



Think Like a Historian Prompt Pack

Prepared by Simon Hennessy | Scripting Horizons

14 simple prompts for comparing past and present, testing sources, seeing an event from several sides, and spotting how persuasion works.

How to Use This Pack

- Copy a prompt, paste it into any AI assistant (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini or similar), and replace each [BRACKETED] part with your own details.
- Use the answers as a starting point for your own reading and thinking. They work best alongside real books, archives and reliable sources.
- AI can make mistakes and invent details. Check every date, quote and reference before you rely on it.
- If an answer feels one-sided or thin, reply and ask for other perspectives, or for what evidence would settle the question.

Note: These prompts are thinking aids for readers of history and current affairs. They do not replace primary sources or published scholarship. Where a topic is contested, look for accounts from more than one perspective before drawing a conclusion.

Past and Present

1. Find a Historical Parallel

I'm trying to understand [CURRENT ISSUE OR EVENT]. Suggest three historical episodes that share some features with it. For each one, explain the similarities, the important differences, and where the comparison stops being useful.

Tip: A good parallel sharpens your questions. Treat it as a way to ask better ones.

2. List What Has Changed

I'm comparing [HISTORICAL EVENT OR PERIOD] with [PRESENT-DAY SITUATION]. List the main differences in technology, institutions, beliefs and daily life, so I don't draw a comparison that ignores them.

Tip: The differences often teach as much as the similarities.

3. What Could People Know Then?

Describe how people living through [EVENT] at the time might have understood it, using only what they could have known, without hindsight. Include what information they had, how fast it reached them, and what they might have feared or hoped.

Tip: Hindsight makes the past look more inevitable than it was.

Testing Sources

4. Who Wrote This, and Why?

Here is a source I'm reading: [TITLE, AUTHOR, DATE, TYPE, AND A SHORT SUMMARY OR EXCERPT YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO SHARE]. Help me ask who created it, when, for what audience and with what purpose, and what it might leave out.

Tip: The same event looks different in a private diary and a public speech.

5. Check a Claim

I came across this claim: [CLAIM]. List what kinds of evidence would support it and what would contradict it, where a careful reader could look to check it, and which parts sound uncertain. If you can't verify something, say so plainly.

Tip: Searching for evidence against a claim is as useful as searching for evidence for it.

6. Primary or Secondary?

Here are the sources I've found on [TOPIC]: [LIST TITLES AND TYPES]. Sort them into primary sources and secondary sources, and tell me what each kind can and can't show me about the topic.

Tip: A good research question usually draws on both kinds.

7. Compare Two Accounts

Two accounts of [EVENT] disagree. Account A says: [SUMMARY]. Account B says: [SUMMARY]. Help me work out where they differ, what might explain the difference, and what I should check to decide which is more reliable.

Tip: Disagreement between sources is where the interesting questions tend to start.

Several Sides of an Event

8. Map the Perspectives

Take [EVENT] and list the main groups involved. For each one, set out what they wanted, what they feared and how they might have described what happened. Keep the tone even-handed, and say where the evidence is thin.

Tip: Try to describe each group's view in words they'd recognise.

9. Whose Voice Is Missing?

Most accounts of [EVENT] focus on [LEADERS / ARMIES / ELITES / WINNERS]. Suggest which other people were affected, such as ordinary workers, women, children, minorities or those who lost, and what kinds of sources might record their experience.

Tip: Letters, court records, diaries and oral histories often carry voices that official accounts leave out.

10. Causes and Triggers

Help me build a timeline for [EVENT]. Separate long-term causes, shorter-term causes and the immediate trigger, and note which are widely agreed on and which historians still debate.

Tip: Asking why it happened then, and not earlier or later, can open up the real causes.

11. Argue Both Sides Fairly

Historians disagree about [QUESTION, E.G. WHY SOMETHING HAPPENED OR WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE]. Present the strongest case for each of the main interpretations in a respectful tone, then tell me what evidence would help decide between them.

Tip: If you can state a view fairly, you understand it better.

Spotting Persuasion

12. Take Apart a Message

Here is a speech, poster, advertisement or post: [PASTE OR DESCRIBE IT]. Identify the claims it makes, the emotions it appeals to, what it wants the audience to do, and what it leaves out.

Tip: Pick something you agree with as well as something you don't.

13. Name the Technique

Describe common persuasion techniques, such as appeals to fear, simplifying a complex issue, or blaming a single group, and show how each appeared in [HISTORICAL PROPAGANDA OR POLITICAL CAMPAIGN]. Then list a few questions I can ask whenever I meet a message like it.

Tip: Once you can name a technique, you tend to notice it more often.

14. Check My Own Reaction

I read or heard [MESSAGE OR CLAIM] and felt [EMOTION]. Ask me five questions, one at a time, about what I felt, what the message wanted from me and whether I've checked it yet. Don't tell me what to conclude.

Tip: A strong feeling can be a signal to slow down and look for more evidence.

If you'd like to explore history in more depth, Simon Hennessy has books to go with these prompts:

- [Trumping Hitler](#)
- [Reflections Across Time](#)
- [Timeless Truths](#)

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