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## Teaching History with AI



Supatman/Adobe

## Creative Uses of AI for History Teachers

History teachers can use generative AI in many creative ways, including brainstorming ways to make History classes more engaging.

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There are a couple of sayings in the AI space. The first is, 'This is as bad as it's ever going to get.' Anything that is only just out of reach now will probably be commonplace in the near future. A lot of what you read here will be out of date soon enough, so I'd recommend subscribing to YouTube channels like Futurepedia.<sup>1</sup>

Another saying is, 'You won't lose your job to AI, but you might lose it to someone using AI.' When IBM's supercomputer Deep Blue beat Gary Kasparov at chess in 1996–97, we thought it was all over for human chess players, yet a human and an AI *together* can still beat an AI alone.

The multiverse of possibility from generative AI landed on our doorsteps about a year ago, and people in the teaching community are already using AI to make their lessons both learning-filled and engaging. It is time to start doing it yourself.<sup>2</sup>

There are numerous AI services teachers can use. Many of them are intermediaries between you, the user, and a large language model (LLM) artificial intelligence. Many of these services require a subscription, but in many instances you can perform the same functions as the intermediary AI app by going directly to the LLM itself. For example, Quizgecko can make quizzes, yet you can create quizzes in ChatGPT directly if you know how to write a good 'prompt' question or command, or are happy to use trial and error to get it right.<sup>3</sup>

My experience is primarily using ChatGPT 4.0, which is considerably better than the free ChatGPT 3.5.<sup>4</sup> The paid 4.0 version costs USD\$20 (about AUD\$30) per month, but if you can write this off as a work expense it only costs you about \$5 per week after tax.<sup>5</sup> A teacher earning \$40 an hour would therefore need to save one-eighth of an hour of work— just 7.5 minutes—per week to make it worthwhile.

» Ben Lawless, 'Creative Uses of AI for History Teachers,' *Agora* 59:2 (2024), 45–48 «

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ChatGPT 3.5 is pretty good for most instances, but 4.0 is much better for anything complex (and I hope you are doing something complex). ChatGPT 4.0 also gives you access to the Dall-E image generator, which is much cheaper, easier and quicker to use than other well-known image generators like Midjourney and Stable Diffusion.

My advice is to become skilled with ChatGPT 4.0, either by writing good prompts or through trial and error. There are other good LLM platforms like Copilot and Gemini, and they're probably just as good. Prompts should work in a similar fashion on these other LLMs.

Note that sometimes you'll get a different result with the same prompt. AI isn't an exact science yet. Play around. Use trial and error.

AI is also fallible. It is trained on the internet, and some things on the internet are not true. AI can also 'hallucinate' facts, so always cast your expert eye over anything AI produces before you give it to an audience.

The real answer to the question, 'How can AI make my History lessons more engaging?' is that AI can help you to do as many interesting things as you can think of. If you're coming up blank, AI can help you brainstorm.

### Brainstorming

Get help with an engaging lesson idea.

Give me fifteen easy to set up creative engaging learning activity ideas.

Through trial and error, I've learnt to add 'easy to set up' to prompts, and to ask for learning activities rather than entire lesson plans. I already have lesson plans, but I sometimes want a different activity to slot into that plan.

Often only a few of the brainstormed items are useful. To hone in on more of the same type, try:

Give me ten more, similar to item (1).

Write a more detailed version of item (1).

You can also ask AI to help you be creative about being creative.

Give me ten creative outside-the-box ways to teach Year 7 students about ancient China.

This generates a wide variety of learning experiences that are arguably broader in scope than just 'learning activities'.

### Creating Images

Dall-E is built into the same prompt framework as ChatGPT. While you can just ask it to 'Draw a picture of...', you can also prompt Dall-E to show the different artistic styles of different places and time periods.

Show ancient Greek and ancient Chinese artistic styles side-by-side.

It is important to have enough knowledge about the period being studied so you know if Dall-E generates something incorrect or inappropriate. Dall-E will also create fictitious historical events if asked.

Draw a historical scene showing Socrates meeting Cleopatra in ancient Egypt.

### Storytelling

Sometimes we ask students to imagine they are an individual from history and to write a story from that point of view. This can be problematic because often students don't have anywhere near enough knowledge about the time to do this task authentically, and it can often misrepresent the real lived experiences of people from the past (e.g. asking a Year 7 to 'imagine' they are a Spartan boy in the Agoge). However, AI can do this much better.

History teachers are lucky in that we can use narratives to teach students content knowledge about our subject. Studies have shown that information taught using narrative is much more likely to be remembered.<sup>6</sup>

Create a short story involving a young soldier during the Gallipoli campaign.

Write a 500-word summary story of the build up to the outbreak of war in 1914. Start in 1870. In each paragraph provide at least one specific date. Reading age of a twelve-year-old. Make the main character a teen.

- 1 Futurepedia, [https://www.youtube.com/@futurepedia\\_io](https://www.youtube.com/@futurepedia_io).
- 2 Some prompts in this article have been written with the help of ChatGPT.
- 3 Quizgecko, <https://quizgecko.com/>
- 4 ChatGPT, <https://chat.openai.com/>
- 5 You should confirm this with a registered tax agent first.
- 6 Judy Willis, 'The Neuroscience of Narrative and Memory,' Edutopia, 12 September 2017, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/neuroscience-narrative-and-memory/>

### Historical Interviews

You can ask AI to pretend to be a character from history that you're studying. The AI can devise answers to class questions asked of that figure, and you can project the discussion on the wall in real time.

Imagine you are Socrates. A class of Year 7 History students will ask you questions. Encourage and inform students.

### Jigsaw

You can also create jigsaw activities by asking AI to write a short piece from the perspective of four different characters. The prompt below is one I used for Year 8 History when learning about the Crusades. It would have taken me hours to write this myself.

Write four 100-word personal reflections from the point of view of these four people: a medieval peasant from England, the Pope, a Muslim resident of Jerusalem, and a French noblewoman.

### Debates

The act of debating is powerful, but it can be tricky because students need to know a lot about a topic to engage in debate about it. ChatGPT can provide students with scripts to use in a debate.

Create a list of statements that high school students could use in a debate on the topic: 'Was the US justified in using atomic bombs against Japan during World War II?' Include arguments for both sides of the debate, covering ethical considerations, military strategy, the historical context leading up to the decision, and its aftermath. Ensure statements are suitable for a high school audience.

### Choose Your Own Adventure

I spent about a year making an historically accurate 'choose your own adventure' for the classroom. Now AI can do it for you and your students in much less time.

Generate an outline for a 'choose your own adventure' online story set in ancient Rome, incorporating historically accurate information. Include key decision points for readers that reflect the social, political and cultural aspects of the time.

### Making 'Completion Tasks'

ChatGPT 4.0 can now make PDF, Word and Excel documents. Previously users would clumsily cut and paste text from ChatGPT into other programs, with the formatting looking atrocious. Now you can just ask ChatGPT to make a worksheet and output it as a Word document. At the end of these prompts just add 'output as .docx file type' (for a Microsoft Word file).

According to cognitive load theory, we should explicitly teach first, then gradually put responsibility more on students (*not* start with open-ended inquiry).<sup>7</sup> Completion tasks are a great step between these two.

Create a cloze passage that describes the process of European exploration and colonisation in Australia, including notable figures like Captain James Cook and events like the arrival of the First Fleet.

### Compare and Contrast

Take two time periods or events and get students to compare them. I've loved doing this with feudal Japan and medieval Europe from the Year 8 curriculum.

Produce a comparative history worksheet that enables students to compare two related historical events or periods. The worksheet should include spaces for event/period summaries, a Venn diagram for similarities and differences, a section on global impact comparison, lessons learned, and a prompt for creative representation, such as a poster or comic strip.

### Historical Fiction

Engage students by getting them to write historically accurate stories with themselves as characters in it. This only works after they have sufficient knowledge of the period to write something substantial.

Craft a creative writing worksheet that prompts students to write a historical fiction story. The worksheet should guide them through setting the scene in a historical period, creating a character with a detailed background, developing a plot involving a historical event, ensuring historical accuracy, and reflecting on the process of writing historical fiction.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Cognitive Load Theory: Research that Teachers Really Need to Understand,' Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, September 2017, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/about-us/educational-data/cese/2017-cognitive-load-theory-summary.pdf>.



### Diamond 9

Diamond 9 is an activity where nine things are printed as cards and students have to rate them based on a characteristic you give them, like 'historical significance'. ChatGPT can generate all kinds of interesting concepts to turn into cards for this activity.

Generate a document containing nine statements about significant Medieval European events, formatted as a single-column table. Export the document as a .docx file.

### Mind Maps

Mind maps are a great study tool. They are visually appealing and can summarise an entire unit. The following prompt creates a mind map in 'markdown' format, which you can open with the free software Xmind.<sup>8</sup> You now have a graphic mind map you can print for students or use in other creative ways.

Create mind map of ancient Greek history. Export as markdown code.

### My Recent Uses

Looking at my recent chat threads, here are some things I've been using over the past few weeks:

- as a writing tutor by getting my Year 7 and 8 students to write an answer to the open-ended question, 'How has human life changed since the Stone Ages?'. I

then paste their writing into a thread of ChatGPT that I've trained to give feedback on spelling, grammar, sentence/paragraph structure, and more content. I've since learnt about Class Companion, which is great for this.<sup>9</sup>

- to write developmental rubrics (train ChatGPT on the rules for writing good criteria first)<sup>10</sup>
- to design the graphics for a board game about student engagement that I'm developing
- to give my university students simple instructions about how to follow APA referencing
- to summarise a chapter from a textbook for student notes
- to give my university students a long list of reasons why a research study might be weak (e.g. small sample size)
- to generate potential names for a Year 9 program we want to start at our school
- to create a student work sample ('rubric with examples') for an upcoming source analysis on Medieval Europe.

My best advice, again, is to play around with ChatGPT, use trial and error, and ask for some ideas to get started.

Happy artificial intelligencing!

8 Xmind, <https://xmind.app/>

9 Class Companion, <https://classcompanion.com/>

10 'Rules for Writing Quality Criteria,' Reliable Rubrics, 9 February 2015, <https://reliablerubrics.com/2015/02/09/rules-for-writing-quality-criteria/>

## How Have You Engaged Your Students?



Share your successes with other History teachers, and submit an article to *Agora*.

Pitch a *Praktikos* article of 1200–1500 words outlining activities and strategies HTAV members can adopt to [agora@htav.asn.au](mailto:agora@htav.asn.au).