

What's the wisdom on...



Causation

The purpose of this guide

This short guide provides new history teachers with an overview of the 'story so far' of many years of practice-based professional thinking about a particular aspect of history teaching. It draws on tried and tested approaches arising from teachers with many years of experimenting, researching, practising, writing and debating their classroom experience. It therefore synthesises key messages from *Teaching History* articles, blogs and other publications. The guide includes a range of practical planning suggestions suitable for any key stage and signposts the basic reading essentials for new professionals.

A summary of the wisdom

One kind of problem a professional historian tackles is the explanation of why events occur and why situations arise. Explaining *why* is often known as causal explanation. An important thing for new history teachers to remember is that causal explanation is nothing to do with the more general meaning of 'explaining' in the sense of 'explication', expounding, setting out or giving more detail. Instead, think of the expression, 'How do you explain that?' It usually means 'Why did this thing *come about*?', as opposed to explaining how a bicycle works or explaining what the Treaty of Versailles was.

History teachers take care to show pupils that causal explanations are not the same as facts. Causal explanations *use* facts, but the arrangement of those facts into a causal explanation is an argument. Judging a causal argument as more or less persuasive is quite different from saying that something is or isn't factually correct.

When they are *explaining why* an event or situation came about, historians are *always* building an argument. In history, causal explanation and causal argument are the same thing. To teach pupils about causal explanation is to teach them how to argue in a certain way.

Pupils learn how to do this by *being taught explicitly* how this special kind of argument is structured, by *practising* that special kind of argument (orally and in writing) and, increasingly, by *reading* or *hearing* (and eventually challenging) lots of examples of historians doing it too.

In 1990, a group of experienced teachers known as the Teaching History Research Group proposed a 5-stage model for progression in understanding causation. This is available on the Historical Association website as 'Scott's 5-stage model'. While history teachers would now urge great caution about using this sort of progression model, it does remain a good place to start because it shows the early thinking of the profession on this issue. Don't take too much notice of the hierarchy of 'stages', but do note the useful and practical things Scott's model suggests about all that is involved in a strong causal argument.

Since that work, history teachers have reached many practical conclusions for teaching pupils to understand, use and practise what historians do when they are building causal explanations.

1 Get your enquiry question right

The best way to teach pupils the practice of causal argument is to craft a single, clear causation 'enquiry question', giving pupils time to try out, examine and improve the explanatory power of their arguments, in response to that one question. The tradition of a single 'enquiry question' giving clear direction to a sequence of lessons (say 3 to 6 lessons) allows you to guide pupils in working gradually towards their own extended, analytic argument. Above all, it gives you time to help pupils really to *think* about the question, and the type of causation response it demands.

Here are some different types of causation enquiry question. Each of these enquiry

questions embodies a causation puzzle. Each would work to unify a lesson sequence built around that one causation problem. Note that in each case the question is crystal clear about *what* needs to be explained – a war, a revolution, the outcome of a war, a particular state of affairs, a major change, and so on.

Some causation questions are ‘open’. This means many types of causal argument could work:

- Why did Islam spread so far, so fast?
- Why did the First World War happen?
- Why was there a revolution in France in 1789?
- Why did the Chartists fail?

Some are ‘closed’. This means that the question is structured in such a way as to require a particular *type* of causal argument. In the following cases, for example, the pupil must weigh up the relative importance or judge the special role of *one* cause in relation to *other* causes:

- How important was international pressure in ending apartheid in South Africa?
- What role did the First World War play in hastening the Russian Revolution?
- What part did economic factors play in the abolition of the slave trade?

What does this mean for my practice?

Structure your lesson sequence in such a way as to get pupils a little bit closer to answering the question each lesson. Think of each lesson as adding a new angle to the problem, either by feeding in more knowledge, or by deliberately complicating or challenging the conclusions that pupils reached in the previous lesson. Aim for pupils to flesh out a full answer (perhaps an essay or a speech at the start of a debate) in the final or penultimate lesson of the sequence.

A key goal across the lesson sequence is to draw pupils’ attention to the distinctive features of the question. Over time, they will start to notice how causation questions work and the kinds of argument they command, and so become more independent in working out how to develop and structure their own arguments.

2 Think about the different kinds of causal argument as ‘shapes’ or ‘patterns’

Basic principles of causation are simple to teach. Patterns for arranging causes into a powerful explanation recur again and again. Over time, get pupils familiar with these so that they can quickly see – and eventually choose – a structure for their own arguments. Using these patterns regularly, pupils start to see that just making a list of causes is not enough. Just linking them randomly isn’t enough either. (But sometimes let younger pupils try doing this – it just leads to a lovely mess! They then quickly see the point of using structures and finding patterns).

Here are the most common patterns for arranging and linking the causes, so that they make an explanation of why and how the particular event/situation/change came about:

- showing how the causes **inter-relate to produce a web** of circumstances that resulted in the event/situation/change;
- identifying causes which are **long-term** (preconditions), **medium-term** and **short-term** (precipitants or triggers);
- **classifying the causes into types or groups** that form a taxonomy (e.g. military factors; economic changes; personal/accidental issues);
- judging the **relative importance of one cause** in relation to others in bringing about the event/situation/change;
- showing the **role that a particular cause played** in triggering other causes and/or bringing about the final event/situation/change that you are trying to explain.

Each of these patterns somehow sorts out the muddle of possible causes into a causal explanation that makes sense. A causal explanation might include one or more of these patterns.

What does this mean for my practice?

It’s a good idea to get pupils competent in one pattern at a time so that they understand what they are doing and so that they can ‘see’ the shapes changing, before their eyes. Decide which of the above is/are (a) best suited to your historical question; and (b) most appropriate for your pupils given their prior experience of tackling causation questions. For example, if they have never been taught explicitly to think about causation before, you will want to choose just *one* of the above patterns, and produce diagrams for them or supply cards to help them make their own diagrams through which they can shape their argument using that particular pattern. Keep it simple at first. Ultimately (say by the end of Year 9) your goal is for pupils to be able to talk about the kind of causation question that they are facing (by comparing it with the others you have used) and make their own good suggestions for approaching their argument.

3 Tackle ‘what’ before ‘why’: bring out the puzzle!

Very often, new teachers make the mistake of getting pupils bogged down in building causal arguments without their having any sense of what they are doing or why. This is often because the pupils themselves haven’t grasped the happening (event, situation, state of affairs) whose occurrence they’re trying to explain! This will also mean that they have no sense of a *puzzle* that they feel compelled to solve. It isn’t even obvious to them that there is a puzzle at all.

This often happens because teachers haven’t begun with *the thing being caused*.

What does this mean for my practice?

Leap forward in time and interest pupils in the war, revolution, event, situation whose causes pupils will eventually build into an explanation. You will then end up saying something like this:

‘Isn’t it extraordinary, isn’t it puzzling that this (*a king getting his head chopped off; some peasants rising up; a genocide; a war; the abolition of something terrible; a remarkable technological breakthrough or fundamental cultural shift...*) should have happened? How on earth did it happen?! This thing felt surprising/was shocking/was without precedent/changed the face of this part of the globe. How on earth did it come about?’

Then you are ready to prepare pupils to try to *explain* it, in a causal sense.

4 Tackle story before analysis

As well as being clear and thorough about the thing being caused, be thorough with some starting outline narrative or narratives so that pupils get secure in the run of events and developments leading to the happening they’re going to explain. A common mistake is to plunge too quickly into the work of building the causal argument without pupils having secure knowledge, within a chronological framework, within which they can think about possible causes. It’s no good flinging pupils a pile of causes and asking them to sort them out. They’ll be overwhelmed (and probably bored). And if they are still harbouring chronological errors, this will severely undermine their ability to engage in causal reasoning. This is also why a *sequence* of lessons is important: it gives pupils time to become secure in the knowledge they need. Experienced history teachers don’t expect pupils to build a causal argument, from scratch, in a single lesson!

Remember too that narratives are important because they do *more* than just give a chronology. They contain implicit arguments about why things happen. (See the articles by Stanford and by Foster and Goudie in this edition, *TH175*, for more on the opportunities and problems this creates.) If students don’t have a clear narrative (or narratives), they can’t establish causes, let alone characterise and judge the role of particular causes.

Building this narrative takes longer than you might imagine. You need to think about what events and people your students need to know about. You also need to specifically consider the sense of period your students need in order to make sense of people’s actions at the time. For example, students need to understand a great deal about why religion mattered to people in the seventeenth century before they can explain why religion helped to cause a civil war.

What does this mean for my practice?

Make a judgement about how much pupils need to have completely secure in their heads about what happened (not necessarily everything, but key markers in the relevant narratives) before you address how and why it happened.

For example, you might have decided to embrace the complexity of the abolition story from the earliest failed

slave rebellions to (say) the eventual abolition in Brazil in 1888. So make sure all pupils can tell that story in overview. Then they will have enough of a landscape of knowledge to meaningfully start to assess (say) a particular individual’s role in the abolition narrative.

5 Use historical scholarship to inform your approach

Although busy history teachers must sometimes take short cuts and borrow good enquiry questions and lesson resources from others (you cannot be a specialist in the entire sum of historical knowledge about the world!), when you design your *own* enquiry questions, try to read some relevant and recent historical scholarship. When pressed for time, use summaries of such historical scholarship that you will find in the *Polychronicon* in each edition of *Teaching History*.

Over time (across your career), you should gradually expand your reading of historical scholarship. If you don’t do this, your planning and teaching will become detached from real debates, and your teaching will feel ‘thin’. It may feed outdated arguments and it will certainly lack the passion a teacher can give it when connected with real scholarly debates. Great TH articles that illustrate the practical benefits of using particular historical scholarship in causation enquiries include Howells in *TH121* (Year 8 and Stuart England), King in *TH159* (low-attaining Year 7 and Magna Carta) and Holliss in *TH154* (A-level and causes of the First World War).

Some practical teaching ideas

Here are some tried, tested and transferable exercises, activities and approaches. Remember, that no activity is automatically good or bad – it is only as good as its appropriateness for the content, for the enquiry question and the particular stage in the enquiry. And it’s only successful if taught using subject-sensitivity, thoroughness and clarity.

Causation diagrams and models

These help pupils ‘see’ the causation problem and begin to manipulate its solution themselves. Diagrammatic models with boxes containing each cause, positioned in relation to each other, are a great way to quickly illustrate any of the five ‘patterns’ listed above (e.g. a line or pyramid for relative importance of causes; clusters to show classification; etc). Ask pupils to add arrows and comments to show relationships and interaction between the boxes. Ask pupils to complete, adapt or alter such diagrams. Make them defend their choices orally to one another, as a way of scaffolding their own thinking about a causal argument, eventually getting them to construct diagrams of their own.

Alex Alcoe has developed very useful questions for pupils to deepen their thinking as they work on such diagrams: see page 19 in *TH161*.

Analogies and metaphors

If you haven’t read and used the story of Alphonse the Camel introduced by Chapman in 2003 *TH112*, a treat is in store for your pupils! Chapman’s story, based on the proverbial ‘straw that broke the camel’s back’, has become a staple of history classrooms wherever history teachers are trying to

help pupils understand the way causes interact with each other to bring about an event or development. Introduce this in Year 7 and pupils will still be talking about it in Year 11.

Many history teachers have developed or adapted Chapman's analogy. See Woodcock (*TH119*) for one way of positioning it in a wider plan for Years 10 and 11, or Buxton's development of other ingenious analogies for her Year 8s on the causes of the French Revolution (*TH140*).

Develop analogies or metaphors to show pupils the difference between types of causes. For example, a barrel of gunpowder is often used for the underlying conditions of Europe in the years prior to 1914, the match is the assassination and the fuse the triggering of the alliance system by the decisions of the 'July Days'.

Oral work as preparation for written argument

History teachers have developed many ways of making pupils *ready* to produce their own written arguments. Pupils need time to try out and practise ways of talking about causal relationships. Support pupils' oral argument with vocabulary that gets them beyond 'Another reason was', and into (say) 'this was exacerbated by...' or 'X paved the way for...' This allows for richer, more confident and precise discussion of what particular causes were doing. Woodcock (*TH119*) gave multiple examples of how to do this. He supplied rich causation vocabulary and showed how to use it to avoid superficial reasoning about causal relationships.

On the use of oral rehearsal, see all TH articles by Carroll, and especially Carroll's piece in *TH162* and this post from his blog: <https://jcarrollhistory.com/2018/02/09/another-reason-why-some-writing-frames-stunt-students-historical-causal-arguments/> Carroll also stresses the importance of topic-specific phrases, and language taken from scholarship, so that pupils don't end up just grabbing generic phrases that are clunky or inappropriate.

Pitfalls to avoid

1 Don't rush into asking pupils to find or do anything with causes before they are secure in a narrative (or narratives).

This means holding key events, dates, people and stories in their heads, and being able to move about comfortably within them, not just having a cursory introduction to them. They can't think about the *role* of the First World War or Lenin's skills in bringing about the Russian Revolution if they can't automatically recall when the First World War broke out or what Lenin did!

2 Don't muddle up in-period and out-of-period tasks

A causation question is an historical question. It is answered by someone (historian or student of history) looking back *on* the past. It can't be answered by someone living at the time because those at the time did not have access to the full picture; they were not trying to build *historical* analyses. Despite this, new history teachers often make the mistake of imagining that the enquiry question can be answered, *in the final outcome activity*, with an imaginative piece of writing by someone from the past. For example, 'Imagine you were Oliver

Cromwell. Write a letter to your son explaining why you had to fight a Civil War.' Such a task may have value, but it is not a causation analysis! Historians are out-of-period. They think hard about what people in the past might have thought or wanted, but they write *about* that, from the perspective of an historian striving to encompass all relevant material, not from the perspective of someone who lived at the time.

3 Don't try to create a causation and a consequence problem at the same time!

Lesson sequences work best when built around a crystal clear question that problematises one thing. Any *causation* question takes the *consequence* as read: it is the thing being caused. You can't problematise the consequence and the cause at the same time! Remember, cause and consequence, as a pair, are nothing like change and continuity, as a pair. When you ask how much something changed, you are also weighing up how much it stayed the same: it's impossible to problematise change without problematising continuity. Cause and consequence, as a pair, don't work in the same way at all. If you want to problematise the consequences of an event, fine. But that's a different question (e.g. What were the consequences of the Black Death?). For that, go to articles on consequences, such as Navey (*TH172*).

4 Watch out for assumptions of inevitability.

If pupils assume that an event or development was inevitable, they become lazy historical thinkers. Outcomes are rarely inevitable, although they can become more or less likely. Two practical exemplars of lesson sequences that deliberately combat this are in *TH92*: see the article by Howells, and Laffin's Cunning Plan. More recently, see how Holliss (*TH154*) used Christopher Clark's *Sleepwalkers* to challenge assumptions of inevitability.

5 Don't let the best laid plans turn into formulaic tasks.

If you don't have a clear direction for your lesson sequence, if the puzzle at the heart of the enquiry question isn't carefully revealed or if pupils just don't know enough to understand the problem in the first place, the best of tasks could turn into a formulaic or otherwise pointless exercise. You can tell pupils to 'find links' or 'draw arrows' until the cows come home, but they'll just produce the formula, bypass their brains and get nowhere. Read Evans and Pate in *TH128*, to find out what this problem looks like and how to overcome it.

Where to go next!

All the back issues of *Teaching History* referred to above can be found at www.history.org.uk. For a guided bibliography to articles and other writing on history teaching, see Michael Fordham's huge bibliography: <https://clioetccetera.files.wordpress.com/2016/12/guided-bibliography-history-education.pdf>

Above all, read lots of historical scholarship where historians have tackled causation questions. The more history you read, the more your own thinking about historical causation will develop.