

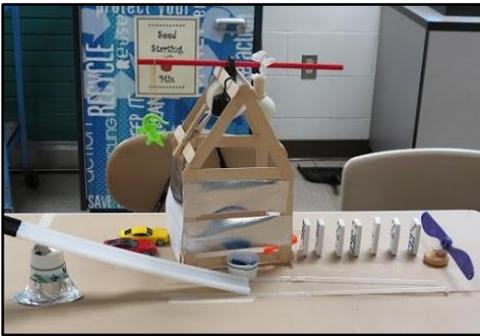
# Blue Education Cereal

## CTER: Causes, Triggers, Events, and Results

This is something I lifted from Rhonda Johnson who used to teach with me in Tulsa and who's still kicking young minds towards greatness there. Rhonda is one of the most entertaining and intellectually challenging people I've ever known, and I appreciate her agreeing to let me sponge off of her in this way.

Then again, why should it be any different than anything else I've borrowed from her over the years?

### The "Cause & Effect" Conundrum



It's not unusual to see history presented in terms of "cause and effect." It's a rational, if simplified, method of trying to pull events together and understand the connections and interactions that make it all meaningful. Without cause and effect, history could only be taught as a series of unconnected events – this happened, then that happened, then another thing happened, and probably some other things, until *today*. Make of this what you will.

It's this same need to bring some sort of narrative or cohesion to history that periodically leads to accusations that history teachers spend too much time interpreting, inflicting, or otherwise doing something grossly unethical by trying to help students recognize that history is far more than random lists of dead white men, dates, and battles. Since we can't cover in exacting detail everything that's ever happened anywhere in the world over the past 10,000 years or more in 180-or-so class periods, some degree of subjective triage is essential.

While it's theoretically conceivable that a math or science teacher might assemble engaging, meaningful lessons with zero discernable social or political bias, such a thing is simply not possible in Social Studies. Yes, we want to try to understand how fascism could take root *when* and *where* it did and recognize that not *all* Germans spent the war cackling maniacally and skinning children. Even if we had the time, however, most of us aren't interested in giving equal exposure to Holocaust deniers or making sure we're appropriately neutral about gassing Jews, Gypsies, and Gays (because who are we to judge?)

The point is, any effort to "zoom out" on history and see big picture connections is inherently subjective and open to dispute, just like deciding what to cover and how to cover it in the first place. Depending on the level of your students, that can become part of the learning. Other times, we settle for "here's the traditional understanding" and trust they'll at least walk away better equipped to have those discussions down the road.

### Causes, Triggers, Events, and Results

Rhonda often teaches her kids American History as a series of Events, each of which had multiple Causes. Causes are generally ongoing – they can be in place for days, weeks, months, or years without the event actually happening. Events also have Results. Like Causes, Results can be short-term or long-term, and sometimes interact in unexpected ways. The Results of one Event easily become Causes for the next. (History's wacky that way.)

The new wrinkle (for me) is the concept of the “Trigger.” While Causes may occur for an extended time without an Event actually beginning, Triggers convert all of that *potential* into *action*. They strike the match that ignites the fuel and timber. Without the Trigger, Causes might continue or eventually fade, but the Event wouldn’t occur – at least not *when* it did and exactly *how* it did.

### **CTER: An Easy Example**

The American colonies had been restless for decades regarding British rule. Enlightenment ideals shaped the thinking of their most accomplished citizens. They enjoyed the benefits of “salutary neglect.” It was difficult for an island so far away to effectively rule a continent. Then came more specific antagonisms – the Proclamation of 1763, the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act, the Boston Massacre, etc. Individuals and small groups begin pushing back more forcefully – the Boston Tea Party, Thomas Paine’s “Common Sense,” and so on. These were all Causes of the American Revolution.

But every one of them occurred without a revolution starting – at least not in the violent “you’re not my mommy anymore!” sense. Some had been going on for years and may have continued for many more.

Then came Lexington & Concord – the “Shot Heard ‘Round the World.” At this point, those causes were suddenly activated, lit on fire, and exploded into the Event. The American Revolution began and lasted nearly a decade. (It was a pretty big deal, so it’s an “Event.”)

Many things after the Revolutionary War weren’t the same as they had been before. The colonies were now independent and resented Great Britain for generations afterwards. They called themselves the United States of America and wrote a constitution called the “Articles of Confederation.” George Washington was forever after known as the “Father of Our Country.” 40,000+ men who’d been alive before the war were dead. Because war is expensive, there was also debt. Debt meant new taxes, and since not everyone felt equally represented in the new government, there were some who objected to this new taxation without—

Well, you get the idea. Some of the results of the American Revolutionary War became Causes of the next major event – replacing the Articles of Confederation with the U.S. Constitution to which was quickly added a “Bill of Rights.” The process continues through Manifest Destiny, the Civil War, the Gilded Age, a few world wars, the 1960s, grunge, and Donald Trump somehow getting elected President. One way or the other, it all connects and more-or-less flows together.

### **Using CTER In Class**

There are two primary ways Rhonda modeled CTER in the classroom. I’ve used them both with great success, despite changing things up over the years. I introduce the concept with a PowerPoint (see attached) and we do a few practice events together to make sure we all have the idea.

The first way I love to use CTER is as an introduction or overview for major events or eras. Students are given a CTER graphic organizer for one or two events from the upcoming unit. I prefer using specific organizers for designated events in order to scaffold for students a bit. Otherwise, they’re not always sure whether Little Bighorn had three causes or forty-seven. This allows some personalization and the inclusion of essential details if you so choose (see examples) and – more importantly – supporting clip art.

There’s really no point having a graphic organizer – or school in general – without clip art, is there?

As we move through the unit, their CTER organizers help keep everything coherently tied together. If you choose, however, you could just as easily use them as unit summaries or quizzes. CTERs don’t require deep analysis, but they do require a “big picture” understanding of main events and why stuff happened the way it did – and that ain’t nothin’.

The other way I love to use CTER is as end-of-semester review. Students work in small groups and each group is given a stack of index cards. On each card is written a Cause, Trigger, Event, or Result. (I never label them as such, but Causes are all one color, Triggers are all another color, etc. Whether or not I share this system with students depends on the group.) Groups are assigned to place the Events in chronological order and to identify the Causes, Trigger, and Results of each event.

The activity requires factual recall, but also a degree of ongoing analysis and understanding of how things connect. There are few things which promote retention and understanding more than impromptu debates over whether a card makes more sense as a Result of this Event or a Cause of that one, or whether such-and-such was truly the Trigger or just another Cause.

The specifics of the activity vary with the needs of the moment. Sometimes, while circulating, I'll drop hints if I see groups getting frustrated. I may suggest the colors of the cards are significant, or pretend to 'slip' and give them some essential clue. Other times, I'll allow one student in each group to be the "Researcher." They can use textbooks or technology to support their group's efforts. Most of you are educators – you know how to school.

The goal is to revisit and rework essential information and understanding. Whatever variations seem likely to get them there are fine with me.

Obviously you'd vary the activity as you see fit. If you disagree with some of my Causes, Triggers, or Results, change them. Simplify the activity for certain groups, or put everything on white index cards to make things a bit more challenging (although I've never had success with that approach). Sometimes students organize things differently than I would have; if they can justify it, that's fine.

We wrap up by walking around and seeing what other groups did, then discussing. You can even hand them cards and assign a new Event or two to create their own for later review. Once you've established the concept, it's infinitely flexible.

### **About the Attached Examples**

You're welcome to anything here. (Most will open in their own window. The PowerPoint you'll have to RIGHT CLICK and choose SAVE LINK AS to download it.) You can use them "as is" or modify them to fit your needs. If you really go to town with the idea, you can do right by the rest of us by sharing whatever you create with me and I'll add it here.

In the unlikely event you find some way to make huge wads of cash on the idea, well... kudos on somehow monetizing "cause and effect." To alleviate what I hope will be the crushing guilt which results, contact me and I'll let you know how to send Rhonda her cut.