

# Getting to grips with concepts in primary history

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Perhaps one of the most perplexing aspects of teaching history is the fostering of conceptual understanding. History subject leaders often find this a challenging issue. Even if they have a decent grasp themselves, it can be difficult for others in the school who have to teach the subject.

Over recent years, the pages of this journal have often addressed the teaching of different concepts but that might still leave unanswered questions. This article focuses on a number of questions related to what is often known as 'second-order' concepts.

1. What are some of the key 'second-order concepts'?
2. What key ideas should we be getting over to the pupils which need frequent reinforcement?
3. How can they be taught in a meaningful way to pupils, reflecting their ages and abilities?
4. Are there some good teaching examples that illustrate some of the points made?

## The key concepts relevant to primary pupils

Although there is some discussion about what exactly form the main concepts, many agree that they include the following:

- **time, change, chronology** – to create a sense of period and time, the sequence of when things happened, what changed and what continued, what we might see as progress.
- **reasons and results** – how can we explain why things happened in history, how did people make a difference to what happened? What followed as a result of these?
- **interpretations** – how and why does the way that history is produced differ? Do we all understand the past in exactly the same way? How do we show what the past was like?
- **historical evidence** – what do we use to find out about the past? How can we use this material safely to produce the best history we can? What are the problems when using historical sources?
- **significance** – how do we choose what is most important in history as we cannot use everything?

## Why bother with these concepts?

Together they can be said to cover what 'history' is about, without the content. They can give structure to all the separate facts and pieces of information that make up the past. Without some way of planning and organising our history teaching, we could end up with a load of separate facts and little real understanding of why things happened, what changed, how we produce history and what we might consider is really important. The concepts can help us see what ideas we want pupils to grasp and can help us plan the tasks and questions we want.

What is vital, however, is the recognition that a concept is not a 'one off' – taught for one topic and then left. If the concepts are so vital, they need to be planned for and taught time and time again. The understanding needs to be reinforced through different content. The concepts can also be understood at different levels and so they need to be covered in a progressive way.

This article attempts to address this issue, by looking at what key ideas underpin the concepts – encountered first in foundation or Key Stage 1 and then further developed in Key Stage 2. Nor does it end there – they will be further developed in Key Stage 3 and beyond. The progression is not just age-related as some pupils may have a conceptual grasp that is better or less than the expectations for their key stage.

Concepts can seem academic and divorced from the excitement of history. They should not be seen this way. It is important that they are not taught in an arid way divorced from real historical content but they are seen as a way of organising the vast amount of historical content there is to cover and making it manageable.

It is also crucial that teachers do not adopt a mechanical approach. A curriculum organised by concepts would almost certainly not work well. Nor might one that just covers one concept at a time. Sometimes that may be needed but at other times several may be covered together in an integrated way. For example, when explaining an event there may well be coverage of some or all of the concepts listed above.

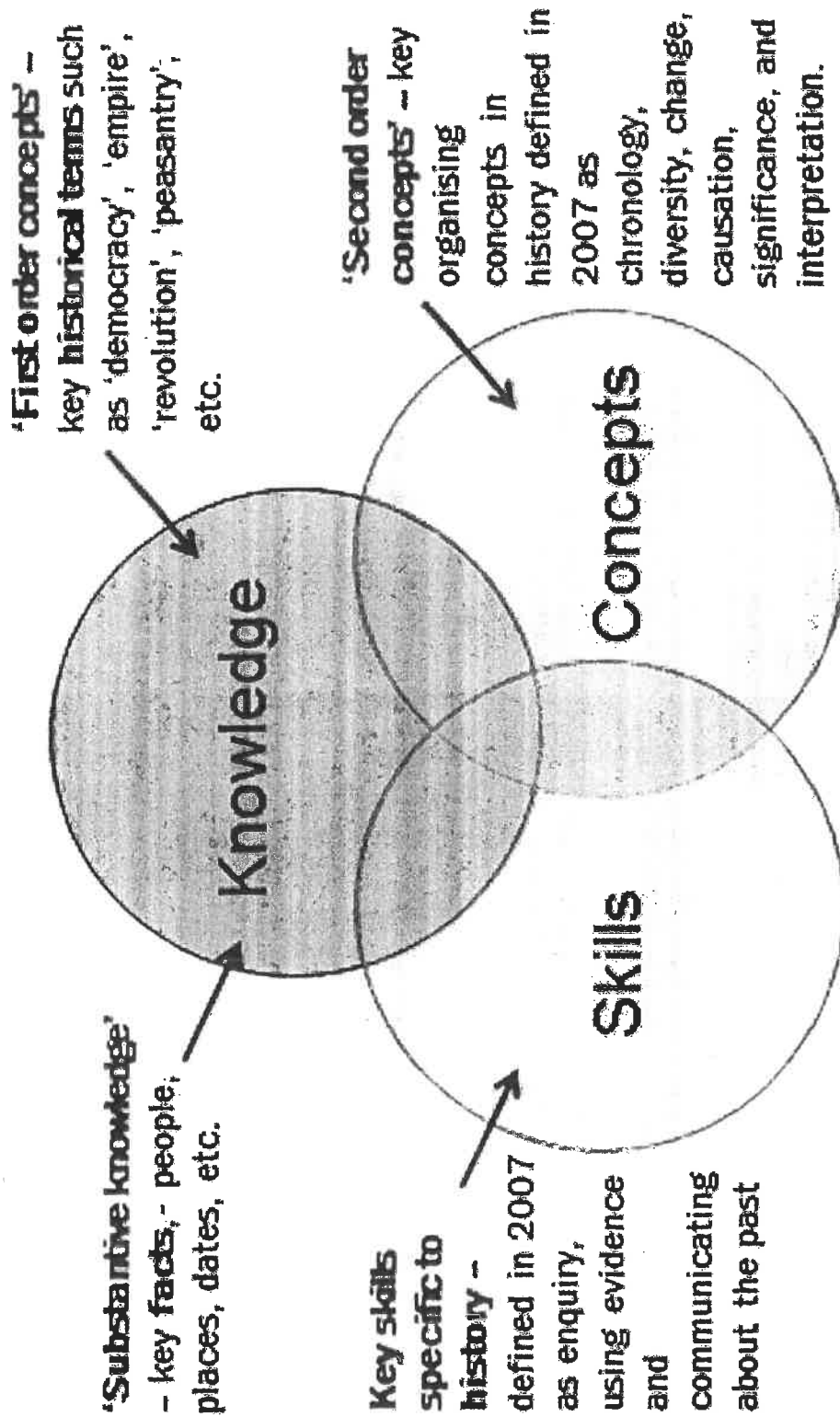
What are these ideas that the concepts represent? It might be reasonable to expect that pupils in Key Stage 1 might understand the following main ideas. Some seem obvious but unless one stresses these ideas time and time again they can easily be ignored.

1. A world existed before they and those around them were born but their world today is connected to the past.
2. All people in the past did not live at the same time.
3. The past can be described in different ways – old, new, today, yesterday, last year, days of the week, years, once upon a time, long ago, past/present, before/after, when I was little etc., as well as some period labels.
4. Many things in the past have changed (and are still changing) but some things are the same.
5. People in the past were real people, had feelings like real people and usually did things for a reason.
6. Events usually happen for a reason (sometimes more than one reason).
7. People in the past did not know the same as we do today but they were not really more stupid.
8. Not everyone in the past thought the same.
9. People in the past did not always think that the same things were as important in their lives as you do today.
10. Things did not always turn out as planned.
11. We can tell different stories about the same history.
12. We find out about the past from different sorts of evidence/clues that come from that particular time.
13. We can show the past in different ways such as pictures, writing, film, theme parks, museums, music and legends.
14. We never know everything that happened in the past.
15. We can disagree about what was happening in the past and it does not necessarily mean that some people are wrong.
4. Change does not always mean progress. There can be 'bad/negative' changes. There are differences between change, progress and development.
5. People in the past had feelings and emotions and had reasons for their actions.
6. It is not always easy to work out why things happened and why people did or thought things.
7. Reasons and events usually lead to results (sometimes more than one) but things did not always turn out as planned.
8. People in the past did not know the same as we do today but they were not really more stupid. When things happened, it was often confusing and uncertain for people and they did not know how things would turn out.
9. We can put together a story/account about the past in different ways. It can be different if we use different information or have views about what is important. This does not mean that one version is right and another wrong.
10. Not all history has been fair to all people and groups. Sometimes this is deliberate and at other times accidental.
11. We find out about the past from different sorts of information/sources such as written, artefacts and pictures. Some parts of history have many sources but others have very few.
12. Different people help put together what happened in the past, such as historians, archaeologists, film makers, museum curators.
13. Not all the sources from the past can be trusted. We always need to be careful when using any evidence from the past, e.g. it can be inaccurate, incomplete, unfair. With care, however, we can make some use of all information – it always tells us something about the past.
14. It is often better when we can find more than one piece of information/source for our topic.
15. There is a difference between a source and evidence. The source is the information but it is you or the historian who uses it as evidence in your own way to answer your questions. A good historian can ask many questions about the sources they use.

These ideas continue into Key Stage 2 but many pupils will develop their understanding throughout the Key Stage 2 years, for instance:

1. A world existed before they and those around them were born – some things occurring many years ago before there were ways of writing about the past. Human time is only a small part of time.
2. The past can be described in different ways – dates, period labels, divisions such as decade, century etc.
3. The past was different from today: some things have changed (slowly or quickly) but some things are the same.
16. We never know everything that happened in the past so it means that we have to work out things that are likely to have happened and that means giving opinions and ideas rather than definite facts.
17. Because we need to tell a clear story, we need to choose which bits to use and this means deciding what is important. Not all information is equally important.
18. We should care about what past people did. We should try to understand them without necessarily agreeing with them. Much of our lives today is because of what people in the past have done.

# What should I teach?



## History curriculum mapping – Key Concepts and Key Processes / Skills

<i>Work likely in...</i>	<i>Early Years</i>	<i>Key Stage 1</i>	<i>Key Stage 2</i>
<i>Chronological understanding (KC 1)</i>	Use everyday language related to time. Order and sequence familiar events.	Develop an awareness of the past. Use common words and phrases related to the passing of time. Know where people/ events studied fit into a chronological frameworks.	Continue to develop a chronologically secure knowledge of history. Establish clear narratives within and across periods studied.
<i>Diversity (KC 2)</i>	Know about similarities and differences between themselves and others, and among families, communities and traditions.	Make simple observations about different types of people, events, beliefs within a society.	Describe social, religious and ethnic diversity in Britain and the wider world.
<i>Change and continuity (KC 3)</i>	Look closely at similarities, differences, patterns and change. Develop an understanding of growth, decay and changes over time.	Identify similarities / differences between ways of life at different times	Describe / make links between main events, situations and changes within and across different societies / periods
<i>Cause and consequence (KC 4)</i>	Question why things happened and give explanations.	Recognise why people did things, why events happened and what happened as a result.	Identify and give reasons for, and results of, historical events, situations and changes.
<i>Historical significance (KC 5)</i>	Recognise and describe special times or events for family or friends.	Talk about who was important e.g. in a simple historical account.	Identify historically significant people and events in situations.
<i>Historical interpretation (KC 5)</i>		Identify different ways in which the past is represented.	Understand that different versions of the past may exist, giving some reasons for this.
<i>Historical enquiry (KP 1) Using evidence (KP 2) Communicating about the past (KP 3)</i>	Be curious about people and show interest in stories. Answer 'how' and 'why' questions in response to stories or events. Explain own knowledge and understanding, and ask appropriate questions. Know that information can be retrieved from books and computers. Record, using 'marks' they can interpret and explain.	Ask and answer questions. Understand some ways we find out about the past. Choose and use parts of stories and other sources to show understanding of key concepts.	Regularly address and sometimes devise historically valid questions. Understand how knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources. Construct informed responses by selecting and organising historical information.

## History's Big Ideas (Key Concepts)

There are a number of key concepts that underpin the study of history. Pupils need to understand these concepts in order to deepen and broaden their knowledge, skills and understanding.

<b>KC 1</b>	<b>Chronological understanding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Understanding and using appropriately dates, vocabulary and conventions that describe historical periods and the passing of time.</li><li>b. Developing a sense of period through describing and analysing the relationships between the characteristic features of periods and societies.</li><li>c. Building a chronological framework of periods and using this to place new knowledge in its historical context.</li></ul>
<b>KC 2</b>	<b>Cultural, ethnic and religious diversity</b>	Understanding the diverse experiences and ideas, beliefs and attitudes of men, women and children in past societies and how these have shaped the world.
<b>KC 3</b>	<b>Change and continuity</b>	Identifying and explaining change and continuity within and across periods of history.
<b>KC 4</b>	<b>Cause and consequence</b>	Analysing and explaining the reasons for, and results of, historical events, situations and changes.
<b>KC 5</b>	<b>Significance</b>	Considering the significance of events, people and developments in their historical context and in the present day.
<b>KC 6</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. Understanding how historians and others form interpretations.</li><li>b. Understanding why historians and others have interpreted events, people and situations in different ways through a range of media.</li><li>c. Evaluating a range of interpretations of the past to assess their validity.</li></ul>

## History's Key Skills

These are the essential skills and processes in history that pupils need to learn to make progress.

	Key Skill	Explanatory notes
KC 1	Historical enquiry	<p>Pupils should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. identify and investigate, individually and as part of a team, specific historical questions or issues, making and testing hypotheses</li> <li>b reflect critically on historical questions or issues.</li> </ul>
KC 2	Using evidence	<p>Pupils should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. identify, select and use a range of historical sources, including textual, visual and oral sources, artefacts and the historic environment</li> <li>b. evaluate the sources used in order to reach reasoned conclusions.</li> </ul>
KC 3	Communicating about the past	<p>Pupils should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a present and organise accounts and explanations about the past that are coherent, structured and substantiated, using chronological conventions and historical vocabulary</li> <li>b. communicate their knowledge and understanding of history in a variety of ways, using chronological conventions and historical vocabulary..</li> </ul>