

## Opening Up the Textbook

### Why do it?

If you're interested in teaching your students historical analysis, the textbook seems an unlikely resource. This strategy of *Opening Up the Textbook*, developed at Stanford University, is one method of using the textbook to help students learn how to think historically and read critically.

*Opening Up the Textbook* (OUT) moves the textbook from its position as the one true story about the past to one historical account among many. It is designed to help students slow down, read closely, and critically evaluate their textbook. This is not a strategy that fits well with reading lengthy textbook passages or chapters.

### What is it?

When conducting an OUT the teacher juxtaposes a short excerpt from the course's textbook with an additional document or two. These documents are chosen to open up the textbook's story and engage students in comparing and crosschecking sources. Textbook prose often represents history as a tidy story and students get little taste of the ongoing investigative nature of historical practice. Using sources that shed a different light on the textbook's account can open up that account and students' understanding of what history is.

Students read and compare the textbook excerpt and additional source(s). They back up their comparative claims with evidence from the documents. (This can be facilitated with reading guides and graphic organizers.) Students can grapple with questions like, "How do you explain the differences in these accounts? What is the significance of these differences?" Summative assignments can include writing a response to a line of textbook prose or rewriting the textbook passage so it is more complete, accurate, or complex.

# READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Six ways to open up the textbook are:

1. *Comparison*: Comparing two textbook accounts—e.g. U.S. to non-U.S, old to new.
2. *Direct Challenge*: Using primary documents to challenge textbook facts or interpretation.
3. *Narrativization*: Where does a textbook begin to tell the story, where does it end it?
4. *Articulating Silences*: Who is left out of the textbook’s narrative? Try bringing in voices of the silenced or moving issues of narrative choice to the surface.
5. *Vivification*: Breathing life into a text that only mentions, or omits.
6. *Close Reading*: Careful, attentive focus on word choice, including adjectives, titles, and the like.

## Why is this a Best Practice?

*Opening Up the Textbook* is a lesson structure that engages students in authentic historical work but is tailored to the realities of the K–12 history classroom. Students encounter multiple historical accounts and have to consider how they work together to inform a larger historical narrative. Students read closely and consider each source’s perspective and purpose.

This lesson structure portrays history as more complex than a single, sacrosanct story. It helps students learn that an authoritative tone (like that which characterizes many K–12 textbooks) does not necessarily convey the full or exclusive story. Using an additional short source that contrasts with a textbook excerpt makes it easier for students to question textbook prose and see the many sides of historical practice. By focusing on text, this structure teaches students to read carefully and to question what they read.