

# HISTORY

## *A FORM OF INQUIRY INTO THE PAST*

### **Introduction**

"History" comes from the Greek "*historia*," or "inquiry." Historians make inquiries into the past, grounding their inquiries in evidence. They look at records from the past such as letters, documents, diaries, and even paintings, selecting the details necessary to address major issues or questions about humanity. Historians ask questions of the evidence in order to bring the past to life, questions that typically address "Who are we?" and "How did we get here?" However, one should not assume there was no communication about the past or inquiry into the past before the Greek scholars.

### **Goals**

Asking questions about the past distinguishes history from "antiquarianism." Most historians reject antiquarianism, which means collecting random details about the past for their own sake. Historians, for example, reject the idea of obsessively collecting bottle caps or matchbooks or obsessively memorizing dates. History is not a random collection of bottle caps or dates. If history does not take the form of a list of dates or a display case of random memorabilia, what is it? History is an intellectual inquiry that enhances our understanding of people and places.

### **Products**

Books and articles usually have an explicit argument, even if they also tell a story. Textbook presentations of history usually focus more on the story than on the argument, but the argument is still there under the surface. The reason there is always an argument, even in an apparently uncontroversial textbook written for use in elementary schools, is that even when a piece of historical text has no apparent argument, it is still written from a point of view. Someone had to decide what was worth mentioning and what could or should be left out. Should the next page of an historical narrative analyze the speech of a great politician or present a piece of iconic art? These are practical questions behind any piece of historical writing, from a seemingly non-argumentative text. Every piece of history is somebody's selection and representation of an argument. There is no *pure* history, only diverse selections—varying histories written by individuals who have different concerns or agendas.

Some historical arguments are written for general-interest and are sold in "mainstream" bookstores. Historians also write specialized books and articles for each other and for students. Some historians conduct research and write reports for organizations or historical societies. Their work may also lead to the production of informative documentaries.

### **Process**

When creating an argument, there is a great deal of historical evidence to examine. The problem is selecting key pieces from it and then arranging them to make sense. Evidence that comes from people directly involved in an event is especially valuable. First-hand sources of information are called "primary sources." People without direct first-hand knowledge of an event write "secondary sources." Historians pursue primary sources,

trying to get as close as possible to what *really* transpired. However, secondary sources can be valuable in establishing a broader picture or a general set of questions for later research. Individual primary sources can be untrue or misleading. Secondary sources can serve as a check on primary sources. Comparing sources to check for and eliminate biased points of view is an important part of creating an argument.

There are two principles that guide most historians when deciding what to include or emphasize. The first is "chronology." It helps to present history in chronological order, because it is how the human brain experiences life. Of course, there can be flashbacks, even whole changes of scene that mean going back in time to pick up another strand in the story. Chronology usually helps readers understand contexts of events. Presenting arguments in chronological order can help make them more convincing.

In addition to chronology, historians use one more tool to shape their narratives. It is called "interconnectedness" or "context." This is the principle that separates history from the social sciences, just as the constant appeal to evidence separates history from the creative arts. An example of context being utilized by the historian is when a particular event or period of time being studied includes a description of other things happening at the same time and connections are made for the reader between the primary topic being studied and conditions, events or personalities that helped characterize or shape the sequence of events that occurred. The 'context' often provides the 'color commentary' that brings the historical topic to life and helps the reader to have more of a three-dimensional understanding of what is being studied. Context also helps provide the 'tone' or psychological climate of the topic being studied.

## **Outcomes**

History's questions often lead into moral or political issues. For example, the question "Why did the Industrial Revolution happen?" may lead to another question, one touching on the effectiveness of modern policies designed to bring economic equity and/or development to groups or nations who have historically been the victims of exploitative and discriminatory practices. A new question might be something like this: "Given what we know about the Industrial Revolution in England in the 18th and 19th centuries, why have certain countries not yet achieved a standard of living comparable to richer countries in such areas as education, living conditions, health, economic and political development?" That question, in turn, could lead to questions about the effectiveness of the particular policies of modern governments. Looking at evidence about the past can throw light onto such questions, history has been called "moral philosophy by example."

History, however, is even broader than that. People can visit the past simply for fun, not only for moral or political lessons. History takes individual human experience and adds to it some of the hard-won lessons, ideas, scenes, and enjoyments of those people whom the reader can not talk to face to face.

Frequently, historical writings contradict each other. The different points of view of historians is part of the historiography; historians from the same era or from different eras approach the study or interpretation of the same events from very different beliefs, values, and prejudices or biases.. Part of the enjoyment and challenge of studying history is appreciating and exploring how historians present different points of view; put together narratives out of contradictory or unlikely evidence; argue their cases, knowing how chancy or changeable current world patterns are; and simply inquire into the past for fun and profit. By studying history, people gaining understanding about how and why events happened in the past. In the best case, these lessons help them and the governments or

organizations they lead avoid some of the same mistakes in the future; in the worst case, their readings helps them appreciate the richness and depravity of the human experience.

## Quality Control

If a piece of history writing is easy to shape any way the historian wants, through selecting one set of details instead of another, is history fictional? To some degree history is an art. Perhaps it *is* subjective, but *partial* is a better word than *fictional*. It is partial because it is always only a “part” of the story, and it is “partial” in taking one side or another in an argument—that is, being partial toward one side or another. Since history is a compilation and representation of evidence, other historians might make a different set of decisions about what to emphasize or what evidence to use in bringing their stories to life. While the human imagination may generate many possible stories about a historical period or event, only a small proportion of those stories fit the evidence. True history fits the evidence that can be verified by other people.

Historians review each others’ books and read each others’ articles, providing peer review. Works of academic history are read by anonymous experts before they are published. These experts provide quality control; they suggest substantive and stylistic improvements. The stylistic improvements are important because historians often dismiss work that is poorly written. If the writing is not good, then the argument and the research are probably poor, too. Most likely, details were poorly selected and do not illustrate what they should or do not illustrate anything in particular. Since history is centered on finding, choosing, and arranging the details that further an inquiry into the past, flaws in logic and organization are very serious.

Flaws due to oversight or selective presentation of evidence are also serious. Historians must consider all known evidence; even it represents only specific examples. While historians can not avoid presenting a point of view, blatantly biased arguments are unacceptable.

While historians do check each other's work and try to write as clearly and as timelessly as possible, each piece of historical writing remains only a part of a whole story. Historians think about these limitations, but are not really bothered by them. They have a saying that “History must be rewritten by each new generation.” Each new generation will have new concerns and new arguments to make and will look at evidence in new ways.

While historians do check each other's work, and while they try to write as clearly and as timelessly as possible, each piece of historical writing remains only a part of the story, and it remains shot through with the point of view of its author. Historians think about these limitations a lot, but they are not really bothered by them. They have a saying that “History must be rewritten by each new generation.” Each new generation will have new concerns and new arguments to make. Each generation will look at the evidence in a new way, and emphasize certain details. For example, since the latter third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic studies and some other departments in universities have contributed to the explosion of new knowledge and new perspectives on past events and historical interpretations related to the experience of certain populations. This has resulted in both the presentation of new evidence and new interpretation of old evidence related to the general topic of cultural studies both in the United States and throughout the world.

## FURTHER READING

Butterfield, Herbert. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. New York: Norton, 1965.

A short classic on how teaching history as an interesting progression toward *now* can distort things.

Crabtree, Charlotte, Ross Dunn and Gary Nash. *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching*

*of the Past*. New York: Vintage, 2000.

On recent controversies about the National History Standards, and the kinds of history that schoolchildren should learn.

Hughes, Stuart H. *History as Art and as Science: Twin Vistas on the Past*. Chicago: U of Chicago

P, 1975.

On connections between history and other fields.

Stilgoe, John, R. *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places*. New

York: Walker, 1999.

On how historical evidence is all around you.