

HISTORY SCENE: PLEASE ENTER

ENTER

HISTO

History Scene Investigations: From Clues to Conclusions

Beverly McIntyre

Four “history scene investigators” tenaciously approach a corner of their fifth grade classroom, pencils in one hand, notebooks in the other. They scan the area marked by yellow tape, slowly step inside its boundaries, and set about their work. One of the investigators reaches for a letter lying beside a quill and inkbottle. The letter, dated 1815, is addressed to Jean Lafitte. The investigator reads on, searching for clues to the identity of the author, while the others examine a nearby map, other documents, and artifacts on the scene. “This one is a letter to the President!” exclaims one investigator.

What are History Scene Investigations?

The students described in the opening paragraph are in the middle of their social studies lesson for the day. The activity is a History Scene Investigation, commonly referred to as HSI by the students, who—in addition to learning history—are practicing reading skills, critical thinking, and writing. HSI, which derives its name from the popular television series based on crime scene investigations (CSI), uses discovery learning and inductive reasoning. HSI requires students to use artifacts in a mock scene from history as clues for drawing conclusions about the scene. (SIDEBAR, p. 18) Students’ jobs as history detectives, or history scene investigators, are to hypothesize about who might have been at the scene, when they were present, why they were there, and what they were doing. By selecting the appropriate types of artifacts to present to the students, the teacher can adjust the level of difficulty of an HSI lesson, making it appropriate for middle or upper elementary grade students.

Procedure for Implementing HSI

When I have an HSI planned, I set up the history scene in a corner of the room before students arrive to class and cover it with a sheet or plastic tablecloth until I’m ready for students to

start their investigation. After the scene is covered, I rope off the investigation site with yellow ribbon, or yellow masking tape, and a sign that instructs,

“HISTORY SCENE: DO NOT ENTER.”

When introducing HSI for the first time, I explain that the history scenes are recreations of real scenes from history—like the popular television show CSI recreates crime scenes. The artifacts are reproductions and can be handled. The students’ job is to become history scene investigators, examining the artifacts for clues to solve the mystery of the scene from history has been depicted. Students receive a chart (CHART 1 p. 19) before going to the history scene to record their observations in writing and sketches.

At the appropriate time, I allow groups of four or five students to visit the history scene with their charts and pencils. A timer can be set to conveniently signal when it is time for another group to get a turn at the history scene. After finishing their investigation at the scene, students take the clue chart back to their labs (their desks) to analyze the evidence. Conclusions are recorded in the appropriate column of the chart.

The final step of the analysis is to use all the conclusions made from the evidence to develop a hypothesis about what happened, who might have been at the history scene, and why. Students write an official detective’s report, which includes a paragraph explaining their hypotheses as well as examples of evidence that justifies their hypothesis.

After all students have a chance to collect and analyze clues from the history scene, the class is brought together to share, discuss, and refine hypotheses. Together, we examine each artifact and the possible clues they yield. As students share their hypotheses, some debate is likely to arise. Using the artifacts as evidence to support or discard conclusions, the class can usually come to a consensus on a set of hypotheses that explains

the “who, what, when, where, and why” of the history scene. Students should be reminded that hypotheses are best guesses based on evidence, and, therefore, could contain errors. They should also be reminded that evidence may support multiple hypotheses at once depending on one’s interpretation of the clues. Therefore, hypotheses can be revised.

Getting Started

The first step in implementing HSI is to identify an event or particular scene from a unit of study that will become the topic of the investigation. Think of the ideas, concepts, and conclusions you want students to take from the activity. These should help to pinpoint at what point during the unit the HSI would best fit.

Brainstorm a list of “artifacts” to be placed at the scene, and think about their value as clues. How will students use this object to make connections between the whole scene and what they know about this period of history? The Internet is a valuable resource when gathering the needed materials. You can download copies of many types of primary source artifacts such as photographs, historic maps, letters, and journals from websites such as the National Archives (www.archives.gov/education/) or the National Park Service (www.nps.gov/index.htm). These images can be printed in color, sized, “aged” with old coffee stains, torn, or marked on. Flea markets, yard sales, and discount stores are good sources of inexpensive props to represent “artifacts” such as old keys, ink wells, or hand tools. The gift shops at historic sites often have reproduction documents and props such as quill pens, period currency, and historical hats. I

keep a box in my classroom for a growing collection of artifacts that can be used for drama props, to peak curiosity for lessons, and for history scene investigations. Ideas for similar history scenes can be found in the *American History Detective* Book by Stacie Hutton.¹

Staging Artifacts

The artifacts can be as simple or as elaborate as you want them to be. Students understand from the beginning that, like television shows, history scenes are staged representations and, therefore, the artifacts are not real. The focus for this activity is not on using primary documents, but on student discovery of content and bringing history to life. This understanding frees the teacher to make “artifacts,” use pictures, or use reproductions of real artifacts. However, the more authentic the artifacts appear, the more real the investigation seems to the students. Paper artifacts smudged with dirt, a used tea bag, a bit of broken pottery--these items look quite convincing to a ten-year-old child. History scenes do not need to be elaborate. Keep the selection of artifacts simple so that students can focus on the clues they yield.

Decide when the HSI would best fit into a particular unit of study. Depending on the content of the HSI and the unit of study, the activity may work best as a unit culmination so that students have ample background knowledge to draw conclusions. However, HSI make a particularly good unit introduction in that they build anticipation to learn more about the topic and fuel further questions for investigation. The first HSI that I used in the classroom was one I designed to introduce a study of Lewis and Clark’s expedition to explore the Louisiana Territory. By the

BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS H.S.I

Suggested Materials:

- Map of the battlefield surrounding New Orleans (recreation based upon the present day battlefield maps used by the National Park Service).
- Jackson’s letter to Jean Lafitte
- Jackson’s letter to President Madison
- Soldier’s letter home
- Other props to set the scene such as beads or other artifacts to indicate the presence of Native Americans, a leather pouch containing a folded pirate flag, a quill and ink well, a crumpled blanket, canteen or other soldier’s items, lantern, candle and holder, etc.
- A small table or student desk covered with a cloth.

Setting the scene: Place the blanket a short distance away from the cloth-covered table. The blanket should represent the quarters of an enlisted soldier. Place the letter containing the eyewitness account of the battle on the blanket, along with some personal effects. Place battlefield map, the letter addressed to President Madison, along with a candle, quill pen, and ink well on the table, which represents Gen. Jackson’s quarters.



time we had finished the concluding discussion of the HSI, we had framed the major points to be covered in the unit of study. Questions left unanswered in the activity were revisited as the unit progressed. The HSI gave students a common experience to build upon.

There are a number of ways to work HSI into the schedule once students understand the procedure and can work independently. I find that what works best is to conduct an HSI on a day when students are working independently on other assignments. Students can work as solo detectives or collaborate in groups. Collaborative groups work well at the beginning when students are still learning the process; it also allows students to learn from each other, share ideas, and discuss possibilities.

How It Works

For the first HSI experience, it is necessary to discuss with students how the activity works and what is expected of them, modeling all or part of the process. For a history scene from the Battle of New Orleans, I might model how to glean clues by picking up a letter addressed to Mr. Jean Lafitte and reading it aloud. (The Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve, among other, provides teaching materials).² I would say that it seems that Mr. Lafitte, along with his brother and men that were under his command at the time, were being praised for bravery during a battle at Chalmette Plantation on January 8, 1815.³ The letter is signed by Major General Andrew Jackson, who must have been in command of the American army at that battle. It also seems that Mr. Lafitte is going to receive a presidential pardon for piracy of the seas, or privateering. I would then model how to record the information in a large chart (identical to the students’ charts) on the board (CHART 1, at right). As the analysis of the scene continues, clues such as the battlefield map and a pirate flag would reveal the location of the battle, opposing forces present (as well as the involvement of some pirates), and final outcome. A sample conclusion might be that Jean Lafitte commanded a band of pirates and received a pardon for piracy based on his fighting with the Americans against the British in the Battle of New Orleans.

Why HSI?

It is well known that one result of high stakes testing is the devaluing of social studies instruction.⁴ As much as three

times more instructional time is spent on reading and math as on social studies in the average elementary classroom.⁵ This fact is unfortunate because, aside from the importance of preparing young people to become an effective citizenry, social studies instruction offers opportunities to read expository text, apply reading strategies in authentic contexts, conduct research, generalize, and practice critical thinking skills.⁶ Many educators are realizing that any argument for increasing the amount of time spent on social studies must showcase the advantages of integrating social studies and literacy instruction.⁷ Integration of literacy and content can be accomplished through HSI.

Content Standards

I use history scene investigations in my fifth grade classroom as a way of engaging students in a hands-on activity designed to facilitate content acquisition while providing a forum for students to apply literacy skills and higher order thinking across the curriculum. Through the process of inquiry and investigation, students ask questions, make connections, evaluate, debate, hypothesize, and cite evidence to support conclusions.

Chart 1. The Battle of New Orleans

A History Scene Investigation (HSI)

Artifact/Clue	Students’ Conclusions (Example)
Major General Andrew Jackson’s letter to Pres. Monroe*	I conclude that this is a military camp and Gen. Jackson is in charge because of his high rank. There has been a battle in New Orleans according to the map fought January 8, 1815, according to the letter.
Jackson’s letter to Jean Lafitte*	I conclude that privateers (pirates) led by Jean Lafitte fought with the Americans in exchange for a pardon for outnumbered 2-1 by British privateering. I conclude that the battle may have been lost without their help the Americans were outnumbered.
A soldier’s letter describing the Battle*	I think many of the British were killed because of what this soldier saw.
Battlefield map	I conclude that this was an important battle because the winner would have gained control of the Mississippi River and access to the trade and interior of the United States.
Pouch containing a Pirate flag	I conclude that there were pirates here, probably participating in the battle with the Americans because someone left behind a pirate flag in the American camp.
Glass beads/ Indian artifacts	I conclude that there were Indians present in the American camp because of the bead artifacts found scattered here.
<p>Hypothesis: The American army, commanded by Major General Andrew Jackson, defeated the British against two-to-one odds in a battle at Chalmette Plantation in New Orleans, January 8, 1815. Soldiers from Kentucky and Tennessee were helped by Indians and pirates. Some pirates were pardoned for their help. This was an important battle because of its location on the mouth of the Mississippi River and it kept the British from using the river to gain access to the interior of the United States.</p>	

* Note: These items, created by the teacher, can be based on actual correspondence from that time.



Students are referred to as history scene investigators during HSI, but this is a perfect time to point out that these activities and thinking processes are the same ones used by actual professionals such as historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists. As students assume the role of historian during HSI, the following national social studies standards are addressed:

- ② TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE
- ③ PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS
- ④ INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS⁸

In addition, the flexibility in choosing the content of the HIS allows teachers to meet additional state standards. Through the follow-up discussion, the past is recreated and interpreted from multiple perspectives, and related to the present. A sense of order and chronology of historical events emerges as students gain a feel for how individuals and groups interacted with one another and influenced history.

Caveats

As with any instructional activity, certain points deserve due consideration:

- Thorough planning—Spend adequate time identifying the activity’s desired outcomes and choosing materials that will foster critical inquiry and interpretation in relationship to those outcomes.
- Classroom management—Plan carefully how HSI will be managed. The plan should locate the HSI scene so as not to distract students working on other assignments, specify what other assignments students will be working on, and list expectations for behaviors while at the HSI. When clear expectations are established prior to visiting the HSI scene, off-task or disruptive behavior is less likely to arise.
- Assessment—Evaluating learning from the discovery process can be challenging; however, the activities can provide data for informal assessments. Notes that you make while observing the investigations, students’ data charts, and follow-up discussion can reveal valuable information on students’ abilities to draw conclusions, cite evidence to support conclusions, work collaboratively, and contribute to discussion. If desired, the teacher and students can collaborate on a rubric for establishing appropriate behaviors and self assessing progress on those behaviors. Rubrics can be developed for assessing students’ data charts as well.

Final Thoughts

The pressures of standardized testing and the lack of time mean that integrating subject matter is more important than ever. Finding authentic contexts in which to practice literacy skills and higher order thinking also takes top priority in the age of accountability. At the same time, it is important that instruction be designed so that students are actively engaged and applying skills across the curriculum. History scene investigations accomplish these goals by incorporating reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking, while facilitating the acquisition of social studies content. They also allow students to actively construct content meaning for themselves. In addition to the pedagogical benefits, the investigations are easy to design and implement, are reusable from year to year, and breathe life into social studies. With appropriate scaffolding and modeling provided for students, HSI can be adapted for any grade level. History scene investigations

are a way to integrate reading and content, to get students involved with hands-on learning, and to challenge them with a situation that calls for critical thinking in this high-speed age—when time is such

a precious commodity. 📖

Notes

1. Stacie Hutton, *The American History Detective Book* (Chatham, NY: Chatham Hill Games, 2005).
2. The following sources were used to develop the documents for the Battle of New Orleans HSI: www.nps.gov/jela/chalmette-battlefield.htm; www.eyewitnesshistory.com/battleofneworleans.htm; and www.danielhaston.com/history/war-1812/neworleans-battle.htm
3. Jack C. Ramsay, Jean Lafitte: *Prince of Pirates* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1998).
4. Kenneth Vogler, "Where Does Social Studies Fit in a High-Stakes Testing Environment?" *Social Studies* 94, no. 5 (September/October 2003): 207-211.
5. "The Bayer Facts of Science Education X: Are the Nation's Colleges and Universities Adequately Preparing Elementary Schoolteachers of Tomorrow to Teach Science?" Executive Summary (Market Research Institute, Inc., 2004).
6. Barbara Buhrman, "Review of the Literature on the Utilization of Textbooks and Tradebooks in Social Studies Instruction," (1995), www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED390775.pdf.

7. Richard Vacca, "The Development of a Functional Reading Strategy: Implications for Content Area Instruction," *The Journal of Educational Research* 69, no. 3 (November, 1975): 108-112.
8. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).

BEVERLY MCINTYRE recently retired as fifth grade teacher at Norwood Elementary in Norwood, North Carolina.

