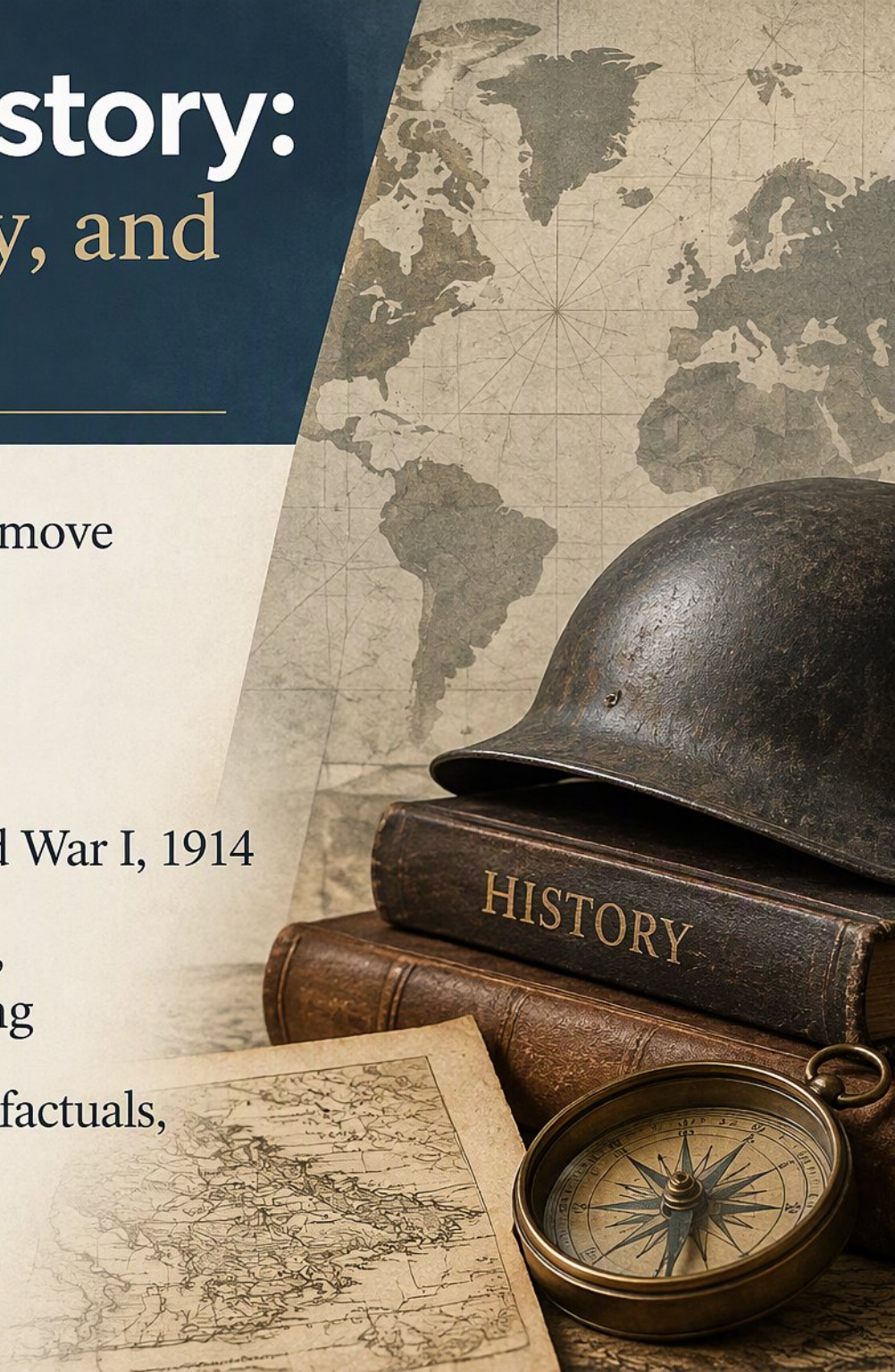
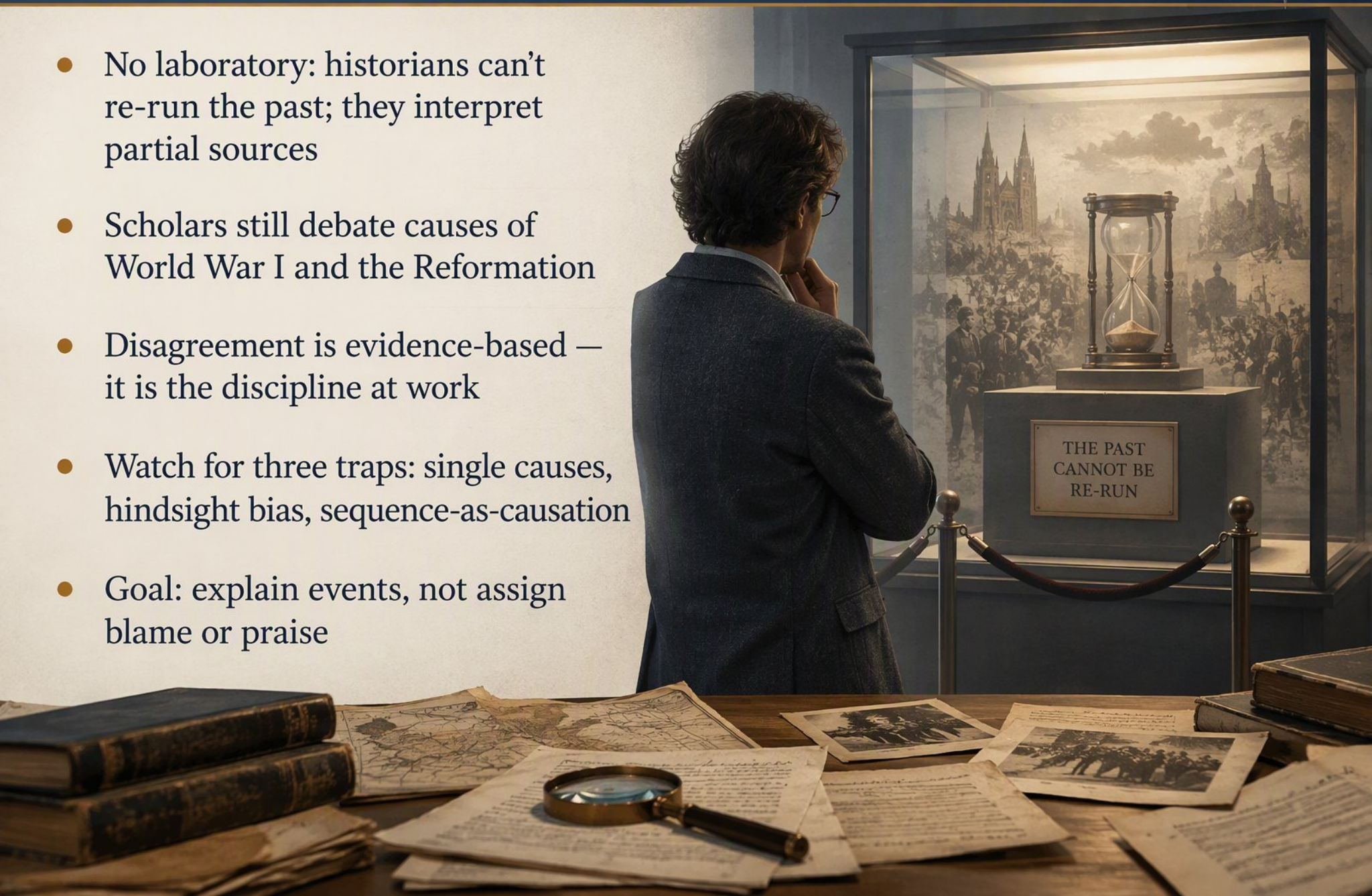
Causation in History:
Causes, Contingency, and Consequences

- Why did this happen? The central move in historical thinking
- Three lenses: causes, contingency, consequences
- Running case: the outbreak of World War I, 1914
- Secondary cases: Thirty Years War, Columbian Exchange, 1857 Uprising
- Goal: label cause types, test counterfactuals, trace consequences



Why Historical Causation Is Harder Than It Looks

- No laboratory: historians can't re-run the past; they interpret partial sources
- Scholars still debate causes of World War I and the Reformation
- Disagreement is evidence-based — it is the discipline at work
- Watch for three traps: single causes, hindsight bias, sequence-as-causation
- Goal: explain events, not assign blame or praise



Where Causation Sits in Historical Thinking

CONNECTING IDEAS • DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING • A BROADER PAST, A BRIGHTER FUTURE

- Six interrelated concepts, not a list of facts
- Significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, perspectives, ethics
- Causes are multiple and layered: long-term conditions plus short-term events
- People cause change within constraints: environment, geography, legacies, others' aims
- Unintended consequences link causes and consequences in one inquiry
- This session makes these concepts explicit with a visible toolkit





DIFFERENT PASTS
BRIGHTER TOMORROWS

What Makes a Cause? Conditions, Pressures, and Triggers

SORT · ANALYZE · SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE

HISTORY THINKING DEEPER

- **Long-term conditions:** alliance systems, imperial rivalry before 1914
- **Medium-term pressures:** arms races, domestic politics
- **Immediate triggers:** the Sarajevo assassination
- **Label each factor by type:** political, economic, social, cultural, technological, environmental, ideas
- **Necessary vs. sufficient:** remove a necessary cause and the chain breaks
- **Infinite regress:** use stopping rules — critical juncture, near-necessary cause, mechanism
- **Exercise:** sort a 1914 factor list; mark type and necessity

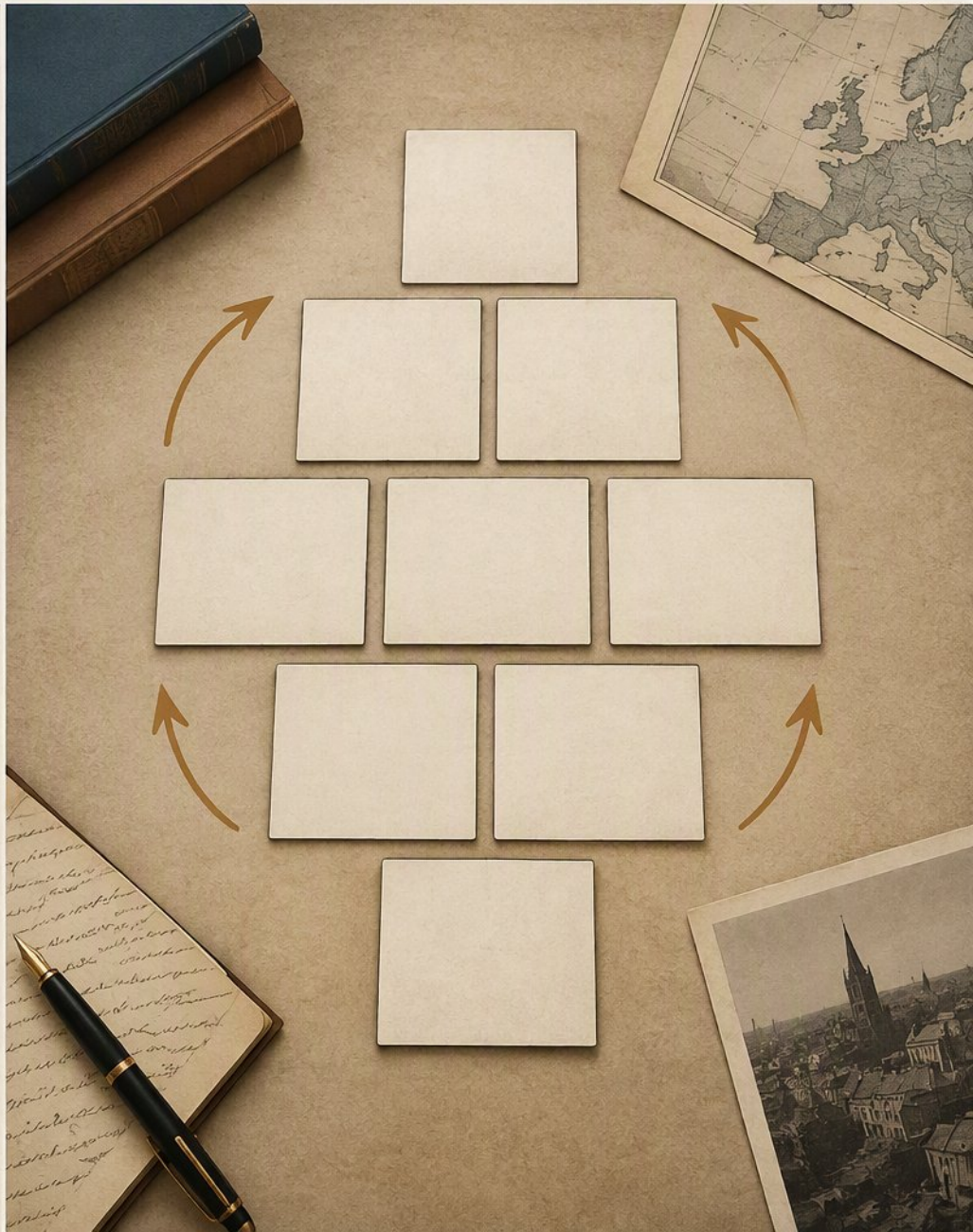


Different factors.
A larger story.

Weighting Causes: Selection and Significance

HISTORICAL THINKING FOR DEEPER EXPLANATIONS

- Everything is causally connected: historians select and rank, not just list
- Weighting, not enumeration, is the historical argument
- Contrast class matters: ‘why war in 1914’ differs from ‘why war at all’
- Criteria: narrative scale, duration, evidence quality, probability raised
- Necessity ≠ importance: a necessary cause can be low-weight; an unnecessary cause can be decisive
- Activity: Diamond Nine ranking of 1914 causes, justified in writing and revised with new evidence



Levels of Explanation: Structure, Institutions, and Individuals

DIFFERENT LENSES
A RICHER UNDERSTANDING



- **Structural level:** economy, geography, demography shape constraints and opportunities
- **Institutional level:** laws, parties, and alliance systems channel choices
- **Individual level:** leaders, their beliefs, and decisions under uncertainty
- **Agency–structure debate:** structure patterns options; agency is the capacity to choose
- **Strong accounts combine all three levels** — aim for interplay, not a vague list
- **Activity:** re-explain one event at all three levels; compare how it changes

CONTEXT | INSTITUTIONS | PEOPLE | BIGGER PICTURE

SAME EVENTS.
DEEPER INSIGHTS.

Contingency: How Open Was the Outcome?

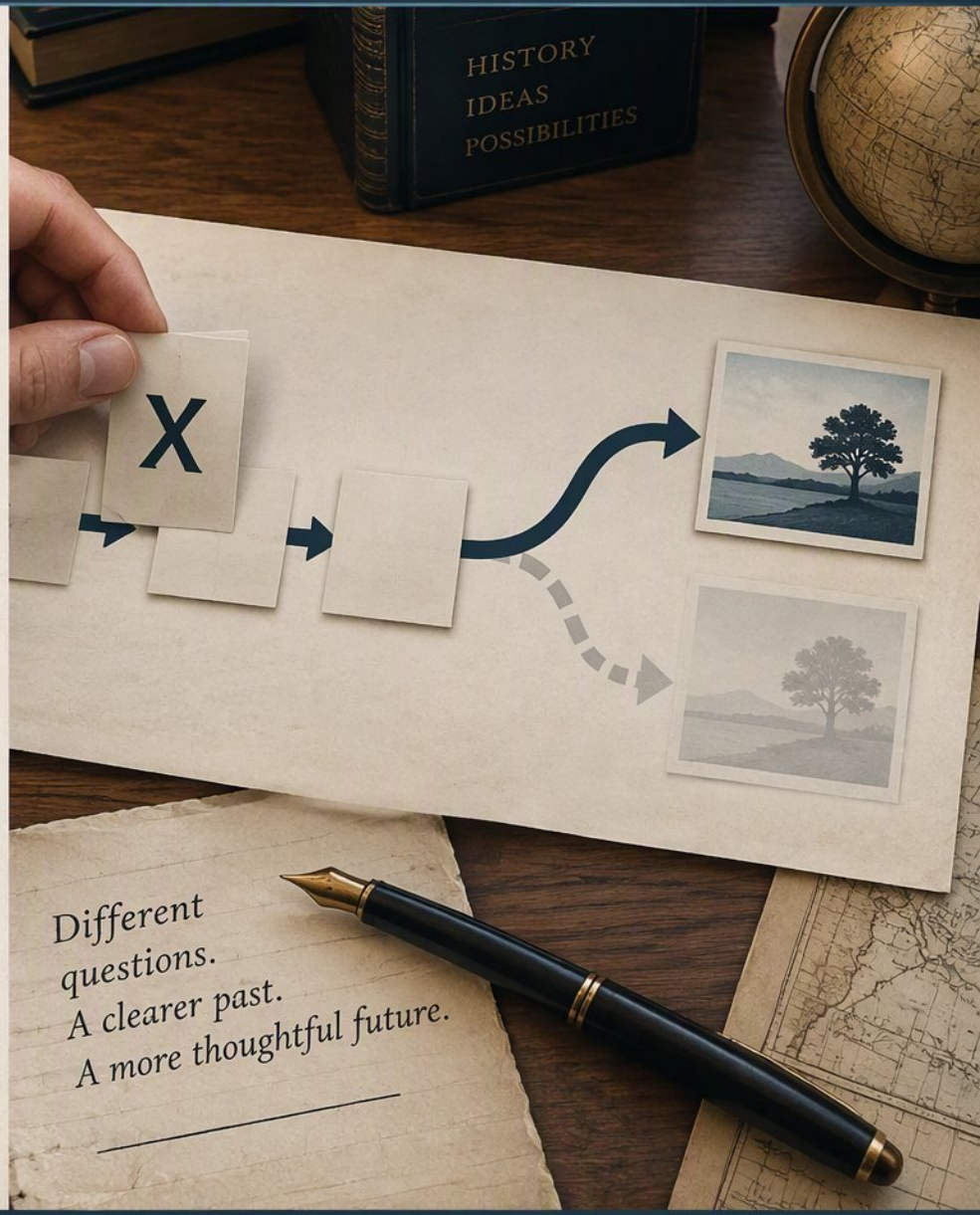
- Contingency = opposite of inevitability: outcomes were not preordained
- "It had to happen" is often hindsight illusion
- In 1914, contemporaries expected crisis to be managed, then it spiraled
- Contingency reveals the role of chance: weather, accidents, miscommunication
- Caution against teleology: people in the past did not know how things would turn out
- Case contrast: a near-miss, highly contingent outcome vs. a heavily structural one



Counterfactuals Done Responsibly

BETTER QUESTIONS DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

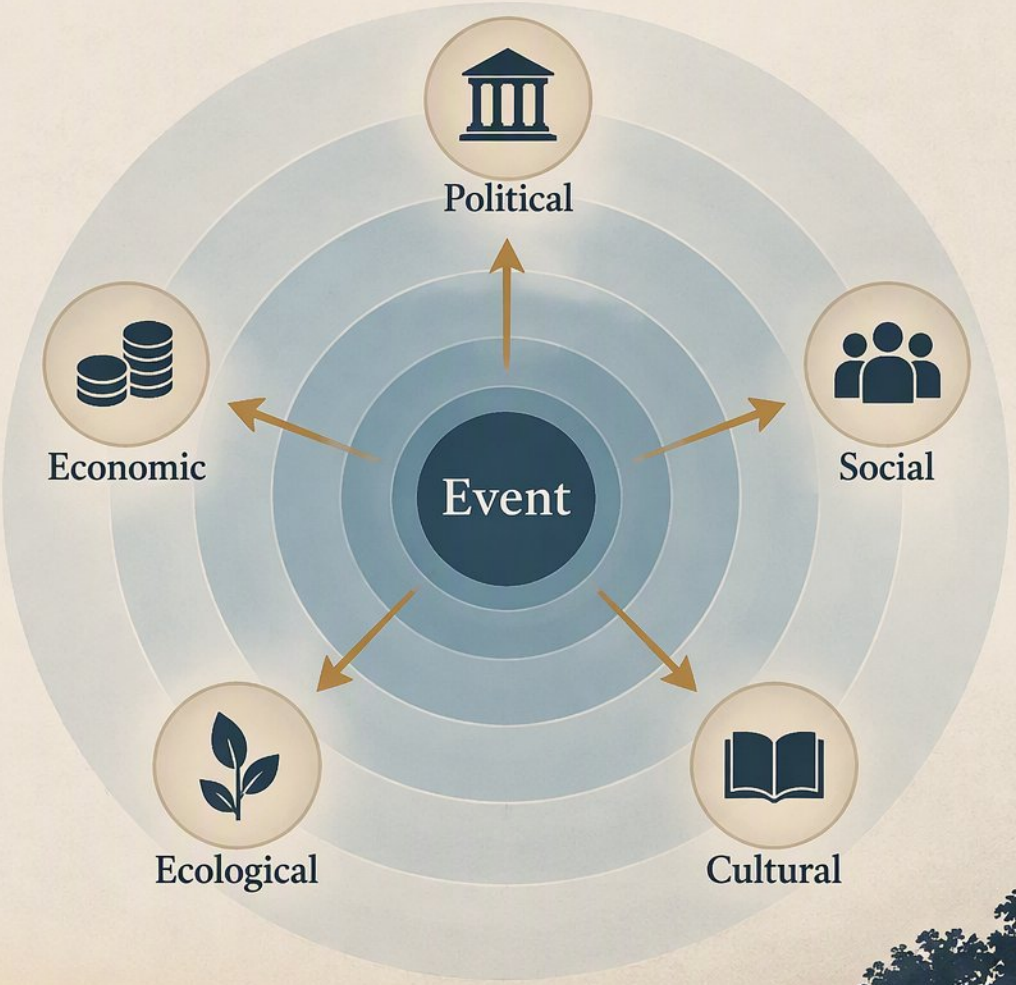
- Every causal claim hides a counterfactual: without X, Y would differ
- A disciplined thought-experiment, not a parlor game (Carr's warning)
- Antidote to three errors: indispensability, false causality, inevitability
- Limits: no traces, wishful thinking — keep changes minimal
- Test: "If Britain had not declared war in 1914..." — plausible vs. unsupported



HISTORY IS RICHER WHEN WE ASK "WHAT IF?" RESPONSIBLY.

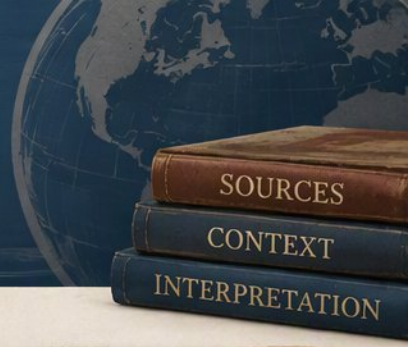
Consequences: Short-Term, Long-Term, and Unintended

- Map outcomes in time: immediate, medium-term, long-term
- Cross domains: political, economic, social, cultural, ecological
- Separate intended from unintended results — the Columbian Exchange
- Consequences become causes of later events: cycles and feedback
- Distinguish consequence from legacy, which carries present-day judgment
- Exercise: draw a ripple map of one event forward in time and domains



Historians at Work:
Reading Competing Explanations

SAME EVENT. DIFFERENT STORIES.



- Compare two adapted excerpts on one event: 1914, Thirty Years War, or the atomic bomb
- Name, weight, omit, assume: map each text's causal claims
- Separate evidence, inference, and interpretation; note how sources shape arguments
- Interpretations shift as archives open and methods change — today's orthodoxy is tomorrow's debate
- Protocol: identify claim → evidence → weighting → limitation, then judge persuasiveness

Historian A

"The outbreak of war in 1914 was primarily the result of a system of alliances that made a local crisis spiral into a general European conflict."

Claim · Evidence · Inference · Interpretation

Historian B

"The war in 1914 stemmed less from fixed alliances than from the aspirations and fears of national leaders, who chose confrontation over compromise."

Claim · Evidence · Inference · Interpretation

Protocol: identify claim → evidence → weighting → limitation → then judge persuasiveness



CLEARER THINKING
BRIGHTER DECISIONS

Pitfalls and Biases in Causal Thinking

QUESTION
ANALYZE
CONSIDER
LOOK FURTHER



Hindsight bias

outcomes feel inevitable once known — counterfactuals are the antidote



Single-cause trap

a satisfying explanation makes us stop searching



Confirmation bias

we favor evidence that fits our prior account



Correlation is not causation

coinciding trends and post hoc reasoning mislead



Self-check: multiple causes? types labeled? evidence cited? counterfactual tested? alternatives considered?



BETTER QUESTIONS A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

Methods Toolkit: Source Analysis and Causal Mapping

Sourcing and corroboration: use origin, purpose, value, limitation to show X contributed to Y

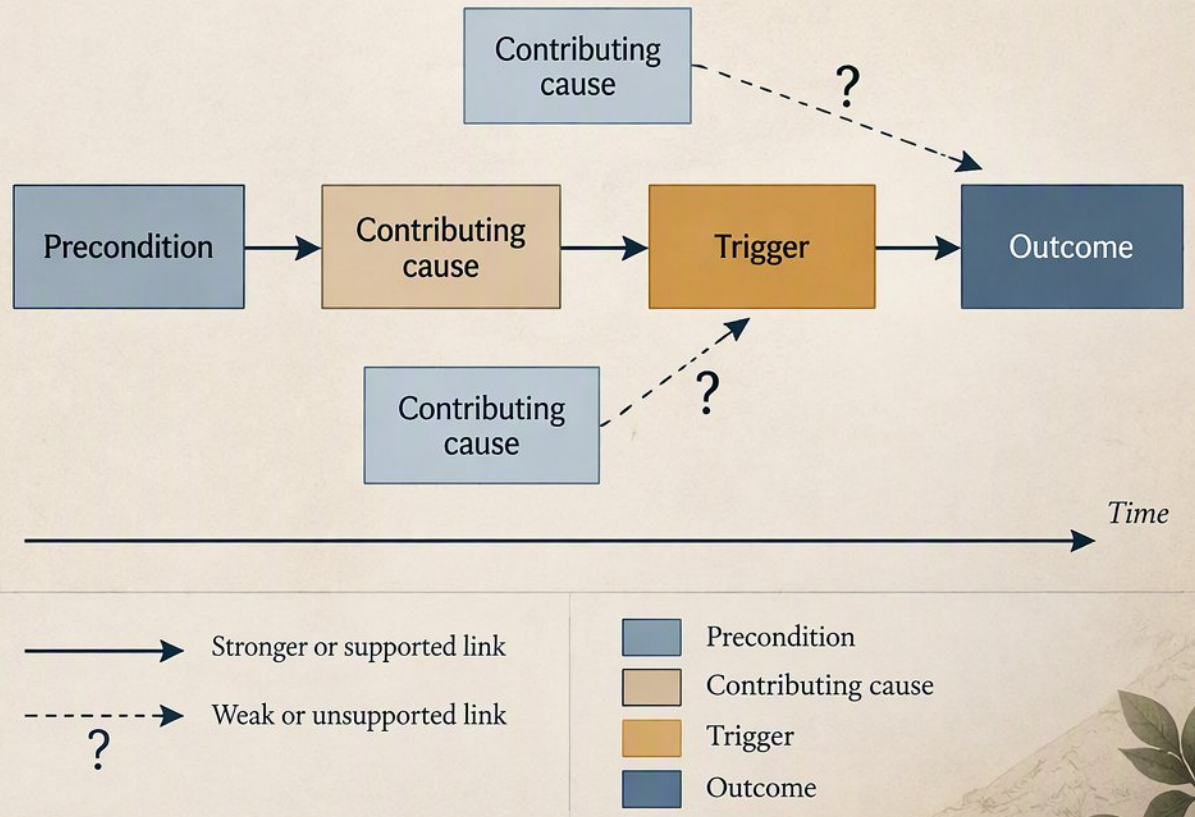
Map step by step: list factors → sort by time and role → label type and significance → draw links

Show weak or unsupported links with dashed lines and question marks—keep uncertainty visible

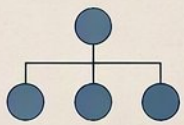
Distinguish preconditions, contributing causes, and triggers; keep chronology visible with a scale

Classroom formats: factor trees, flowcharts, layered timelines, simple network maps

Example Causal Map

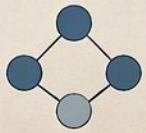


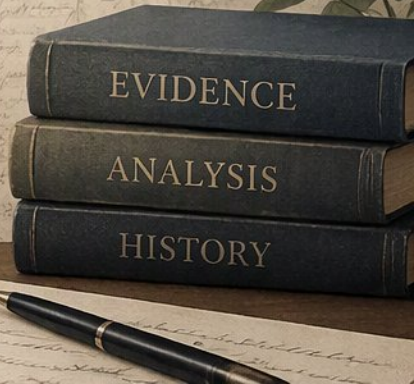
Classroom Formats


Factor trees


Flowcharts


Layered timelines


Simple network maps



Workshop: Build a Causal Account of a Turning Point

Group task: choose a well-evidenced turning point, e.g., 1857 Indian Uprising or 1914 outbreak.

Build a factor tree, testing for contingency and mapping consequences forward.

Peer review: fair weighting, cited evidence, visible uncertainty, justified conclusion.

Avoid over-listing, ignoring evidence, and over-claiming certainty.

Share-back: compare explanations and discuss divergences as a lesson in historical knowledge.



Assessment and Transfer: Judging Causal Claims

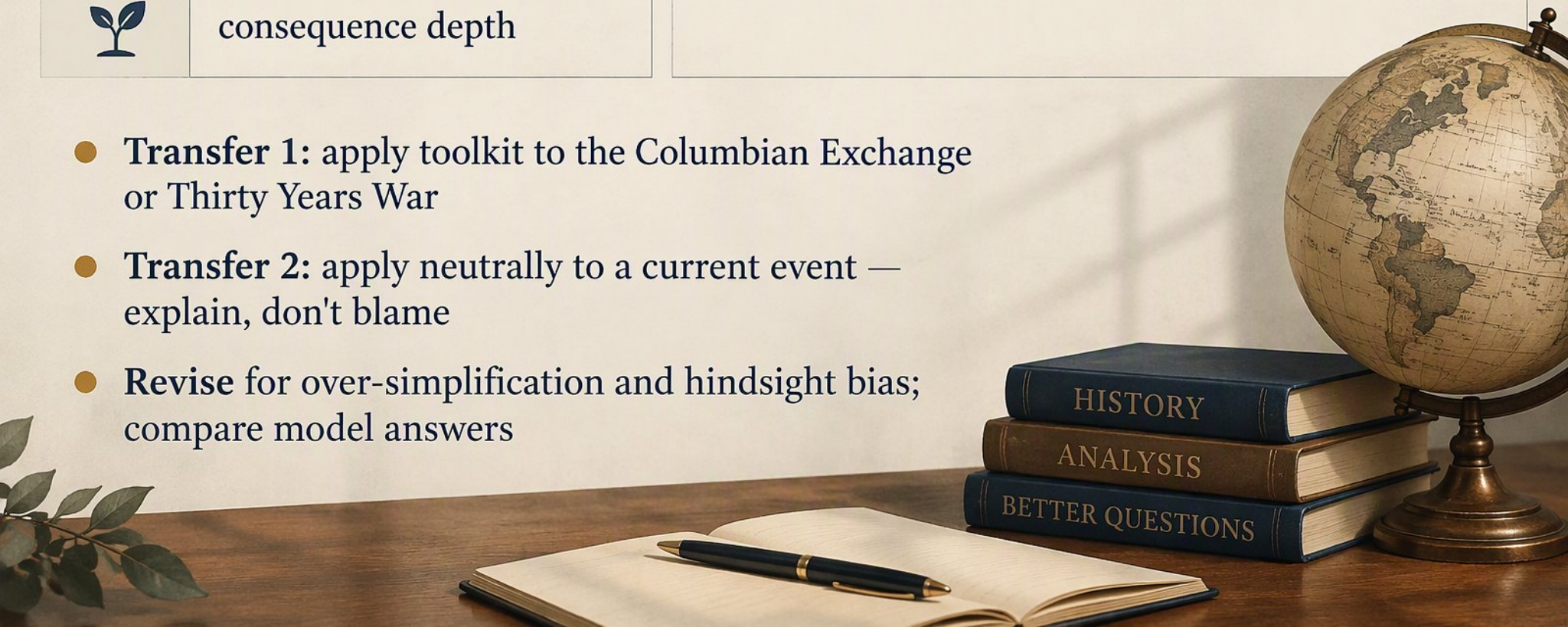
Rubric

	evidence accuracy
	stated weighting
	responsible contingency
	consequence depth

Answer shape



- **Transfer 1:** apply toolkit to the Columbian Exchange or Thirty Years War
- **Transfer 2:** apply neutrally to a current event — explain, don't blame
- **Revise** for over-simplification and hindsight bias; compare model answers



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