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# Doing Battle With Chronological Impairment: Bracketing

*by Bill Ross, III*

*Editor's Note: Chronology is important because it places events in time. But the question arises: How to teach chronology without requiring excessive, low level memorization and losing sight of the "big story" in the historical narrative? In this piece, Bill Ross suggests a technique that can help anyone, in school or out.*

Media are replete with horror stories detailing a lack of historical knowledge among Americans both young and old, often centering around chronological confusions and howlers. Even CBS Late Night host David Letterman has highlighted the problem by inaugurating (July 2) a feature he calls On This Day In History According To A Dumb Guy. But I'm afraid his hypothetical "dumb guy" who mixes up historical events is a far too common reality.

Our much maligned educational system usually gets the blame for such problems. Are these attacks justified?

Clearly most history courses are taught chronologically and the vast majority of our students take several history classes over their years in elementary and secondary schools. Why then this documented inability to put events in order? Are students not making enough effort to learn? Are teachers not trying hard enough to teach? Or, as I suspect, is there too much material being introduced and too few connections being made across historical time? We know that history teaching which races through the text, merely "mentioning" people, events and places, can not contribute either to long term retention of subject

matter or to the ability to use what is retained for higher level analysis and understanding. Obtaining added curriculum time for history instruction might help, but it is hard to do, and is even impractical in many settings. We must search instead for pedagogical ideas which would enable us to achieve the Bradley Commission's goal of moving beyond "short-lived memorization of facts without context" in order to "cultivate the perspective arising from a chronological view of the past down to the present day."1

The "Less is more" strategy, in which the instructor stresses some topics over others so that opportunities can be created for in-depth study (using primary resources, original student research etc.) can be helpful, but it is not a panacea for chronological ineptitude. We also need an emphasis on tying together course content across centuries and eras. Learning should be a continuum, always reinforcing earlier mastery. To this end, I propose a strategy for setting up a skeletal historical framework in each student's mind which is continually reinforced through both well-chosen course content and an exercise I call "Bracketing."

Bracketing is an old artillery technique which can be adapted to the war on chronological infirmities. It consists of intentionally firing a shell beyond the target followed by a round short of the target and gradually narrowing the over and under until the target is hit. For historical instruction, this strategy teaches a list of some 30 landmark historical events and eras (which can be done in two days) in a concise, skeletal narrative of our 5,000 years of recorded history and then taking every opportunity to connect the 30 or so items to everyday class lessons.

To further refine and practice Bracketing techniques, I especially like to have students read a "This Day In History" column, available in many major daily newspapers. It can be our tool of choice...cheap, relevant, easily adjustable, and fun for everyone to think about.

Here is an example of how this longitudinal reinforcement exercise works. Using the Dayton (Ohio) Daily News' ALMANAC (its version of This Day In History) for May 16th we use an 1868 event—Andrew Johnson's Acquittal.

**TEACHER TALK** (maybe at the start of class as a warm-up, attention getter, or organizing activity): I give them the date and they have to use bracketing to discover the event.

"And now it's time for This Day In History! (Fanfare) Our first featured event occurred on this day in 1868. Give me an event from our time line before 1868." [Expected response: 1865, end of the Civil War]

"Now give me an event after 1868." [Hoped for response: 1898, the Spanish-American War—we became a world power after the Gilded Age]

"This 1868 event, of course, is closer to the end of the Civil War. What is the period right after the Civil War called?" [Reconstruction, but if a clue is needed say, "After all the destruction there was an obvious need for, what? (reconstruction)"]

"Which president presided over the early stages of Reconstruction?" [Andrew Johnson]

"Did he have any problems?" [Yes, Radical Reconstructionists, etc.]

"How long did he serve?" [Barely survived one term.]

At some point the term impeachment will come up, but try to avoid a rush to conclusion and bring out these other teaching points. "Tell me more about the impeachment process." [House brings charges; Senate conducts trial; 2/3 vote required to remove president from office.]

Again, our date is May 16th, 1868. "Can anyone tell me how the impeachment process came out?" [President Johnson was acquitted by one vote.]

The preceding is only one of five items from the May 16th ALMANAC that I could have chosen to use that day. Birthdays of famous figures are also engaging, and seven of the eleven listed for May 16th were familiar enough to one or more students to be useful. To use bracketing with birthdays, we begin with the year of birth, then students are to say what events the person lived through. I give them the person's occupation (i.e. American musician) and then clues until they are able to determine who the famous person is. All the while they are using, and becoming more familiar with, the bracketing list in order to place the person or event in time and thereby learn its identity.

Bracketing has served me well since I first used it in the early 1980s. With it my students develop a solid sense of chronology while enjoying the technique itself. It puts a good foundation under their historical house, and it can be adapted to classrooms at any grade level.

Let's not let our students end up like Letterman's hypothetical "dumb guy" who thought that in 1908 President Gerald Ford invented a car and named it the Model T in honor of "Mr. T"! This malady of the mind is preventable by early intervention and continual reinforcement.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could mention the year of an event and students were able to state both a prior and a post event, thereby zeroing in on the historical event and capturing the essence of its era? It is past time for young people to develop a better sense of history and Bracketing can help it happen.

1 Building A History Curriculum, Bradley Commission on History in Schools, (Westlake, OH: National Council for History Education, 1988), p.7, Recommendation 2.-

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## Bracketing Teacher Talk

A short version of the teacher talk:

Just as you wouldn't build a house without a foundation, why do we try to teach history without a foundation of major events that the student can build on? Math students learn their multiplication tables and language arts insists on the alphabet, yet we try to teach without a foundation taught in a narrative fashion.

Bracketing is an old artillery concept which calls for intentionally firing a round over the target and one under the target, then adjusting the powder charges to narrow in to the target. Once you commit these 25 major events to memory, they can be continually used to help students think historically and establish the context of a time period. If I mention the year 1880 to a student, I wouldn't expect detail about that year, but just being able to say that 1880 is after the Civil War and before we became a world power, would really help the thought process.

Here we go!

Let's go back in time to the end of the ice age, and I'm not talking about when the rapper Vanilla Ice had his last hit! (guess the approximate year) (in round numbers)...10,000 years ago. What did that event make possible? (Diffusion of Asiatic peoples into North America) Let's skip 5,000 years. If we do that too many times this lesson will be over quickly! I need a real sea change event in human history...

Do Egypt dance imitation. Yes friends, it's the development of civilizations. Where did early civilizations form? (river valleys) What made them different? (a written record) Name the first two. (Egypt and Mesopotamia)

Now, for the last time, let's skip another 5,000 years. What event is our calendar based on? (birth of Christ)

Who had the world's greatest empire at that time? (Rome)

Where did they get a lot of their ideas (ancient Greece). Is Rome still a major power today? (No) When did Rome fall? (476) And that plunged Europe into the...(Dark/Middle Ages) Before Rome fell, she had split into a western part HQ in Rome, and an eastern 1/2 in Constantinople. This Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire lasted almost a thousand years longer than the west! Do the math. What century does that put us in? (the 1400s/15th) What was mankind starting to do on a large scale at that time? (explore) Do you have a rhyme for us?(Columbus sailed the ocean blue in1492.) Who did Columbus work for? (Spain) Name the first two great exploring nations. (Spain and her neighbor Portugal) Is Spain still a world power today? (No) When did they start their decline?(Spanish Armada...1588...tell the story) Who starts to come on strong and how did their exploration philosophy differ from Spain's? (England, settlement/colonization) What was their first successful settlement? (Jamestown...1607) When did a form of slavery start in what later became the U.S.? (indentures, first Africans 1619) When did we become an independent country? (1776...76 is everywhere in today's America) What was our status in the period 1607-1776? (English colony) When did our new country double in size overnight? (1803...Louisiana Purchase) Did we only fight the British once? (No, 1812-1815 also) (Sing first few bars of Johnny Horton's Battle of New Orleans) (Emphasize speed of communications at the time. Battle after end of war!) When will we pick up some more land? (War with Mexico...1846-1848) As a result of that war we gained a lot of land. As the land was settled, the question was would that land, once settled, apply for admission to the U.S. as \_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_ states.(free or slave) We weren't able to work that out, so from 1861-1865 we had a \_\_\_\_ (civil war). After all the destruction, there was a need for \_\_\_\_ (Reconstruction) After a lot of industrialization, we finally were recognized as a world

power after what event? )Spanish-American War...1898) Who would you bet on in that one? (Spain had passed her prime in 1588)

Let's put in an invention. First successfully tested on Dec. 17th, 1903 at Kitty Walk, NC. What am I talking about? (Wright Bros, first powered flight) Did this invention have a military application? (Yes) What was the first war with planes? (WW1) When our boys came back from "Over There", what was America like in the 20s? (Look and discuss items in Bracketing list) After this gambling in the stock market where you only had to put down 10 cents on the dollar, a massive sell-off ensued and we plunged into \_\_\_\_\_ (The Great Depression) (Brother Can You Spare A Dime...FDR's programs) What really brought us out of this period? (WW2) We wouldn't want to start a war to help our economy, but we were the only major industrial power not being bombed! Name our major WW2 Allies (Get them to say Russia.) How did Russia get on our side? (Hitler attacked them too!) After the war, Russia breaks off and we end up with a very dangerous situation, a war of words with the continual threat of nuclear war. We call this period the \_\_\_\_\_ (Cold War). The year 1949 was a very import year, in that the balance of power in the world changed. (Stress the three events from our Bracketing list.) With these changes, the Russian and Chinese backed dictator of a small Asian country felt that he could annex the southern part of his peninsula. At 4a.m. on a Sunday morning in 1950, what war started? (Korea, give quick overview) It's invention time again! It's 1957. Car fans would tell me that the 1957 Chevy is a classic, but I'm looking for something else. Beep, beep, beep...around the world it went... (Sputnick, start of the space age) As we enter the 1960's, the communists test us again in Asia. Where? (Vietnam, give details) One of the great lessons of the 20th century is that borders can't be changed nor land annexed. What happened in the summer of 1990? (Kuwait, Desert Storm) We didn't finish the job and we've gone back again. Our last event is in your frame of reference and you can probably remember where you were when you heard about it. (sept. 11th, 2001)

We'll use these dates to help us think historically and always have a sense of chronology/sequence...a powerful tool. It's always to have a few reference points so we can tell what came before and after a given event!

(Use this day in history once a week for 15 minutes to exercise the chronological mind!)

GOOD LUCK WITH BRACKETING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!



**BRACKETING !!!!!**  
**Dr. Bill Ross**

10,000 YEARS AGO –	End of the ice age
5,000 YEARS AGO –	Development of writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia
1 A.D./C.E. –	Birth of Christ
476 –	Fall of Rome
1453 –	Fall of Constantinople/eastern Roman Empire
1492 -	Columbus
1588 –	Defeat of the Spanish Armada
1607 –	Jamestown/first permanent English settlement in North America
1776 –	Declaration of Independence
1803 –	Louisiana Purchase
1812-1815 –	War of 1812 (vs. Britain)
1846-1848 –	Mexican War
1861-1865 –	Civil War
1898 –	Spanish-American War
1903 –	First powered flight/Wright Brothers



- 1914-1918 – World War I
- THE 1920'S – Roaring 20's, The Jazz Age, women get the right to vote, Prohibition, gambling in the stock market, first radio broadcast
- THE 1930'S – The Great Depression
- 1939-45 – World War II
- 1949 – First Russian "A" bomb, NATO formed, China goes communist
- 1950-1953 – Korean War
- 1957 – Start of the Space Age/Sputnik
- 1964-1975 – Vietnam War/major American involvement in Vietnam
- 1990-1991 – Persian Gulf War
- SEPTEMBER 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 – Start of the War On Terror