

Historiography Framework Cheat Sheet (HIST 101/102)

Purpose: This is a quick reference for the core “engines of change” (conceptual frameworks) we use to interpret the past.
You can use this sheet all semester for discussion posts, quizzes, and essays.

1) Agency (Human Choice)

Core idea

History is driven by **human decision-making** (choices, leadership, strategy).

What to look for in a historical account

- individual leaders making decisions
- pivotal moments / turning points
- motivations, intentions, calculations
- contingency (“things could have gone differently”)

Useful sentence starters

- “A major turning point was when ____ decided to ____.”
- “This outcome depended on the choices of ____.”
- “If ____ had not , *then* might have happened instead.”

Example (U.S. History)

Lincoln’s decisions during the Civil War and emancipation debates.

2) Great Man Theory (Extreme Agency)

Core idea

History is made primarily by **exceptional individuals** (“great men” / heroic leaders).

What to look for

- hero-centered narratives (“only one person could do this”)
- the crowd becomes background
- “genius,” “destiny,” “extraordinary leadership”

Quick critique question

- “If we remove the hero, what other forces still explain the change?”

Example (World History)

Napoleon as the explanation for major European transformation.

3) Determinism (Forces Beyond Individual Agency)

Core idea

History is shaped by **forces larger than individuals**. People act within constraints.

Common deterministic forces

- economic systems
- class structure
- institutions (laws, governments, corporations)
- geography / environment
- technology
- unconscious drives / psychology (Freud)

What to look for

- patterns across time
- “inevitable” language
- people as products of systems
- structural pressures limiting options

Useful sentence starters

- “Even if individuals wanted change, ____ constrained their choices.”
- “The larger system of ____ shaped outcomes more than any single person.”
- “This conflict was rooted in structural pressures like ____.”

Example (U.S. History)

Industrial capitalism shaping labor conflict and working conditions.

4) Ideology (Belief Systems as an Engine of Change)

Core idea

People act based on **belief systems** (ideas about truth, morality, legitimacy, identity).

What ideology can do

- justify power (“this is natural / correct / deserved”)
- create enemies and outsiders
- normalize inequality
- shape what counts as “common sense”

What to look for

- moral language (“freedom,” “civilization,” “tradition,” “order”)
- claims about what is “natural,” “right,” or “inevitable”
- rhetoric that divides groups into good/evil

Useful sentence starters

- “This policy seemed justified because they believed ____.”
- “The ideology of ____ shaped how people interpreted ____.”
- “The author frames ____ as legitimate by using language like ____.”

Example (U.S. History)

Pro-slavery ideology and racial hierarchy arguments in the 1800s.

5) Marxism (Class Conflict + Material Conditions)

Core idea

History is driven by **material conditions** and **class struggle**.

What to look for

- owners vs workers
- exploitation, inequality, profit incentives
- labor conflict, wages, property
- who benefits economically from the system

Useful sentence starters

- “A Marxist interpretation would emphasize ____.”
- “The real conflict was rooted in control of ____ (labor/property/wealth).”
- “This reform movement threatened the economic interests of ____.”

Example (U.S. History)

Labor strikes (1877, 1894) interpreted through class conflict.

6) Nationalism (Nation as Identity + Loyalty)

Core idea

People understand themselves as part of a **nation**, and act in the name of national loyalty.

What nationalism does

- mobilizes sacrifice (“for the nation”)
- creates myths, heroes, and shared memory
- defines insiders vs outsiders
- strengthens the nation-state

What to look for

- national myths and heroic narratives
- patriotic symbols
- “unity” language
- historical memory (celebrating or silencing certain stories)

Useful sentence starters

- “National identity shaped how people interpreted ____.”
- “This narrative creates unity by emphasizing ____ and minimizing ____.”
- “Nationalism turns history into a story of ____.”

Example (Global History)

WWI propaganda and national mobilization efforts.

7) Evidence Check (How to Read Like a Historian)

Core idea

A historical argument is not “true” because it sounds convincing. It must be supported by **evidence**.

Key questions

- What evidence is used? What is left out?
- Are statistics framed selectively?

- Are sources quoted fairly?
- Is rhetoric being used to push a moral conclusion?

Useful sentence starters

- “The author supports this by citing , *but does not address* .”
- “This statistic is persuasive, but it may leave out ____.”
- “The author’s wording (‘____’) signals a specific interpretation.”

Cheat Code for Essays (High-Scoring Move)

In your writing, try to do **two things at once**: 1) Explain the event
2) Identify the framework

Example sentence

“Although the textbook highlights individual leadership (agency), the deeper cause was structural—economic pressures and class conflict (determinism/Marxist lens).”