

Why History?

By Professor Matthew Thick

“If you don’t know where you come from, you may not know where you’re going.” – Malian proverb.

History is far more than the study of what happened in the past. History is the study of WHY things happened and WHY they are important.¹ Unfortunately, it seems many history classes, especially those in high schools, practice memorization of names and dates, and then students recall those facts on a multiple-choice exam. Sadly, studying only names and dates is merely trivia.

Along with the study of why events happen and why they are significant, a third important aspect of history is UNDERSTANDING what happened in the past. A historian’s goal isn’t judgment or determining if an action was moral or immoral or trying to learn past mistakes – the goal of the historian is *understanding*. Understanding the past helps us better understand the present, and it helps to find the relationships between events. You will find that past events are rarely isolated. That means many events are connected in ways in which you may not have thought about.

Historians ask questions about the past, and in pursuit of answers, they consult variety of sources. Mostly, a historian looks at **PRIMARY SOURCES**.² These are sources that were created and preserved during the event or era under study. These include, but are not limited to, private letters, government records, speeches, news reports,³ laws, diaries or journals, photographs, and videos. A historian does not take these sources at their word. Sources must be scrutinized for validity. Remember, humans make mistakes, humans might bend the truth or outright lie, and human memory can be faulty. Items that were unintentionally left behind are valuable primary sources, as well, especially if one is looking at societies that had no system of writing. These sources are usually tools, decorative pieces, or weapons that were discarded in one way or another.

History is called a “Social Science” because historians apply a form of the Scientific Method called the Historical Method. If you have been exposed to the Scientific Method before, the Historical Method will be familiar.

Historical Method

1. Find a historical problem (typically *why* something occurred)
2. Form a hypothesis (oftentimes, people, especially the general public, confuse “hypothesis” with “theory.” It’s important to understand the difference).
3. Conduct research into sources:

Questions to ask the sources:

- Is it genuine? Is it what it says it is?

¹ To discover why an event is important, look for what changed as a result of the event.

² See “Types of Sources” later in this essay/

³ Especially now, it is vital to understand the difference between news *reporting* and news *opinion*.

- When and where was it made?
 - How did it get from its original recording to the present?
 - Who is the author? (really, *who* was this person, not just a name)
 - How was the author able to create the source?
 - Has anyone revised or edited this document?
 - What is the source's ostensible meaning or intended purpose?
 - How accurate was the author (any clear bias or prejudice)?
 - What is the source's content?
 - How does it compare with other reliable sources?
 - What do modern scholars say about the source? (To answer this question, historians look at **SECONDARY MATERIAL**, or the books or scholarly articles written by historians.)
4. Make the argument (a claim based on evidence) and conclusions, usually written.
 5. Share the knowledge (publish)⁴

A historian's claims are based on his or her interpretations of the sources. Because of this, another historian looking at the same sources might come up with a different conclusion. Regardless, it is important to note that effective and convincing historians back up their claims with evidence. Though a few have intentionally misled their audience, professional historians are not making things up or making baseless claims. Still, the interpretations of sources themselves can change over time. For example, a historian from the present time will have a different interpretation of Civil War sources than a historian from the 1940s. Historians often study these changes within their own field, and a work that focuses on the changes within the study of history is called a **historiography**.

When a person studies history, he or she practices skills that are useful in other disciplines. Furthermore, these skills are incredibly important in the business world. Historians, including history majors, are typically good communicators. They are skilled in writing, speaking, and comprehension. Also, they develop strong research skills – knowing where to find valuable sources, interpreting those sources appropriately, and then making sense of those sources. Finally, historians and history majors usually have strong critical thinking skills (asking the right questions about a problem or issue) and analytical skills (placing a problem or issue in the appropriate context). If you are interested in a degree in history, don't feel as if you're limited to education or research. A degree in history can be useful in law, government jobs, marketing, publishing or editing, journalism, working in museums, business administration, and much more. Even if you don't plan on majoring in history, history classes have incredible value since you will practice these skills regularly.

The goal of the history is to make sense of the past in order to better understand the present. There is practical use for that, which brings me to the reason why, especially in a democratic society, we study and value history. By understanding why past events happened and why they are important, we can look at the events going on presently and ask some of the same questions. We gain a better understanding of current politics, cultures, societies, interactions between peoples, and the changes brought by technological advances. From that, it helps us

⁴ This version of the Historical Method is presented in Brian A. Pavlac's *A Concise History of Western Civilization: Supremacies and Diversities throughout History*, 2nd edition (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 2.

make better decisions. This is very important in voting. There is power in the ballot – and for those of you who may deny this, just look at the times in history when one group denied the vote of another group. And since there is power in the ballot, making better decisions can be beneficial to not just one small group but to all.

Remember, historians are not judges of morality. It is equally unfair for us to judge the morality of the past based on current standards as it would be for future generations to judge us based on their standards. Further, the purpose of history is not to learn about mistakes. The purpose of studying history is to understand the past, and to accomplish this a historian studies why things have occurred and why they are important (i.e. change).

Types of Sources

Historians consult numerous types of sources, which are categorized by the following:

Primary sources are those that were written during the time in which we are studying. Primary documents come in many forms, diary or journal entries, private letters, laws, government records and reports, news articles, memoirs, and so on.

Primary sources are different than **secondary sources**, which are books, articles, and other documentaries that have taken numerous primary sources and organized them into some sort of narrative or has made some sort of claim about the past. Secondary works are often produced long after the events under study. The works produced by historians about events in the past are secondary sources.

There are works considered **tertiary sources**, as well. These would be textbooks (because they offer general information or basic summaries), encyclopedias, indexes, bibliographies, and the like. When doing research, it's best to avoid tertiary sources since the info is generalized. However, they can be useful in finding relevant secondary sources.