

# The SCIM-C Strategy: Expert Historians, Historical Inquiry, and Multimedia

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## Understanding history is a challenge.

In order to provide teachers with a tool that can help students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to interpret primary sources and reconcile various historical accounts, we developed the SCIM-C strategy. Grounded in research on teaching and learning history<sup>1</sup> and building upon Riley's layers of inference model to support teaching evidential understanding,<sup>2</sup> the SCIM-C strategy focuses on five broad phases: Summarizing, Contextualizing, Inferring, Monitoring, and Corroborating. When students examine an individual source, they move through the first four phases (i.e., summarizing, contextualizing, inferring, and monitoring) and then, after analyzing several individual sources, they compare the sources collectively in the fifth phase (i.e., corroborating).

The following sections explain each of the five phases of the SCIM-C strategy, including the four spiraling analyzing questions for each phase.

### Summarizing

Summarizing is the first phase of the SCIM-C strategy. In this phase, students quickly examine the documentary aspects of the text in order to find any information or evidence that is explicitly available from the source. Students should attempt to identify the type of source (e.g., letter, photograph, or cartoon) as well as its subject, author, purpose, and audience. In addition,

students should look for key facts, dates, ideas, opinions, and perspectives. The four analyzing questions associated with the summarizing phase are as follows:

1. What type of document is the source?
2. What specific information, details and/or perspectives does the source provide?
3. What is the subject and/or purpose of the source?
4. Who was the author and/or audience of the source?

### Contextualizing

When students begin contextualizing, they spend more time with the source in order to locate it within time and space. The teacher should emphasize that it is important to recognize and understand that a source may contain archaic words and/or images from the period. These words or images may no longer be used today or they may be used differently; these differences should be noted and defined. In addition, the meanings, values, habits, and customs of the period may be very different from those today. Ultimately, students and teachers must be careful to avoid treating the source as a contemporary product as they pursue their guiding historical question. Following are the four analyzing questions associated with the contextualizing phase:

1. When and where was the source produced?
2. Why was the source produced?

3. What was happening within the immediate and broader context at the time the source was produced?
4. What summarizing information can place the source in time and place?

### Inferring

Inferring is designed to provide students with the opportunity to revisit initial facts gleaned from the source and to begin to read subtexts and make inferences based upon a developing understanding of the context. In answering an historical question and working with the primary source, sometimes the evidence is not explicitly stated or obvious but rather, the evidence is hinted at and needs to be drawn out. The inferring stage provides room for students to explore the source and examine the source's perspective in the light of the questions being asked. These are the four analyzing questions associated with the inferring phase:

1. What is suggested by the source?
2. What interpretations may be drawn?
3. What perspectives or points of view are indicated?
4. What inferences may be drawn from absences or omissions in the source?

### Monitoring

Monitoring is the capstone stage in examining individual sources. Here students are expected to reflect upon their initial assumptions in terms of the overall focus

on the historical questions being studied. This reflective monitoring is essential in making sure that students have asked the key questions from each of the previous phases. Such a process requires students to examine the credibility and usefulness or significance of the source in answering the questions at hand.

Ultimately, monitoring is about reflection—reflection upon the use of the SCIM-C strategy and reflection upon the source itself. The SCIM-C strategy is recursive in nature and thus revisiting phases and questions is essential as one begins to create an historical interpretation through one's questions. The four analyzing questions associated with the monitoring phase are as follows:

1. What additional evidence beyond the source is necessary to answer the historical question?
2. What ideas, images, or terms need further defining?
3. How useful or significant is the source for its intended purpose in answering the historical question?
4. What questions from the previous stages need to be revisited in order to analyze the source satisfactorily?

### Corroborating

Corroborating only starts when students have analyzed a series of sources, and are ready to extend and deepen their analysis by comparing the evidence gleaned. What similarities and differences in ideas, information, and perspectives exist between the analyzed sources? Students should also look for gaps in their evidence that may hinder their interpretations and the answering of their guiding historical questions. When they find contradictions between sources, they must investigate further, including checking the credibility of each source. Once the sources have been compared the student then begins to draw conclusions based upon the synthesis of the evidence, and can begin to develop her or his own conclusions and interpretations. The four analyzing questions associated with the corroborating phase are as follows:

1. What similarities and differences between the sources exist?

2. What factors could account for these similarities and differences?
3. What conclusions can be drawn from the accumulated interpretations?
4. What additional information or sources are necessary to answer more fully the guiding historical question?

The SCIM-C strategy's utility lies in the recognition that it provides a point of entry through which to teach and learn historical inquiry. The overall process of moving through the phases of the SCIM-C strategy should be viewed as a precise, recursive, and thoughtful approach to historical inquiry. It is an approach that requires a concerted level of engagement with each source in order to investigate historical questions through analyzing primary sources deeply, thoroughly, and carefully. The ultimate goal of this instruction strategy is for students to become self-regulated in the use of the strategy as part of the process of doing history. In pursuit of this goal—the development of a multimedia tool for teachers and students that facilitates the use of the SCIM-C strategy for historical inquiry—the three authors, a social studies educator, an educational psychologist/technologist, and an academic historian, respectively, designed, developed, and implemented the SCIM-C Historical Inquiry Tutorial ([edpsychserver.ed.vt.edu/scim/soced](http://edpsychserver.ed.vt.edu/scim/soced)). Following is a demonstration of SCIM-C using a letter from the Depression-era, which is included in our tutorial.

### Letter from the Depression

In this section, we will apply the SCIM strategy to an historical primary source. Our intention is to illuminate the source relative to this guiding historical question: *What was the life of a child like during the Depression?* The source to be analyzed is a letter obtained from the National Archives (see Figure 1, p.223). The letter was originally sent to the federal Children's Bureau and, as was the custom when the letter was sent, the original handwritten letter was transcribed using a typewriter.

As we address each of the four phases of the SCIM strategy, we will attempt to

answer the four analyzing questions associated with each phase (see Table 1, p. 224). It is important to note how different portions of the text help to answer different analyzing questions.

The purpose of summarizing is to locate any information or evidence that is explicitly available. The first piece of evidence available from the source is the source type; in this case, we are analyzing a letter. At this point it is necessary to read through the letter to get a broad understanding of the letter's author, subject, audience, and purpose.

The sender's address is listed as: *Bobby Murray, Route 3, Malvern, Arkansas*, and the letter is dated *July 8, 1939*. In addition, the letter is addressed to the *Children's Bureau, Department of Labor, Washington, D.C.* What does this letter tell us, explicitly? The author of the letter is a 15-year-old boy, Bobby Murray, who is in the 10th grade. The purpose of the letter is to seek assistance to be able to continue school; specifically, he is writing to the government, to the Children's Bureau at the Department of Labor for help. In addition, the author has a mother, an older sister, who died six months earlier, and a niece from his deceased older sister. The mother works, though not regularly, and pays the family's living expenses.

This may not be an exhaustive summarization, but we do now know who wrote the letter, why the letter was written, to whom the letter was written, and a series of other specific details within the letter. The question to be answered next is, can this letter be placed in some type of context?

Now we move into contextualizing, which as we mentioned earlier, means examining the source in more detail to locate it in time and space (see Figure 2, p. 225). In this case, when and where the letter was written is fairly straightforward. This was also mentioned previously in the summarization phase. Specifically, the letter was written in 1939, in Malvern, Arkansas. Why the letter was written is also clearly stated. Bobby Murray, the author, is seeking financial assistance from the government to continue his schooling.

Now, what was happening within the immediate and broader context of the

time and place the letter was written? The date of 1939 is significant. We know that ten years earlier, in 1929, the Depression started in the United States. However, by 1939, the time of the writing of this letter, economic life was generally getting better. Yet, within the immediate context of Malvern, Arkansas, the letter tells us that life was still difficult. The author does not imply that starvation is an issue, or that his family might lose their home; nor does he say they are at risk of having his niece taken from them. Specifically, the letter tells us that unemployment was still a problem for boys under eighteen years of age.

At this point, we have identified the letter's author, the letter's purpose, and the letter's context. We now move on to inferring—that is, what information may be implied or concluded from the evidence? (See Figure 3, p. 225) We can see that this particular source provides fertile ground for inferring. For example, the letter suggests that the boy is mature for fifteen

years of age, as he seems to understand the family's dynamics. Specifically, he is concerned with furthering his education, but not allowing his education to adversely affect the family finances.

The author also seems sensitive to his mother's workload and her need to take care of his niece. Unfortunately, the author does not tell us much about his family; specifically, who was his father, how did his sister die, or who was the father of his sister's child? In addition, since the author is writing to the Children's Bureau and referencing the superintendent, it is likely the author already asked the superintendent for financial assistance. Extending this financial focus, since the author is seeking financial assistance from the government, we can conclude that the family was not an upper class family, but more likely a family where finances would be difficult, such as a middle or lower class family.

Finally, this letter reflects a change in

individuals' perspectives: that is, the letter reflects a perspective that the government is willing and able to get directly involved in citizen's lives—a perspective not common in the 1920s. Curiously, the author does not provide much explicit information regarding life in Malvern, Arkansas. He paints a picture of a difficult time, but Bobby Murray does not reference bleak details about the number of unemployed, the number of students out of school, or the number of people starving, which would suggest that life had improved since the depths of the Depression in the early 1930s.

The progression from summarizing, through contextualizing, to inferring, always leads to questions. In the monitoring phase, we tend to ask, 'What questions do I have regarding my initial assumptions and interpretations or my current understandings?' In this case, we have several questions. The author seems very mature for a fifteen-year-old boy, which raises the question: Was there something about the experience of the Depression that would have increased the sense of responsibility of a fifteen-year-old boy? Also, what opportunities were available to a fifteen-year-old boy during 1939? The author seems to value education: why? Did the author see education as a way to better conditions for himself and his family?

As we mentioned previously, the author does not indicate much about the conditions in Malvern, Arkansas. Learning more about Malvern might help us understand the author's environment and better contextualize the contents of the letter. Was Malvern a typical southern community? Similarly, we are still left with questions regarding his family. Who was his father and did something happened to him? What happened to his sister? What happened to his niece's father? Were the conditions of the author's family common during the late 1930s?

Finally, we are left with the question of what happened to Bobby Murray and

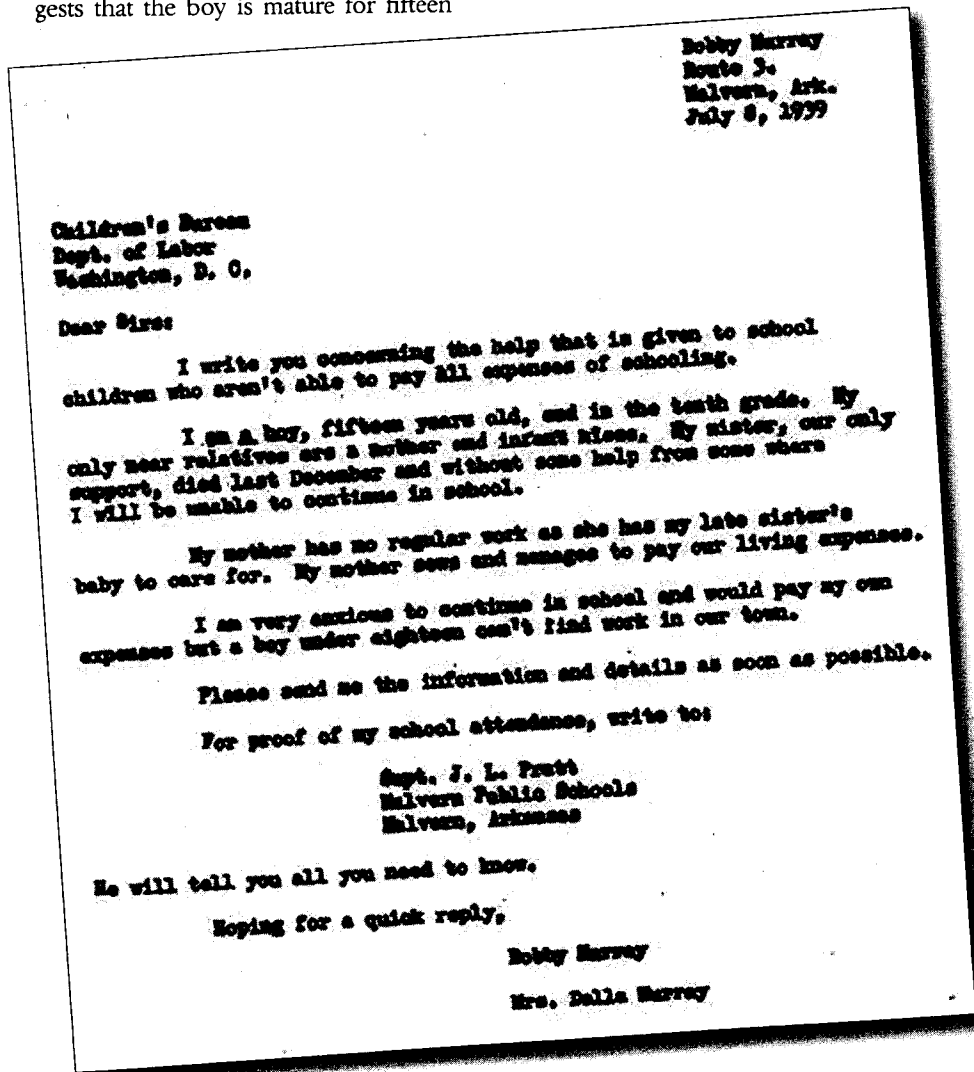


Figure 1. A letter from Bobby Murray requesting financial assistance to continue schooling in light of family hardship.

**Table 1. The SCIM-C Strategy**

**Summarizing**

1. What type of historical document is the source?
2. What specific information, details, and/or perspectives does the source provide?
3. What are the subject, audience, and/or purpose of the source?
4. What does the source directly tell us?

**Contextualizing**

1. Who produced the source?
2. When, why, and where was the source produced?
3. What was happening locally and globally at the time the source was produced?
4. What summarizing information can place the source in time, space, and place?

**Inferring**

1. What is suggested by the source?
2. What conclusions may be drawn from the source?
3. What biases are indicated in the source?
4. What contextualizing information, while not directly evident, may be suggested from the source?

**Monitoring**

1. What is missing from the source in terms of evidence that is needed to answer the guiding historical question?
2. What ideas, images, or terms need further defining from the source in order to understand the context or period in which the source was created?
3. How reliable is the source for its intended purpose in answering the historical question?
4. What questions from the previous stages need to be revisited in order to analyze the source satisfactorily?

**Corroborating**

1. What similarities and differences exist between the sources?
2. What factors could account for the similarities and differences?
3. What gaps appear to exist that hinder the final interpretation of the source?
4. What other sources are available that could check, confirm, or oppose the evidence currently marshaled?

**Table 2. General Guidelines for Teaching Strategies**

**Description and Explanation**

1. Teach strategies explicitly.
2. Teach strategies through modeling and explaining.
3. Teach when, where, and why to use strategies.

**Practice and Feedback**

4. Provide extensive examples of strategies in use.
5. Provide extensive practice in strategy use.
6. Provide extensive feedback on strategy use.

**Evaluation and Control**

7. Teach students to monitor the effectiveness of strategy use.
8. Teach students to self-regulate the use of strategies.
9. Teach strategies within the context of their natural use.

**Generalization and Adaptation**

10. Encourage the use of strategies beyond the classroom or specific domain.
11. Encourage the use of strategies over an extended period of time.
12. Encourage students to modify strategies and evaluation criteria for different uses.

## HISTORICAL INQUIRY

**Directions:** Consider the Contextualizing phase of the SCIM strategy and examine the contextualizing statements below. Then, select the contextualizing statement that best represents the source.

The letter was written in 1939, in Malvern, Arkansas, by Bobby Murray, for the purpose of seeking financial assistance from the government to continue his schooling. The date of 1939 is significant, in a broad context. Ten years earlier, in 1929, the Depression started in the United States. By 1939, however, the time of the writing of this letter, economic life was generally getting better. However, within the immediate context of Malvern, Arkansas, the letter indicates that life was still difficult.

The letter was written by Bobby Murray, in 1939, in Malvern, Arkansas. The letter suggests that the author is concerned with furthering his education, but not allowing his education to adversely affect the family finances. The letter was written in 1939, the very end of the Depression, a time when life was generally improving. The Depression began in 1929 but by 1939 economic recovery was widespread.

**Children's Bureau**  
Dept. of Labor  
Washington, D. C.

**Bobby Murray**  
Route 3,  
Malvern, Ark.  
July 4, 1939

Dear Sirs:

I write you concerning the help that is given to school children who aren't able to pay all expenses of schooling.

I am a boy, fifteen years old, and in the tenth grade. My only near relatives are a mother and infant niece. My sister, our only support, died last December and without some help from some where I will be unable to continue in school.

My mother has no regular work as she has my late sister's baby to care for. My mother sees and manages to pay our living expenses.

I am very anxious to continue in school and would pay my own expenses but a boy under eighteen can't find work in our town.

Please send me the information and details as soon as possible.

For proof of my school attendance, write to:

Supt. J. L. Pratt  
Malvern Public Schools  
Malvern, Arkansas

He will tell you all you need to know. Hoping for a quick reply,

**Bobby Murray**  
Mrs. Della Murray

The purpose of contextualizing is to examine the source in more detail in terms of recognizing and locating the source in time and space. Unfortunately, the response you have selected contains inferred information and lacks important contextualizing information. The statement's reference to the author's "not allowing his education to adversely affect the family finances," is essentially an inference and does not address the goal of contextualizing. In addition, the statement selected is devoid of reference to the immediate context of what is happening in Malvern, Arkansas. When contextualizing, it is important to focus on when, where, and why the source was produced, and the immediate/broader context in which the source was produced.

Figure 2. Students are presented with interpretive passages that they must then assess in terms of the passage's veracity in representing Bobby Murray's letter.

far away as Washington, D.C. The author is clearly hopeful that a change will come as soon as possible, because any further delays will keep him from school.

This interpretation shows how utilizing the SCIM strategy results in a deep, thorough, and careful analysis of a primary source; it also demonstrates that these steps facilitate the creation of an insightful and well-grounded interpretation.

### Notes

1. See Samuel Wineburg, "On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach between School and Academy," *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 3 (1991): 495-519.
2. C. Riley, "Evidential Understanding, Period, Knowledge and the Development of Literacy: A Practical Approach to 'Layers of Inference' for Key Stage 3" *Teaching History* 97 (November 1999): 6-12.

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his family. For example, unbeknownst to Bobby, he will be of prime draft age soon after World War II begins for the United States in December 1941. Ultimately, there's a lot in this letter. It is short, but it's clear and its objective is specific.

With the four phases of the SCIM strategy complete, we are left to create an interpretation of the source relative to the guiding historical question: What was life like for a child during the Great Depression? One such interpretation might look like this:

This letter suggests how the effects of the Depression were felt by one boy and his family. The boy's difficulties were not caused directly by the Depression, but rather by the lack of resources available to the family. The one source of support, the sister, has passed away; the mother works part-time while also raising her granddaughter. The Depression is thus a background cause, suggested in the statement that a boy under eighteen cannot find any work. The letter does show, however, how the government is perceived as a source of assistance. Bobby Murray is

writing to the Children's Bureau because he is hopeful of receiving some of the assistance being offered to children who cannot pay their school expenses. He refers to the superintendent of the local school district as a reference who will testify to his attendance. The letter thus shows how the combined difficulties of home life and the Depression caused problems for a child, and how the child's response demonstrates both a sense of responsibility and a willingness to look for assistance from as

## HISTORICAL INQUIRY

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS

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INFERRING

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Evidence from the Source</b></p> <p>Children's Bureau. For proof of my attendance, write to, Supt. J. L. Pratt. He will tell you all you need to know.</p>	→	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Interpretation / Inference</b></p> <p>It is likely the author already asked the Superintendent for financial assistance.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Evidence from the Source</b></p> <p>I write you concerning the help that is given to school children who aren't able to pay all expenses of schooling.</p>	→	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Interpretation / Inference</b></p> <p>The family was not an upper class family, but more likely, a middle or lower class family where finances would be difficult.</p>

The author also seems sensitive to his mother's workload and her need to take care of his niece. Unfortunately, the author does not tell me much about his family; specifically, who was his father, how did his sister die, or who was the father of his sister's child? In addition, since the author is writing the Children's Bureau and referencing the Superintendent, it is likely the author already asked the Superintendent for financial assistance. Extending this financial focus, since the author is seeking financial assistance from the government, I can conclude that the family was not an upper class family, but more likely, a middle or lower class family where finances would be difficult.

Figure 3. The SCIM-C strategy and inferences drawn from Bobby Murray's letter. This figure and Figure 2 are screens from the SCIM-C Historical Inquiry Tutorial at [edpsychserver.ed.vt.edu/scim/soced](http://edpsychserver.ed.vt.edu/scim/soced).