History Department key questions and analytical tools. This work in progress is the result of much discussion among colleagues in the history department at Montgomery Bell Academy. It is intended to help foster a critical approach to the study of history at all levels and to help in our ongoing efforts to prepare students to be history scholars!

I. Key Interpretive Questions

A. THE OBJECTIVITY QUESTION & HISTORIOGRAPHY

* Is objectivity possible? Is it the goal of historians?
* Recognize the perspective of the author
* Do historical interpretations change for reasons other than the discovery of new evidence? How and why?
* Why do we study history?
* What do we mean by the lessons of history?

B. WHAT ARE THE KEY CATALYSTS FOR HISTORICAL CHANGE?—

* Is historical change random & chaotic or guided by forces? If the latter, then what guides it?
* great men vs. forces of history . . .
* Great systems—Hegel, Marx
* Climate and geography and natural resources shape and define cultures
  “Geography is destiny”
* Is technology and technological innovation the key driving force or are these simply tools for making a civilization more efficient?
  How does technology affect the rise and fall of societies?

C. Are there patterns or cycles of history? What are they? How do they work? Can they be altered?

* Patterns of political revolution & reaction
* Pattern of growth & development/decay—empires, eg. Arnold Toynbee
* How do culture and artistic expression affect and/or reflect the politics and social structures of a society.
* Short vs long term causes & surface vs deep/underlying causes


* Is it inevitable that cultures will be in conflict with other cultures?
* Ideal of universality of humankind vs realities of ethnic & cultural identity & conflict.
* Aggressor states and the dangers of appeasement vs. dangers of intervention.
* Importance of the rule of law/order as the necessary imperative
* Is protection of liberty of the individual or the preservation of order the better path to a good society?
  GW quote-- "Fire is a useful servant, but a terrible master."
* the modern state -- is it "enfeebling" (Samuel Smiles)? Or, is it an "instrument of progress" (Enlightenment view), protector of individual liberties and well-being?
* What is the role of the individual in relation to society
* Social contract theory/ theories of the origins and types of government
* What is the nature of the universe?
  Is it rational, with absolutes comprehensible to reason?
  Or, without absolutes, which leads to relativism?
* What is the nature of man?
  a. Primarily rational and capable of self-government (Locke)?
  b. or do selfishness and contentiousness often or even inevitably overwhelm reason, making man incapable of orderly, just self-government?
* Is man the creator, or is man the destroyer?
II. PROMPTS—

A. Evaluate or assess the Validity of this statement. . .
First, to answer a validity prompt, one must take a strong stand on one side of the prompt. If one agreed with the prompt, one would use evidence to support the statement in the prompt. If one disagreed, one would use contrasting evidence to refute the prompt. One should also take a limited view of contrasting evidence and to disprove it for one's increased support of their own evidence.

B. Change Over Time
To answer a change over time prompt, one should present the initial conditions and show how the major areas evolved through the time period.

C. To What Extent. . .
To answer an extent prompt, one should take a strong stand for a greater extent or lesser extent in one's essay. By including equal amounts of evidence for both sides, the strength of the essay is diminished. One must take a stand.

D. Compare and Contrast
In a compare and contrast prompt, one should focus on the similarities and the differences of the major aspects of the prompt. In one's essay, one should concentrate on including enough evidence for comparison and contrasting to fully answer the prompt. One needs to be consistent with one's thesis to have a constant train of logic.

E. Cause and Effect
In a cause and effect essay, one should concentrate on various events and illustrate the effects of these events.

F. Discuss or Assess the Impact of. . .
In a discuss the impact essay, one needs to focus on the results of the given event.

G. Relative Importance/degree
The first priority in a relative importance prompt is to develop evidence for the contributing factors. One then must create a hierarchy, or a categorization of the evidence by significance, for the contributing factors.