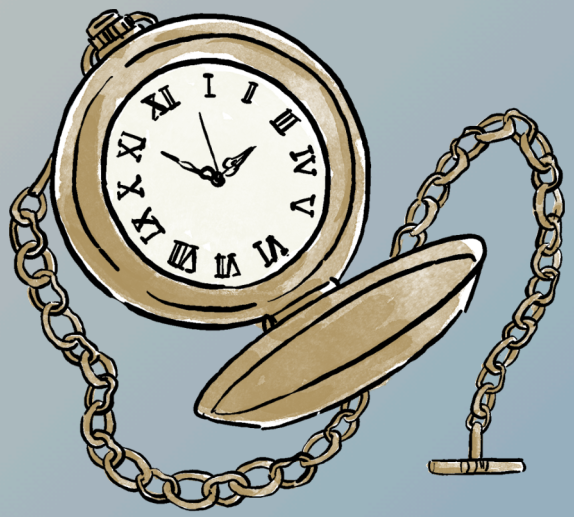
Context, Change, and Continuity



THE TIME TRAVELER

I connect people, events, and ideas across time to understand larger historical patterns.

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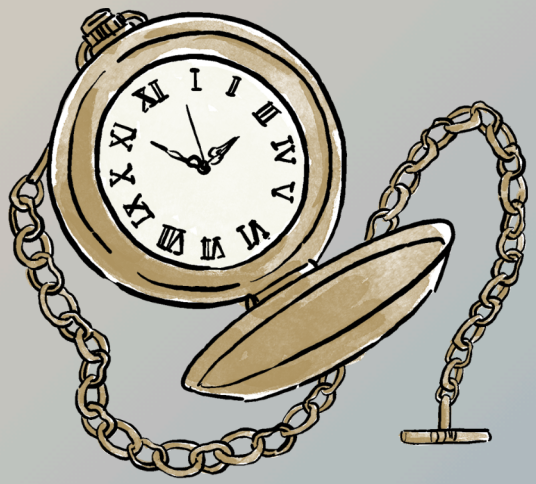
I'M THE TIME TRAVELER



I Ask...

- What conditions, events, or ideas are reflected in the source?
- What is similar to today, and what is different?
- What else is going on at the time this source was created?
- How does this compare to what other sources say?
- What larger patterns or themes does this connect to?

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Historical Perspectives

THE PERSPECTIVE SEEKER

I examine how different people experienced and understood the same events.

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I'M THE PERSPECTIVE SEEKER

I Ask...

- What is the point of view represented in this source?
- What factors (time period, location, identity, role, beliefs) may have shaped this source?
- How might someone in a different position at the time have viewed this event or topic differently?
- What assumptions or values does this perspective reflect?
- How does understanding the author's frame of reference change how we interpret this source?

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Historical Sources and Evidence

THE INVESTIGATOR

I analyze sources to uncover what they reveal and what they leave out.

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I'M THE INVESTIGATOR

I Ask...

- What type of source is this, and how does that shape the kind of information it provides?
- Who created this source, for whom, and for what purpose?
- What claims does the source make? What evidence supports those claims?
- What perspectives or voices are included? What perspectives or voices are absent?
- What additional sources would help strengthen or challenge the narrative?

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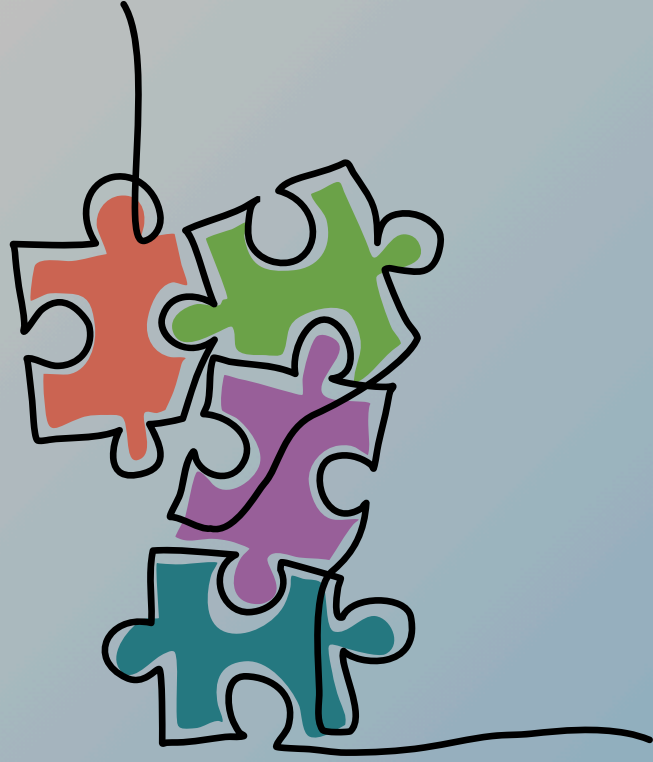
Causation and Argumentation



THE SENSE-MAKER

I weigh evidence and different interpretations to explain why things happened.

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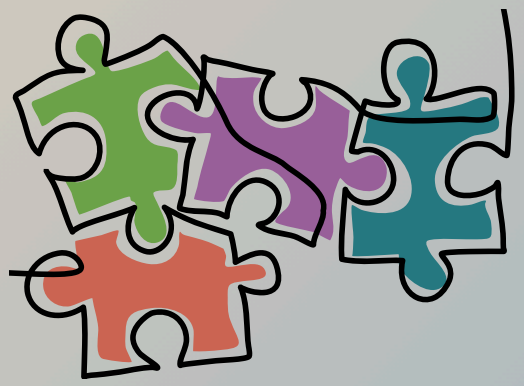
I'M THE SENSE-MAKER



I Ask...

- What were the short-term and long-term causes of the event or development the source is about?
- What causes seem most significant, and why?
- How do different sources agree or disagree about what happened or why it happened?
- How can conflicting evidence be reconciled into an explanation that makes sense?

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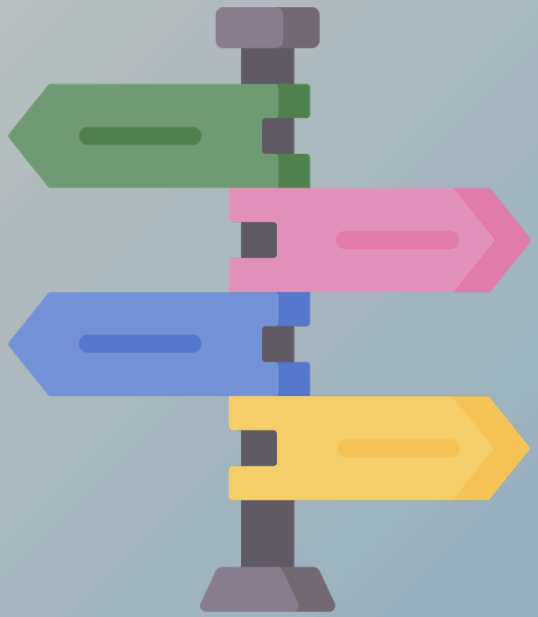
Connecting Past and Present



THE ACTION PLANNER

I use what I learn from the past to understand issues today and plan informed action.

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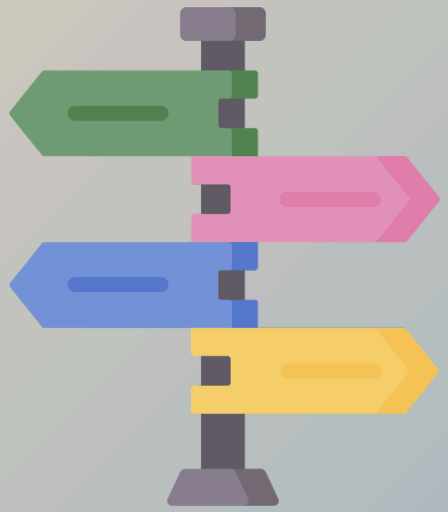
I'M THE ACTION PLANNER



I Ask...

- What things happening today are similar to what you see in this source?
- How does a choice made in this source impact people's lives today?
- How have the issue or issues in the source continued into the present?
- What patterns from history are relevant now?
- What informed actions could address the issue moving forward?

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