

NATIONAL
STANDARDS

FOR

HISTORY
FOR
GRADES K-4

EXPANDING
CHILDREN'S

NATIONAL
STANDARDS

FOR

WORLD
HISTORY

EXPLORING
PATHS TO
PRESENT

Grades 5-12 Expanded Edition

NATIONAL
STANDARDS

FOR

UNITED STATES
HISTORY

EXPLORING
THE AMERICAN
EXPERIENCE

Grades 5-12 Expanded Edition





Teaching modules on historical practice

Stephen Jackson

Teaching How Official History Is Made

State Standards as Primary Sources

Stephen Jackson, the 2023 AHA Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Award winner, traces the controversial rise and uses of state history standards for K-12 education and offers teachers a flexible lesson plan that encourages them to draw upon the standards in their own state to help students better understand the complexities of how local constructions of official knowledge are formulated. Jackson provides a quick history of the rise of state history standards in the American context beginning in the 1970s and 1980s; an ensemble of discussion questions about what history standards include, what they leave out, and how they balance critical thinking and content coverage; and a writing assignment that asks students to identify and revise what they see as a problematic single history standard.

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The Silver Lining of State Standards Documents in History and the Social Studies

As with many historians, I suspect, my reaction to the mere mention of K–12 state standards in history and the social studies is normally a beleaguered sigh. Over the past forty years, these documents, closely associated with the accountability movement and tied to standardized testing, have become a key method by which state governments attempt to exert control over school districts and individual classrooms in the United States. Battles over state standards revision processes have recently fanned the flames of the culture wars in states like Virginia, Texas, Florida, and South Dakota.¹ All too often, historical accuracy is thrown out the window for the sake of political expediency in standards revision processes, exposing students to a subpar education in the discipline.²

Though states like Texas and Florida tend to dominate the headlines when it comes to state history and social studies standards, the problems engendered by these documents go far beyond the usual-suspect states. In the case of world history, Susan Douglass's recent work indicates that a majority of states continue to frame their historical narratives around outdated and Eurocentric frameworks.³ This includes a state like California, which has embraced a "Western Civ Plus" model for their curriculum since the 1980s despite the advocacy of world historians in the state who have lobbied for more global perspectives.⁴ Scholars have similarly critiqued US history standards for failing to adequately cover a number of key topics, especially as they relate to historically marginalized populations.⁵ The problems presented by these documents clearly go well beyond the highly politicized processes that so often generate headlines and lead to compromised historical narratives.

In reality, the nature of standards themselves stand at odds with disciplinary conventions in history.⁶ Quality historical work grapples with multiple perspectives and rival interpretations. State standards, by contrast, prioritize certain perspectives and factual content, mandating that all public school students learn what amounts to an officially sanctioned version of history. Under the best circumstances, these standards emphasize inquiry as a key goal of a history education.⁷ In the worst cases, dominant political and advocacy factions prioritize their heroes and narratives at the expense of historical nuance and complexity. This is totally divorced from the best scholarship on history education, which emphasizes critical engagement and the consideration of multiple perspectives as the lifeblood of historical inquiry.⁸

Frontis: Covers of *National Standards for History for Grades K-4*, *National Standards for United States History*, and *National Standards for World History*, 1994. National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles.

Despite my conviction that state standards documents usually produce bad history, I argue in this module of #AHRsYllabus that they nevertheless offer a unique teaching opportunity that can engage students in meaningful dialogue about the construction of official knowledge. Opening up standards documents to critical scrutiny is a straightforward way to engage students in challenging the “omniscient tones of history text and teacher,” which can amplify the potential for historical inquiry.⁹ Working with these documents as primary sources creates exciting possibilities to discuss issues related to historical thinking, content inclusion and exclusion, and the political uses of history.

I’ve spent my career teaching at the college level, where state standards have not directly affected my classroom practice but have nevertheless indirectly impacted my teaching and research in a number of significant ways. State standards are crucial in shaping the warp and weft of K–12 social studies education in the United States, establishing the prior knowledge, critical thinking skills, and historical awareness of students entering my classrooms. I taught an undergraduate world history survey course at a small liberal arts college in a deep red state for about ten years, and in that time I noticed that many of my students entered class with narrow views of the human past. Every semester, I began the first session by asking undergraduate students to name important figures from world history. In most cases, students could think only of male political figures from Western Europe, and rarely named important African, Asian, Latin American, or Indigenous figures. There are a number of factors that we might attribute this to, but the fact that state standards in the vast majority of US states continue to espouse historical narratives dominated by Europe is surely a contributing factor.¹⁰

This problem sparked my research curiosity, and led me to write a book about the evolution of world history education in Texas secondary schools from the interwar period to the early twenty-first century.¹¹ For that project, I noted how standards in the state, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), powerfully reinforced Eurocentric historical narratives. As official forms of knowledge, standards documents tend to strengthen traditional ways of understanding the human past, preventing or slowing paradigmatic change in history and the social studies.¹²

Convinced of the necessity of improving standards in history education, I volunteered to serve on a standards revision work group in the state of South Dakota in 2021. I had a wonderful time collaborating with other educators with the common goal of improving history education in the state.¹³ Unfortunately, after we completed our work, the State Department of Education made a number of changes behind closed doors, precipitating a serious controversy over the next two years.¹⁴ By 2023, after throwing out the initial set of proposed revisions and starting all over again with a new standards revision commission, the state of South Dakota approved a set of standards opposed by the American Historical Association, the National Council for History Education, the

South Dakota Education Association, the Native American tribes in the state, and over 85 percent of people who offered feedback to the South Dakota Department of Education.¹⁵

It was in the context of this unfolding controversy that I began incorporating standards into my regular teaching practice. I wanted a way to engage my students, the majority of whom were pre-service history and social studies teachers, in a productive conversation where they could carefully consider the squabble over standards without reproducing the incendiary rhetoric that typifies the culture wars. Rather than focus on the headlines, I decided to build a lesson plan and writing assignment that would engage students in a detailed examination of the rival South Dakota state social studies standards as examples of primary sources, analyzing them just as we would any other historical documents. The silver lining of the tumultuous controversy in the state was the realization that though state standards pose a formidable challenge for historical advocacy, and will likely continue to fuel the culture wars for the foreseeable future, they also present a valuable teaching opportunity.

To implement this planned lesson and writing assignment, I selected a historical methods course, composed mostly of preservice teachers, and developed the lesson for early in the semester. The first step was to provide students with contextual background on the history of standards. As shown below in the mini-lecture, I included information on the accountability movement emerging in the 1970s, the place of history and the social studies within that movement, and the failure of the National History Standards project of the 1990s.

But though the history of state standards served as important context, I focused class discussion more on the process by which standards came into existence. Who selected the participants of revision committees? What backgrounds and expertise did the members of the committee have? Peppered throughout the discussion were a series of what I call “should” questions. Who should be on these committees, and why? These kinds of questions ask students to consider the relative balance among professional historians, K–12 educators, politicians, members of the business community, and other community stakeholders. In conversation, students tended to favor the value of historical expertise, thinking that it was educators and historians who should have the bulk of the decision-making power. Concomitantly, they outright dismissed the value of politicians in the process.¹⁶ Though I tend to agree with the idea that the process should favor the experts, it was essential to challenge this interpretation. After all, as Jonathan Zimmerman points out, “in a democracy with deep suspicions of elites, this conception of history was always a vexed strategy. Why should any group of experts get to determine the entire nation’s story? And what made them experts in the first place?”¹⁷

Asking students to critically consider the value of historical expertise proved to be a critical and fruitful avenue of discussion. Public schools are democratic institutions, and control over what goes into

the curriculum needs to satisfy a broad public audience, not just a small cadre of historical professionals and educators. I presented students with the perspective of the great world historian William McNeill, whose words from 1997 are no less relevant in our context a generation later:

One of the most visceral issues in our current debate over history curricula is how to reconcile this vision of the human past, which is true to the intellectual purpose of history, with the desire to preserve and pass on American institutions and cultural values, which is true to the civic purpose of history.¹⁸

Happily, the civic and intellectual purposes of history are not always in conflict, but it is important for students to consider these as distinct goals of the history curriculum in publicly funded schools. The bluster and fury of the culture wars are much more about the civic purpose of K–12 history, which aims to use education to foster democratic citizenship, than they are about the intellectual purpose of the discipline, which, to the extent possible, aims to “show what actually happened,” in Leopold von Ranke’s venerable phrase.¹⁹

Class discussion provided the necessary context for the writing assignment I developed on the history and nature of standards. In the case of South Dakota, we had three versions of the standards that served as our primary sources for the writing assignment. These included the standards then in effect, created in 2015, as well as rival versions produced by two different groups, one in 2021 and another in 2022. Each student selected an individual grade level, and the first part of the writing assignment was to comparatively analyze the rival versions. Selecting individual grade levels made the project more manageable for students by limiting the scope of their investigation, and had the added benefit of encouraging students to consider the age appropriateness of the standards. This was especially important when considering difficult histories. When and how much should students be taught about oppression, inequality, dispossession, and dehumanization in the human past?²⁰ The writing assignment asked students to explore a few questions in particular: How are standards organized? What factual content is prioritized? What is the balance between critical inquiry and rote memorization? What, or who, is left out or minimized in the standards?

Whereas students carefully analyzed the historical thinking within standards documents in the first part of the writing assignment, the second part asked them to consider their own principles. Imagine that you were a member of a standards revision committee: What would you consider to be an ideal set of standards, and why? As it turned out, this section of the writing assignment needed more grounding. The papers I received talked in flowery language about high-minded ethical principles without situating these principles within the banal practicalities

Copies of these [three sets of standards](#) can be found in the supplementary data for this article on *AHR* online.

of the standards creation process. For the writing assignment shown below, you'll see how the second section is now grounded with a more specific and concrete task that gets at the same central questions: What is your own personal ethic of history, why do you think it is most appropriate for students, and how might you persuade a broad public audience that your interpretation is worthy?

In the context of the class, the lesson was a hit. Students reported feeling a real connection to the subject matter, and the writing assignment helped them to think about the public production of history in new and significant ways. The lesson that I created was tailored to a specific state context, but the beauty of state standards documents is that, with a relatively small amount of effort, this type of lesson can be customized to any state context, whether or not there is a major controversy brewing in the state.

A Note of Caution

Recent years have witnessed a wave of punitive legislation designed to prevent the free exchange of ideas in history classrooms. This lesson plan and writing assignment are not designed to engage directly with so-called "divisive concepts." In fact, one goal of this content is to bypass the unhelpful rhetoric of the culture wars and allow for a measured discussion of state standards in history and the social studies using tried-and-true methods of historical inquiry. Utilizing this content will mean that you are quite literally teaching to the standards. Nevertheless, challenging subjects may come up in the context of class discussion. Before developing and implementing this lesson plan, I urge teachers to carefully consider their own positionality and security as you develop this content. Consulting the American Historical Association's [Teaching History with Integrity](#) content can provide helpful guidance on how to manage teaching difficult histories in this polarized moment.²¹

Teaching How Official History is Made

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Teaching How Official History is Made

Stephen Jackson
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Video 1. This video includes in-class footage of a guest lecture provided by Stephen Jackson to an undergraduate History and Government Methods course led by Ryan Fullerton at the University of Kansas. The 14-minute video introduces the purpose of the module through a discussion on the nature of state standards. The full video can be accessed with the online version of this article.



Lesson Plan

State History Standards as Primary Sources in the Classroom

This lesson critically evaluates state standards documents as primary sources. State standards emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as part of the accountability movement and have been a major shaping force in American education for the past several decades. Standards documents provide a local connection to the construction of official knowledge and memory, and can lead to important conversations about the ethics behind the interpretive choices that all historians have to make as a routine part of our craft. The lesson is intended to be highly customizable to a wide variety of class settings, and so the lesson begins with a few instructions for teacher preparation prior to implementing the lesson in your classroom. Following that, I've provided a mini-lecture offering a brief explanation of the rise of state standards, as well as the fierce controversies over history education that have resulted from their widespread adoption in states across the country. The heart of the lesson will be a guided discussion with your students. In this module, I've included a series of suggested questions in four key analytical categories that explore the process, content, and ethics behind state standards in history and the social studies. Finally, I've included a writing assignment that will ask students to carefully analyze a standards document from their state and to reflect on their own considered views of what makes for a high-quality standard in history and the social studies.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson and writing assignment, students will be able to

- critically analyze state standards in history and the social studies as powerful local manifestations of official knowledge and memory construction;
- interrogate the ethics and values underpinning the historical process as it is constructed in an official public setting; and
- consider and reflect on their own personal ethic of history.

Teacher Preparation

The value of this type of lesson and writing assignment rests in its customizability, but this feature will also require preparation before implementation. The most important task will be to familiarize yourself with your state’s history standards. Information on how to [find your state’s standards](#) can be found in the accompanying supplementary data for this article online. Read through the document to understand the kinds of content choices that guide history education in your state context.

Lesson Plan

This lesson plan is intended for a one-class session. You can also plan on an extended version over multiple class sessions, or draw from the bank of questions to jump-start class discussion for lessons throughout the term. Additional material about these latter two options is available at the end of this module.

- Mini-lecture: 15 minutes
- Guided Discussion: 20 minutes
 - Select between two and four discussion questions from the question themes listed below. I recommend selecting at least one each from the themes “How is History Imagined?” and “What is Included, What is Left Out?” Teachers can mix and match these questions as best suits their class needs.
 - Include at least one “should question”
- Writing Assignment Set-up: 15 minutes
 - Ask students to “wave a magic wand” and “fix” a problematic history standard in their state. Have them explain and justify the choice they made in revision to a broader audience.

Mini-lecture: A Brief History of State Standards in the US Context

Below is a script that I follow in the lecture part of the class. This is written in my own teaching voice—feel free to adapt to your taste and style. At the end of the mini lecture you might consider providing local knowledge about standards in your state. Detail to students what, if any, controversies occurred in your location during the last standards revision process.

The Accountability Movement and *A Nation at Risk*

State standards emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as part of a broad movement toward educational accountability.²² The accountability movement was the result of a rising conservative rejection of progressive forms of education and a growing sentiment that American schools were falling behind international competitors. Historian of education Ronald Evans argues that “the origins of accountability reform in schools can be found in the confluence of business, government, conservative and neoconservative politicians and educators, and the religious right.”²³ The movement called for a back-to-basics approach to education, emphasizing a rigorous traditional curriculum that could be carefully measured to ensure that all students received minimum competency in key subjects. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 gave advocates of educational accountability positions in the highest levels of federal power, laying the groundwork for an enormously influential report called *A Nation at Risk* in 1983.²⁴

A Nation at Risk painted a dire portrait of education in the United States. The report said that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”²⁵ According to the report, one major cause of this was that the curriculum in most schools had become diluted by the proliferation of student choice in course offerings, or what the report referred to as a “curricular smorgasbord.”²⁶ The report advocated for a return to the basics in education, which would be made possible by schools adopting “more rigorous and measurable standards.”²⁷

In the decades since its publication, historians have witheringly critiqued *A Nation at Risk*. Linda Symcox took aim at the methodology employed by the authors of the report, noting that they grossly exaggerated the data available to them, making American education sound much worse than it was in reality.²⁸ For Ronald Evans, the effects of the accountability movement and their calls for educational excellence were, ironically, “the reification of low-level learning practices focused on basic skills and knowledge, to the detriment of reflective or inquiry-oriented teaching practices in schools.”²⁹ Morgan Polikoff,

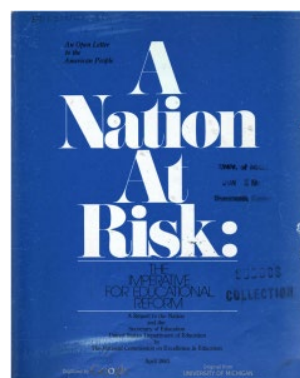


Figure 1. Cover of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Washington, DC: The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983.

by contrast, argues that *A Nation at Risk* and accountability advocates correctly diagnosed some key problems in US education. But even the more favorable assessment by Polikoff concludes that the policy solutions of the accountability movement proved a dismal failure over time.³⁰ Though historians have criticized its methodology and outcomes, no one denies the significance of *A Nation at Risk*. The race to standardize the curriculum was on, and by the end of the 1980s, the production of state standards had become common practice across the country.³¹

Though standards are produced at the state level using a wide variety of processes, there are nevertheless some common features of disciplinary standards documents in US education. By design, standards limit and reduce local control over education, placing power over the curriculum much more directly into the hands of state departments of education and oftentimes appointed officials in state boards of education. In line with the back-to-basics approach of the accountability movement, standards are supposed to provide statements of minimums. In other words, teachers can exceed the stated requirements in standards documents but must ensure that they meet them. Standards are an iterative process and are revised on a routine basis in most state settings. Finally, it is easy to overemphasize the significance of standards. In many cases, states do not have a standardized test in history or the social studies, and it is much harder to enforce a set of standards in that case.

The Troubled Place of History Standards, 1980s-Present

Standards mania in the 1980s impacted every subject in the school curriculum, but history and the social studies enjoyed a fleeting moment of popularity with accountability reformers. *A Nation at Risk* argued that the social studies in schools were critical to “the informed and committed exercise of citizenship in our free society.”³² Accountability advocates believed in a need to reinforce a common sense of citizenship to restore faith in America, and where better to do that than in history classrooms?

A number of initiatives emerged to promote history as a key element of the back-to-basics educational approach favored by accountability reformers. In 1987, California developed their influential *History-Social Science Framework* for history and the social studies. California’s governor, Bill Honig, was a staunch advocate of the accountability movement, arguing that “the progressive movement got corrupted and people thought it was somehow elitist to require a solid academic curriculum.”³³ Honig championed a traditional version of history that could provide stories of heroes that would, he claimed, positively develop students’ citizenship.³⁴ Charlotte Crabtree and Diane Ravitch spearheaded this effort, which emphasized chronological history.³⁵ In 1989, the Bradley Commission on History in Schools similarly critiqued the

progressive social studies of the 1960s and 1970s, calling for a return to a more traditional historical approach.³⁶

The accountability movement's love affair with history and the social studies came to a crashing halt in the 1990s with the disastrous failure of the National History Standards project. The project began promisingly enough as Lynne Cheney, the prominent conservative head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, green-lit funding for the National Center for History in the Schools in 1988 and subsequently funded the National History Standards project in 1992.³⁷ The project was housed at the University of California, Los Angeles, and led by historians Charlotte Crabtree and Gary Nash. Crabtree and Nash organized a massive undertaking that brought together educators, historians, and professional organizations such as the American Historical Association to create the first set of standards for the discipline of history that could be used by state governments nationwide.³⁸

The trouble, though, was that by the early 1990s many professional historians held perspectives very different from those of conservative accountability advocates. The newly created World History Association, for instance, rejected what they saw as the traditional Eurocentrism of standards, advocating instead for a more fully realized global approach to world history.³⁹ The National History Standards incorporated previously marginalized groups and historical perspectives, especially on topics like social and labor history, and was not as overtly nationalistic as conservatives had hoped. For initial supporters of the project like Lynne Cheney, the end result seemed to be a shocking betrayal. Cheney herself spearheaded a nationwide conservative attack on the National History Standards as nothing more than a liberal version of history.⁴⁰ Cheney's criticism became big news across the country in 1994 and 1995, leading eventually to the US Senate disavowing the standards by a stunning vote of 99–1.⁴¹

The failure of the National History Standards was a major rupture point in the relationship among conservatives, professional historians, and the discipline of history. Fritz Fischer suggests that the history wars of the 1990s made the subject into a “pariah discipline” in the twenty-first century, becoming so controversial that the Common Core marginalized history altogether.⁴² A 2008 report showed that instructional time in the social studies fell dramatically following the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act.⁴³ At the state level, standards revision processes in some states continued to foster controversy. In 2010, for instance, the state of Texas became embroiled in a particularly fierce debate over history standards as extreme social conservative politicians took control of the Texas State Board of Education and advocated for a hard right turn in the state's standards, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills.⁴⁴ The history wars have returned with a vengeance since 2020, leading to a raft of legislation forbidding the teaching of so-called “divisive concepts” by conservative activists, and to equally strident defenses of history by professional organizations like the American Historical Association.⁴⁵



Figure 2. Cover of *National Standards for History, Basic Edition*, 1996. National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles.

In today's class, we'll discuss the state standards process in our state and critically evaluate the outcomes of our state's social studies standards procedures.

Guided Discussion

Description

Here I will offer a set of sample discussion questions organized thematically that can be used or easily modified for classroom use. Each theme will include questions designed to get students thinking deeply about the underlying goals and objectives of standards documents. I will illustrate these questions with examples drawn from South Dakota, the state with which I am most familiar. The three standards documents from 2015, 2021, and 2022 are included in the [supplementary data section](#). You can feel free to draw from the South Dakota case, but I include the examples more for illustrative purposes, since this lesson will be more powerful for your students if they examine local standards in your state.

I will also include at least one "should" question with each group of discussion questions, asking students to develop their own unique perspective on an idealized version of state standards. For every "should" question, it is important to ask students to justify their claims. They will need to grapple with the messy democratic process involved in the standards creation and revision process. These questions, however, do not necessarily have a right or wrong answer. Since students are being asked to share their deeply held beliefs, it is important to establish a norm of respect in the classroom. As the instructor, you can ask students to clarify, to add more detail, or to consider alternative points of view, but it is vital that you acknowledge that their perspectives and opinions are significant and add real value to the classroom conversation.

Classroom Instructions

Provide students with your selected state standards document in advance, potentially making it an assigned reading for the class. These documents can be expansive, so you may also consider assigning only the most relevant portions. If possible, put the document up on the class screen during the discussion.

Group Discussion Tip: If students are reticent to engage with the wider class, divide them into groups of four, and give each group member a specified role. Students can be facilitators, recorders, reporters, or responders. Facilitators will help lead the small-group discussion, ensuring that everyone's perspective is heard. Recorders will take notes, accurately summarizing the various perspectives provided in class discussion. Reporters will be responsible for informing the wider class about the group's conclusions. Finally, responders will field any follow-up questions that come up in the context of the wider classroom discussion.

How is History Imagined?

Analytical Questions

1. Do the standards provide a rationale for the teaching approach considered optimal for the subject?
2. How do the standards balance a consideration of historical inquiry as a process, and the memorization of factual information as a necessary part of that process?
3. How do the standards build concepts and content in an age-appropriate manner?

“Should” Question(s)

1. What should be the balance between critical thinking and content coverage?
2. At what age should students learn about the “tough stuff” of history?

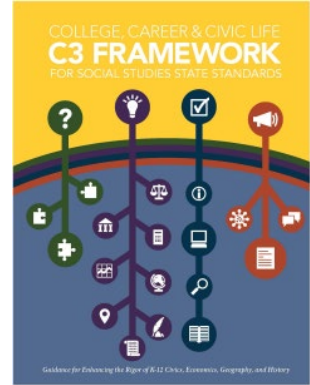


Figure 3. Cover of *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*. Courtesy of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).

TABLE 1. Comparison of pedagogical strategies stated in 2015, 2021, and 2022 South Dakota Social Studies Standards documents.⁴⁶

2015	2021	2022
“South Dakota used research-based resources to inform the newest SD standards. Starting in June 2014, the workgroup reviewed the C3 Framework... The final South Dakota product is an amalgamation that was created from documents based in research, national association’s contributions, existing South Dakota Social Studies Standards, the C3 Framework, and the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies.”	“Inquiry is at the heart of social studies; it disciplines and supports the ways in which practitioners in the field research and make decisions. Inquiry, or asking questions to drive one’s learning, is crucial to strong student outcomes.”	“Inquiry-based learning is a pedagogical approach that lies outside the scope of a standard. The role of a standard is to outline ends while inquiry-based learning is one of several pedagogical means to achieving those ends.”
44 pages	60 pages	179 pages

What is included, what is left out?

Analytical Questions

1. Do you notice any trends in what kinds of historical content are prioritized?
2. Do you notice any groups, movements, or perspectives that are missing from the standards? Where are the silences?
3. Do the standards adequately cover difficult histories in a balanced fashion, or are these minimized in any way?

Customization Option: Ask the class to focus on a particular standard on a singular topic, event, or historical concept. Utilize questions 1–3 with that specific focus.

“Should” Question(s)

1. Historians can never include all the information at their disposal and are always making choices that shape the narratives they create. In this case, did the standards revision committee make appropriate choices to adequately include a range of perspectives?
2. What content should have been included that was not, and what content was overemphasized that might be reduced?

TABLE 2. Sample standards selected from the 2015, 2021, and 2023 South Dakota Social Studies Standards documents.

2015	2021	2023
1.H.1.1: “Demonstrate chronological order using events from their own lives.”	1.H.1.1: “Demonstrate chronological order using events from students’ own lives.”	1.SS.1, N: “The student can recite the following line from the Declaration of Independence from memory: ‘We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.’”
1.H.2.1: “Connect people and events honored in commemorative celebrations.”	1.H.6.1: “Discuss the Oceti Sakowin Oyate creation story, including correct chronological order of the story.”	1.SS.6, A: “The student describes the similarities and differences in lifestyle, traditional warfare, and culture between two historical pre-Columbian Native American tribes, one of which is from the Oceti Sakowin Oyate (including select standards from Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings 1–5 and 7). Other tribes to consider include, but are not limited to, the Mandan, Sahnish (Arikara), Cheyenne, Crow, and Hidatsa.”
3 total history standards for first grade	4 total history standards for first grade	61 total history standards for first grade

Who controls the narrative?

Analytical Questions

1. Does the document indicate how members of the history / social studies revision committee were selected?
2. Does it tell you the backgrounds of the individuals who served?
3. If so, what does that information indicate about which perspectives were most valued in the standards revision process?

“Should” Question(s)

1. If you had the power to choose, how would you select participants who would create the first draft of history / social studies standards? Why?
2. What should the balance be between educators and experts in the field on the one hand and other community stakeholders (including representatives from the business community, parent groups, advocacy organizations, or politically influential voices such as legislators) on the other?

TABLE 3: 2021 South Dakota Social Studies Standards Revision Work Group (left) compared to 2022 South Dakota Social Studies Standards Commission (right)⁴⁷

South Dakota Social Studies Standards Revision Work Group	2022 South Dakota Social Studies Standards Commission
44 members	15 members
31 educators certified to teach in South Dakota	5 total teachers (2 not certified in the state)
Project Facilitator: American Institutes for Research	Project Facilitator: Hillsdale College Emeritus Faculty
Project Lead: Social Studies Specialist, South Dakota Department of Education	Chair of the Commission: Governor’s Chief of Staff
70% certified educators in the state of South Dakota	20% certified educators in the state of South Dakota

How do we move from draft document to classroom practice?

Analytical Questions

1. After the first draft is crafted, what does the process for final ratification of the standards look like?
2. Which community groups have a role in the ratification process?
3. Have there been any problems in your state following the normal and stated standards revision process?

“Should” Question(s)

1. Do you think the stated process is fair?
2. If there have been problems in following the routine process, what steps do you think could be taken to improve the process?
3. Standards always reflect a compromise between groups within our society that have divergent interests and that often approach the past from radically different perspectives. How, then, do we know if a single standard or standards as a whole are “good” or not?

Writing Assignment: Analyzing History Standards

Background

History is all about understanding perspectives and rival interpretations. But at the K–12 level, state governments across the country establish guidelines for history and the social studies, called “standards,” mandating certain perspectives and factual content for all public school children. History and social studies standards have been controversial since their widespread adoption in the 1980s but have been particular lightning rods for controversy since 2020.

The Magic Wand (100-200 words)

In this section, imagine that you can wave your magic wand and “fix” a problematic history standard in your state. Considering the messiness of standards revision procedures, in this section, you will (a) identify what you would consider to be the most problematic individual standard at your chosen grade level and (b) revise it using the rhetorical style and structure of the rest of the document.

Justify Your Revision

Before they are implemented, standards must go through a rigorous process of public review. In 300–500 words, explain and justify the choices you made in revision to a broad public audience. What was wrong with the standard as it existed, and how do your revisions make it better?

Other Lesson Plan Options

As an alternative to the single-lesson plan provided above, you can consider drawing from the bank of questions to jump-start class discussion for lessons throughout the term, or focusing on this topic for multiple class sessions. Below I've suggested other versions of this lesson plan as options for you to choose from and adapt as best fits your class setting.

À La Carte Option: Short discussions sprinkled throughout your course

- Discussion: 5 minutes.
 - Select individual standards from your state germane to the chronological or thematic focus of your day's lesson. Place the standard on the screen at the start or end of class.
 - Option 1: Ask students to analyze the standard drawing from one of the discussion questions. Use this discussion as a way to launch into the topic of the day.
 - Option 2: With the final five minutes of class, ask students how they might revise the standard, and to explain their choices.

Extended Option: Two class sessions

Session 1:

- Mini-lecture: 15 minutes.
- Group Work with Guided Questions: 35 minutes.
 - Divide class into groups of four. Assign each group a set of questions drawn from one of the discussion question themes included in the question bank. Groups will discuss their findings in the next class session.

Session 2:

- Guided Discussion: 30 minutes.
 - 15 minutes: Ask groups to report back on the discussion question themes they explored.
 - 15 minutes: General class discussion on remaining questions.
- Writing Assignment Setup: 20 minutes.
 - Writing assignment can include all three sections.

Suggested Reading List

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- Recommended by the Bradley Commission on History in Schools.” Westlake, OH, 1997.
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- Stern, Jeremy A., Alison E. Brody, José A. Gregory, Stephen Griffith, and Jonathan Pulvers. “The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021.” Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institution, 2021.
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was awarded the 2023 Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Award by the American Historical Association and the Society for History Education.

- 1 For more on the Virginia case, see Beau Dickenson, Brendan Gillis, and Chris Jones, “Defending History: Educators Stand Up to Protect Virginia’s Social Studies Standards,” *Social Education* 87, no. 6 (2023): 345–54. On Texas, see Ileana Najarro, “Political Debate Upends Texas Social Studies Standards Process,” *Education Week*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/after-political-pressure-texas-delayed-its-social-studies-standards-update/2022/09>. On Florida, see Leslie Harris, “History behind the Headlines: African American History and State Standards in Florida,” American Historical Association webinar, August 25, 2023, https://youtu.be/m5PUkqpDv8E?si=_957xVQTIT3urF, and James Grossman, “African American History in Florida: AHA Response to New Standards of Instruction,” *Perspectives on History*, August 28, 2023. On South Dakota, see Stephen Jackson, “The Hillsdale Effect: South Dakota’s Troubling New Social Studies Standards,” *Social Education* 87, no. 6 (2023): 355–60, and Stephen Jackson, “The Place of World History in South Dakota’s Failed 2021 Social Studies Standards Revision Process,” *World History Connected* 20, no. 1 (2023): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.13021/whc.v20i1.3527>. For an updated list of letters sent by the American Historical Association in support of history education, see American Historical Association, “History Education Advocacy,” <https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/news-and-advocacy-archives/history-education-advocacy>.
- 2 See Lauren McArthur Harris, Christopher C. Martell, Jennifer Chalmers, and J’Shon Lee, “‘I Was in the Room Where It Happens’: Educator Agency and Community within State Social Studies Standards Committees,” *Theory and Research in Social Education*, July 6, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2023.2226655>.
- 3 Susan Douglass, “Culture Wars or Pax Historica? Trends and Models in State World History Standards since 1994,” *World History Connected* 20, no. 1 (2023): 1–23.
- 4 Ross Edmunds Dunn, “World History in the California History-Social Science Framework,” *World History Connected* 20, no. 1 (2023): 1–11; Tadashi Dozono, “Eugenic Ideology and the World History Curriculum: How Eugenic Beliefs Structure Narratives of Development and Modernity,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 51, no. 3 (2023): 408–37; Brad Fogo, “The Making of California’s History-Social Science Standards: Enduring Decisions and Unresolved Issues,” *History Teacher* 48, no. 4 (2015): 737–75.
- 5 See, for instance, Sohyun An, “Asian Americans in American History: An AsianCrit Perspective on Asian American Inclusion in State U.S. History Standards,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 44, no. 2 (2016): 244–76; Carl B. Anderson and Scott Alan Metzger, “Slavery, the Civil War Era, and African American Representation in U.S. History: An Analysis of Four States’ Academic Standards,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 39, no. 3 (2011): 393–415; Brittany L. Jones, “Feeling Fear as Power and Oppression: An Examination of Black and White Fear in Virginia’s U.S. History Standards and Curriculum Framework,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 50, no. 3 (2022): 431–63; Leilani Sabzalian, Sarah B. Shear, and Jimmy Snyder, “Standardizing Indigenous Erasure: A TribalCrit and QuantCrit Analysis of K–12 U.S. Civics and Government Standards,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 49, no. 3 (2021): 321–59; Chris Seeger, Tiffany Mitchell Patterson, and Maria Gabriela Paz, “Reckoning with White Supremacy and Anti-Black Racism in the Virginia US History Standards,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 53, no. 3 (2022): 268–89; and Sarah B. Shear, Ryan T. Knowles, Gregory J. Soden, and Antonio J. Castro, “Manifesting Destiny: Re/presentations of Indigenous Peoples in K–12 U.S. History Standards,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 43, no. 1 (2015): 68–101.
- 6 As Bob Bain pointed out in a recent presentation at the World History Association, the discipline of history may be uniquely ill suited to being constrained by a set of standards, which assumes linear relationships between content and skills. Bob Bain, David Fisher, Stephen Jackson, Brittiani McNeil, Pamela McVay, and Laura J. Mitchell, “State Standards for World History in American Schools: Challenging Moments and Promising Outcomes” (roundtable, World History Association Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, June 23, 2023).
- 7 The best example of this, now more than a decade old, is *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K–12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver

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- 8 American Historical Association, "Criteria for Standards in History/Social Studies/Social Sciences," American Historical Association Council, updated January 2019.
 - 9 Bob Bain, "Rounding Up the Unusual Suspects: Facing the Authority Hidden in the History Classroom," *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 10 (2006): 2080–114, here 2081.
 - 10 Importantly, this is not something that we can write off entirely as a failure of education and educators, as research reveals that the public forms their views on history from a variety of sources, which include but are not limited to educational sources found in formal classroom settings. See Pete Burkholder and Dana Schaffer, "A Snapshot of the Public's Views on History: National Poll Offers Valuable Insights for Historians and Advocates," *Perspectives on History*, September 2021, <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2021/a-snapshot-of-the-publics-views-on-history-national-poll-offers-valuable-insights-for-historians-and-advocates>, and Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). For more on the persistence of what world historians call the "Western Civ Plus" model, see Douglass, "Culture Wars or Pax Historica?," and Bob Bain and Tamara L. Shreiner, "Issues and Options in Creating a National Assessment in World History," *History Teacher* 38, no. 2 (2005): 241–71.
 - 11 Stephen Jackson, *The Patchwork of World History in Texas High Schools: Unpacking Eurocentrism, Imperialism, and Nationalism in the Curriculum, 1920–2021* (New York: Routledge, 2023).
 - 12 In part this can be explained by the conservatism of American educational systems more generally. Stuart J. Foster noted in his study of textbooks that there is a "deeply held belief that the story of America is a just and noble one.... Americans do not want to address the uncomfortable notion that their society might be fractured and disunited." Stuart J. Foster, "The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks," *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (1999): 251–78, here 275.
 - 13 For more on this, see Stephen Jackson, "The Place of World History in South Dakota's Failed 2021 Social Studies Standards Revision Process." For perspective on the standards the state ultimately approved in 2023, see Jackson, "The Hillsdale Effect."
 - 14 Recent research led by Lauren McArthur Harris indicates that irregularities in the final stages of standards revision processes is regrettably common. Harris et al., "I Was in the Room Where It Happens," 19–20.
 - 15 James Grossman, "AHA Sends Letter to South Dakota Board of Education Opposing Social Studies Standards," September 15, 2023; National Council for History Education Board of Directors, "The NCHE Board of Directors Statement regarding the South Dakota Social Studies Standards"; Morgan Matzen, "South Dakota Social Studies Standards Pass, despite Opposition from Educators, Tribes," *Argus Leader*, April 17, 2023.
 - 16 This tracks with recent public opinion data. A June 2023 Ipsos poll found that fewer than one in ten Americans and K–12 parents say federal legislators or state legislators should be primarily responsible for what is taught in public schools. Chris Jackson, Mallory Newall, and Charlie Rollason, "Americans Trust Teachers, but Some Still Want to Be the Primary Voices on What's Taught," Ipsos, June 2, 2023.
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 - 18 William McNeill, "What We Mean by the West," *Orbis* 41, no. 4 (1997): 513–24, here 522.
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 - 20 For recent practitioner perspectives on teaching difficult histories, see Lauren McArthur Harris, Maia Sheppard, and Sara A. Levy, eds., *Teaching Difficult Histories in Difficult Times: Stories of Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2022).
 - 21 American Historical Association, "Teaching History with Integrity," <https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/teaching-history-with-integrity>. For more on censorship in American classrooms, see Jeremy C. Young, Jonathan Friedman, and Kasey Meehan, *America's Censored Classrooms 2023*, PEN America, November 9, 2023, <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms-2023/>.
 - 22 For a recent and authoritative look at the accountability movement, see John Rury, *An Age of Accountability: How Standardized Testing Came to Dominate American Schools and Compromise Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023).
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 - 24 National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: Department of Education, 1983).

- 25 National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, 5.
- 26 National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, 18.
- 27 National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, 27.
- 28 Linda Symcox, *Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 45–46.
- 29 Evans, *Schooling Corporate Citizens*, 6.
- 30 Morgan Polikoff, *Beyond Standards: The Fragmentation of Education Governance and the Promise of Curriculum Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2021). For more on the problematic implementation of accountability measures, including standards, see J.M. Beach, *Can we measure what matters most?: Why educational accountability metrics lower student learning and demoralize teachers* (Lanham, Md: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2021).
- 31 More than forty states began initiating plans to roll out mandated standards by 1983. Margret Montgomery, “Texas Curriculum Revision and the National Scene,” in *Curriculum Revision: Mandates and Processes: Implications of House Bill 246 for Texas Schools*, ed. Joyce Miller and Mary McCabe (Garland, TX: Ramsey Enterprises, 1984), 1-3, here 1.
- 32 National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*, 26.
- 33 Ron Brandt, “On Curriculum in California: A Conversation with Bill Honig,” *Educational Leadership* 47 (November 1989): 10–13, here 10.
- 34 Symcox, *Whose History?*, 70.
- 35 Symcox, *Whose History?*, 77.
- 36 Kenneth T. Jackson and Barbara B. Jackson, “Why the Time Is Right to Reform the History Curriculum,” in *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, ed. Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on History in Schools (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 3–15, here 5.
- 37 Symcox, *Whose History?*, 95.
- 38 Gary Nash and Charlotte Crabtree, *National Standards for History* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996).
- 39 Symcox, *Whose History?*, 107–10.
- 40 See Symcox, *Whose History?*; Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Edmunds Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Knopf, 1997); and Gary Nash, “Lynne Cheney’s Attack on the History Standards, 10 Years Later,” *History News Network*, November 8, 2004.
- 41 Symcox, *Whose History?*, chap. 6.
- 42 Fritz Fischer, *The Memory Hole: The U.S. History Curriculum under Siege* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2014), 140.
- 43 Jennifer McMurrer, *Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Change for Specific Subjects* (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2008).
- 44 See Keith Erikson, ed., *Politics and the History Curriculum: The Struggle over Standards in Texas and the Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 45 See Young, Friedman, and Meehan, *America’s Censored Classrooms 2023*.
- 46 South Dakota Department of Education, “South Dakota Social Studies Content Standards,” adopted August 24, 2015, 7; South Dakota Department of Education, “South Dakota Social Studies Content Standards: Preparing Students to Be College, Career, and Life Ready Citizens,” proposed to work group on July 26, 2021, 2; South Dakota Department of Education, “South Dakota Social Studies Standards,” March 30, 2023, 5.
- 47 Jacob Newton, “Few Certified Teachers in New Social Studies Workgroup,” Kelo News, April 25, 2022.