



## Thinking Outside of the Exhibit: Using Artifacts to Drive Analysis

**Objective:** Participants will learn how historians examine artifacts, analyze and describe artifacts, and identify ways to use historical thinking skills in everyday life and occupations.

**Time:** 15-30 minutes

### Materials for activities:

- **Artifacts**
- **Artifact Analysis Sheet**
- **Pencil**

**Anticipatory Set:** How do historians examine an artifact? In your own home, you may have items that have been, or will be, passed down from generation to generation. Maybe you have a special dish that was given to you by your grandmother, or maybe you have tucked away a set of baby clothes that your child wore for a special occasion. These items look familiar to you, and are often not difficult to deduce. However, there may also now be items in your home that look unfamiliar to a younger person. Did you grow up with a rotary dial phone in your home? What does it mean to “dial” a phone now, anyway? The make-up or use of an object can change over time. Consider that at the turn of the nineteenth century, the color pink denoted items for baby boys and blue denoted items for baby girls – the opposite of how many in the United States look at those colors today. Objects from our past sometimes require additional context and analysis for understanding. Thinking like a historian can not only help us better understand items and events from the past, but it can help broaden our outlook on the present, too.

### Analysis Activity:

- 1.) Divide your audience into teams of three.
- 2.) Each team will receive an artifact. Provide five (5) minutes for the separate teams to analyze the artifact.
- 3.) Once five (5) minutes have passed, hand out the Artifact Analysis Sheet.
- 4.) Ask your teams to fill out the Artifact Analysis Sheet. Allow ten (10) minutes for this activity.
- 5.) Bring the teams together to present their findings. Once everyone presents their findings, move on to discussion.

**Defining Historical Thinking:** “Almost every historian has his or her own personal list of the characteristics of historical thinking, but abilities that come up again and again are:

1. The ability to tell the difference between a primary and a secondary source.
2. The ability to “source the source”; that is, figure out who created the source, when it was created, and so on.



3. The ability to obtain information about the authority of the source and to assess that authority in light of other evidence.
4. The ability to set sources in their proper chronological order and to understand why that ordering is important.
5. The ability to construct an original argument based upon evidence from various sources.
6. The ability to recognize the strangeness of the past without being put off by that strangeness.
7. The ability to make comparative judgments about evidence.
8. The ability to recognize what one does not or cannot know from the evidence at hand.
9. The ability to understand that events are understood differently by different people.
10. The ability to triangulate between and among sources.
11. The ability to ask probing questions—not just what happened, but why did it happen this way and why didn't it happen that way?
12. The ability to recognize the role of causality.
13. The ability to critique evidence both on its own terms and in terms of its value to a larger analytical project.
14. The ability to recognize lines of argument in historical thought.
15. The ability to present the past in clear ways, whether in writing or in other media, saying what can be said and not saying what cannot.”

Kelly, T. Mills, *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 22-23.

**Discussion:**

- 1.) What questions did your team initially ask when examining your artifact?
- 2.) Were there any differences in the questions that your team initially asked and the questions on the Artifact Analysis Sheet?
- 3.) Did you discover anything about your own approach to analysis while completing this activity?
- 4.) How might historical thinking be used by you beyond examining an artifact?
- 5.) How might historical thinking be used in your occupation?
- 6.) How might historical thinking be used by you as a citizen?