

Flashcards That Work

Studying history is more than just memorizing terms. It's about connecting the dots.

Flashcards

Creating flashcards may seem labor intensive, but that's precisely why it's a good technique for studying. Research on memory clearly shows that the *more you do* with material (e.g., reading, writing it, copying it, saying it, etc.) the stronger your recall will be.

My problem with flashcards is that they tend to isolate historical facts. We don't learn history as just a collection of random facts; we learn it as a sequence of information. Individual facts, such as the firing on Ft. Sumter in April 1861, are useless in and of themselves. Rather, it's how those facts *connect* that is important. In that sense, the fact that the Confederates fired on Ft. Sumter is important BECAUSE it led to Lincoln's decision to call up 75,000 troops, which in turn led to the secession of four more states and made war inevitable.

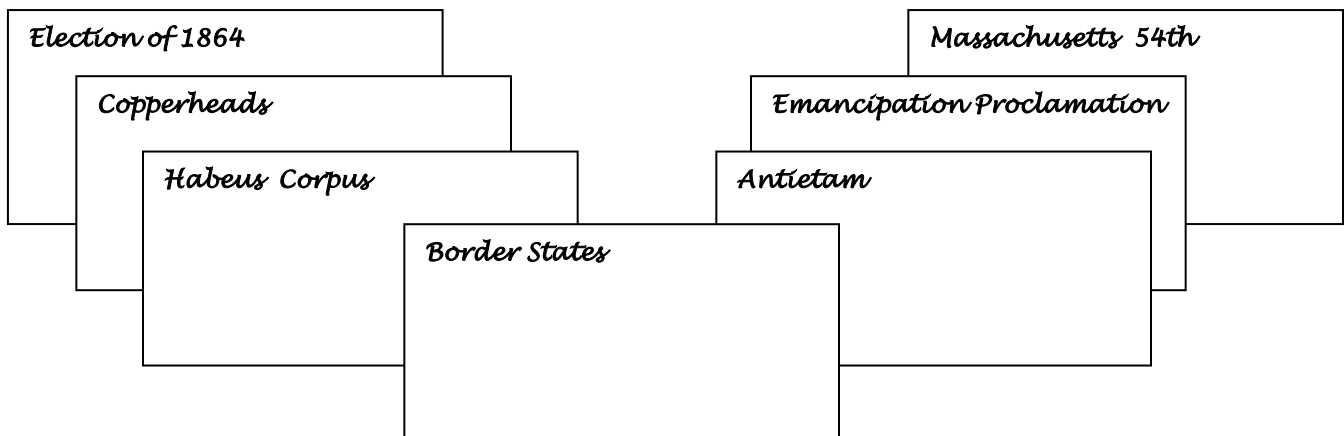
So, how do we make flashcards that emphasize connections?

Here's a model that I came up with that may help:

TERM	DEFINITION – <i>What is this term? (Who, what, where, when)</i>	
<i>Front of Card</i>	SIGNIFICANCE – <i>What did this term lead to?</i>	CONNECTIONS – <i>What other terms in your deck is this term associated with?</i>
<i>Antietam</i>	<i>Robert Lee's army defeated in Maryland in September 1862.</i>	
	<i>Union victory secures the border states and allows Lincoln to issue Emancipation Proclamation.</i>	<i>Emancipation Proclamation George McClellan Border States</i>

As you can see in the example above, your flash card contains more than just the definition of the term. It also includes the importance or significance (i.e., how did this term impact history), as well other terms that are logically related to it. This last part is especially important...you need to really brainstorm here. And, in fact, that act of brainstorming—thinking about how events relate—is part of studying itself.

When you begin actively studying for a test or quiz, you can physically arrange your terms in ways that highlight the relationships between the terms.



Then, recite them, emphasizing how the connections between them. E.g.,

*“The **Border states** were slaveholding states that remained in the Union; they included Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri. In September 1862, Lee invaded Maryland, hoping a victory there would cause it to join the Confederacy. However, his invasion failed, and the Union victory at **Antietam** secured the Border states. Lincoln was then able to move on with his plan to emancipate slaves in rebellious areas. As a result of the **Emancipation Proclamation**, African-Americans were allowed to fight in the Civil War. The most famous of these regiments was the **Massachusetts 54th** regiment.”*

Mix them up or pursue different lines of connection. E.g., Border States → Habeus Corpus → Copperheads → Election of 1864.

*“The **Border states** were slaveholding states that remained in the Union; they included Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri. Lincoln was determined to keep these states in the Union. He suspended the writ of **habeus corpus** in the Border States, and order the arrest and detention of Confederate sympathizers. Many of these **Copperheads**, a faction of anti-war Democrats that actively undermined the war effort. In the **Election of 1864**, the Copperheads backed General George MacClellan in an effort to unseat Lincoln, but a string of Union victories and the vote of Union soldiers helped Lincoln retain the Presidency.”*