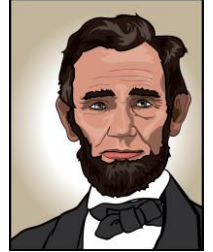


Why Study History?

Why do we study history? For thousands of years we have learned about the people who came before us - their actions, triumphs, and anguish. *Why do we do this?* Put simply we study history to learn about ourselves - how would we react and act in instances like those in the past. The past is made of human interactions between each other and the environment. When you study history, you start to see patterns in human behavior. An understanding of the past is key to an understanding of the present.

To study history, you must start with a question. You are looking to find the answer to this question by studying the past. A question you could ask is "What makes a great president?" A question like that could lead you to a study of American presidents. This could lead to another question - "How does a great leader react in time of crises?" or "What characteristics makes a person great?" Who decides?"



Next you would need to gather facts and information related to your questions. This becomes the **evidence** you need to analyze to reconstruct the past. Evidence is the information that can be used to prove your statement or to support a conclusion. When you study history, evidence can be found in many different forms. It might be an old letter or photograph. Or it might be an **artifact** - a human made object - such as a tool, button or old vase. Evidence can also be found in pictures, music and even old movies. You draw your conclusion based on the patterns of evidence you find in your research.

As you study the past looking for evidence, you are actually looking at **primary sources** - a document or other record of past events created by people who were present at that time. A letter, such as the one Abraham Lincoln wrote to his son's teacher, is an example of a primary source. You are looking to find patterns and establish meaning through these documents and artifacts left by people from other times and places. While these primary sources can sometimes be difficult to read, they provide the best information on a certain topic or question.

You can also gather information from **secondary sources**. A secondary source is written after the time period by an expert or historian. They were not present at the event or maybe not even alive during the same time. Many secondary sources are created long after an event occurs. Secondary sources can include books, magazines, and short articles. Secondary sources can be useful for summarizing a large amount of information.

All historical evidence, whether primary or secondary, must be looked at carefully. You should examine each source for the **point of view** of the person who created the source. A point of view, or way of looking at something, may be shaped by many things, such as the person's age, religion, job, or political views. For example, a historian would expect that a Northern soldier in 1864 would have had a point of view different from that of a soldier fighting for the South.

Sometimes a source contains information or conclusions that reflect a certain point of view. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but you must be careful to look for signs of **bias** when analyzing evidence. In general, bias is anything that might change a person's observations. Bias takes many forms, ranging from a simple friendship to an unfair dislike of a person or group. Whatever its form, bias can make a source less than trustworthy.

Sometimes a source you examine isn't even true! In today's world, spreading false information is extremely easy! People may write inaccurate stories in order to persuade someone to support a certain point of view. When studying history, it is essential to ensure you are reading accurate information. As a famous president once said,



Everything you read on the internet isn't true! – Abraham Lincoln

You can check for accurate information on the internet by asking critical questions: Who is the author? Is the article free from bias? What is the source of the information? Is the information found in several different sources? Are the sources cited and verifiable? If you check your information, you will find if it is accurate or not (like the quote from Lincoln - not true!)

Once the evidence is selected and evaluated, you can begin to reconstruct what happened. You can start by establishing a **chronology**, or sequence of events in time. Once you are certain of the correct order of events, you are better able to make connections among those events. You can look for patterns. You can identify causes and effects. You can also begin to look for long-range changes and trends that may have developed over many years or even decades. For example, when deciding what makes a great president, you could examine the events during different presidencies and evaluate how different presidents reacted to these events. You could then compare these reactions to those of other leaders when faced with a similar situation.

History is not like other subjects you study in school; sometimes there can be more than one correct answer. History is still open to interpretation. In fact, some people describe history as an ongoing argument about the past. The way we view certain events can change over time. Differences of opinion about how to look at the past makes history interesting and important. With each new generation of people come new arguments. As historian Frederick Jackson Turner once wrote,

"Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time."

In other words, our understanding of the past is always being shaped by the point of view of those in the present. In that sense, history is never finished. The lessons of the past shape our understanding of the present, and must light our way to the future.