

Doing Battle with Chronological Impairment: Bracketing

by Bill Ross, III

Editor's Note: Chronology is important because it places events in time. But the question arises: How to teach chronology without requiring excessive, low level memorization and losing sight of the "big story" in the historical narrative? In this piece, Bill Ross suggests a technique that can help anyone, in school or out.

Media are replete with horror stories detailing a lack of historical knowledge among Americans both young and old, often centering around chronological confusions and howlers. Even CBS Late Night host David Letterman has highlighted the problem by inaugurating (July 2) a feature he calls On This Day In History According To A Dumb Guy. But I'm afraid his hypothetical "dumb guy" who mixes up historical events is a far too common reality. Our much maligned educational system usually gets the blame for such problems. Are these attacks justified?

Clearly most history courses are taught chronologically and the vast majority of our students take several history classes over their years in elementary and secondary schools. Why then this documented inability to put events in order? Are students not making enough effort to learn? Are teachers not trying hard enough to teach? Or, as I suspect, is there too much material being introduced and too few connections being made across historical time? We know that history teaching which races through the text, merely "mentioning" people, events and places, can not contribute either to long term retention of subject matter or to the ability to use what is retained for higher level analysis and understanding. Obtaining added curriculum time for history instruction might help, but it is hard to do, and is even impractical in many settings. We must search instead for pedagogical ideas which would enable us to achieve the Bradley Commission's goal of moving beyond "short-lived memorization of facts without context" in order to "cultivate the perspective arising from a chronological view of the past down to the present day."

The "Less is more" strategy, in which the instructor stresses some topics over others so that opportunities can be created for in-depth study (using primary resources, original student research etc.) can be helpful, but it is not a panacea for chronological ineptitude. We also need an emphasis on tying together course content across centuries and eras. Learning should be a continuum, always reinforcing earlier mastery. To this end, I propose a strategy for setting up a skeletal

historical framework in each student's mind which is continually reinforced through both well-chosen course content and an exercise I call "Bracketing."

Bracketing is an old artillery technique which can be adapted to the war on chronological infirmities. It consists of intentionally firing a shell beyond the target followed by a round short of the target and gradually narrowing the over and under until the target is hit. For historical instruction, this strategy teaches a list of some 30 landmark historical events and eras (which can be done in two days) in a concise, skeletal narrative of our 5,000 years of recorded history and then taking every opportunity to connect the 30 or so items to everyday class lessons.

To further refine and practice Bracketing techniques, I especially like to have students read a "This Day In History" column, available in many major daily newspapers. It can be our tool of choice...cheap, relevant, easily adjustable, and fun for everyone to think about.

Here is an example of how this longitudinal reinforcement exercise works. Using the Dayton (Ohio) Daily News' ALMANAC (its version of This Day In History) for May 16th we use an 1868 event, Andrew Johnson's Acquittal. TEACHER TALK (maybe at the start of class as a warm-up, attention getter, or organizing activity): I give them the date and they have to use bracketing to discover the event.

"And now it's time for This Day In History! (Fanfare) Our first featured event occurred on this day in 1868. Give me an event from our time line before 1868." [Expected response: 1865, end of the Civil War] "Now give me an event after 1868." [Hoped for response: 1898, the Spanish-American War we became a world power after the Gilded Age]

"This 1868 event, of course, is closer to the end of the Civil War. What is the period right after the Civil War called?" [Reconstruction, but if a clue is needed say, "After all the destruction there was an obvious need for, what? (reconstruction)]

"Which president presided over the early stages of Reconstruction?" [Andrew Johnson]

"Did he have any problems?" [Yes, Radical Reconstructionists, etc.] "How long did he serve?" [Barely survived one term.]

At some point the term impeachment will come up, but try to avoid a rush to conclusion and bring out these other teaching points. "Tell me more about the

impeachment process." [House brings charges; Senate conducts trial; 2/3 vote required to remove president from office.]

Again, our date is May 16th, 1868. "Can anyone tell me how the impeachment process came out?" [President Johnson was acquitted by one vote.] The preceding is only one of five items from the May 16th ALMANAC that I could have chosen to use that day. Birthdays of famous figures are also engaging, and seven of the eleven listed for May 16th were familiar enough to one or more students to be useful. To use bracketing with birthdays, we begin with the year of birth, then students are to say what events the person lived through. I give them the person's occupation (i.e. American musician) and then clues until they are able to determine who the famous person is. All the while they are using, and becoming more familiar with, the bracketing list in order to place the person or event in time and thereby learn its identity.

Bracketing has served me well since I first used it in the early 1980s. With it my students develop a solid sense of chronology while enjoying the technique itself. It puts a good foundation under their historical house, and it can be adapted to classrooms at any grade level.

Let's not let our students end up like Letterman's hypothetical "dumb guy" who thought that in 1908 President Gerald Ford invented a car and named it the Model T in honor of "Mr. T"! This malady of the mind is preventable by early intervention and continual reinforcement.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could mention the year of an event and students were able to state both a prior and a post event, thereby zeroing in on the historical event and capturing the essence of its era? It is past time for young people to develop a better sense of history and Bracketing can help it happen.