

Guidelines for Counterfactual Scenarios

Use scenarios that could have easily gone the other way.

Counterfactual scenarios work best when the event that did occur “turned on a dime,” or where key decisions or events happened that could easily have happened differently.

Counterfactuals must be plausible.

The scenarios must be believable and based on historical evidence.

Counterfactual scenarios should not require a series of changes.

Counterfactual scenarios work best when a specific decision, event or factor can be identified that was significant in charting a historical course of events. When several changes need to occur for the alternate history to occur, the counterfactual scenario becomes increasingly implausible.

Avoid beginning with a preconceived view of history as you would like it to have been.

For counterfactual history to be a useful historical tool, it must not be caught in the trap of first imagining history as we would like it to have been and then re-imagining events so as to create the history of our desires.

Be careful not to reach erroneous conclusions based on faulty reasoning.

Imagining counterfactuals is a valuable but not difficult historical device. Its validity is dependent on careful and sound analysis based on available historical evidence.

Counterfactual history can never lead to a definitive alternate history—at best it can suggest what might have been.

This background information resource is based on Garfield Gini-Newman, “Counterfactual History: Good Teaching, Bad History? Part I, *OHASSTA Rapport*, Fall 2003, Volume 24, Number One, and Garfield Gini-Newman, “Counterfactual History: Good Teaching, Bad History? Part II, *OHASSTA Rapport*, Winter 2004, Volume 25, Number Two, <http://www.ohassta.org/rapport.htm>. Permission granted for use by Alberta teachers.