

Many students believe that the study of history involves nothing more than memorizing dates, names, battles, treaties, and endless numbers of similar, often uninteresting facts with no apparent relevance to their lives and concerns. After all, so they think, the past is over and done with. Historians know what has happened, and all students have to do is absorb this body of knowledge.

But these notions are wrong. History involves discovery and interpretation, and its content is vitally relevant to our lives. Our understanding of history is constantly changing and deepening as historians learn more about the past by discovering new evidence as well as by re-examining old evidence with new questions and methods of analysis. Furthermore, each person who studies the past brings to it a unique perspective and raises questions that are meaningful to that individual. The drive to understand what has gone before us is innately human and springs from our need to know who we are. History serves this function of self-discovery in a special way because of its universality. In short, ***the study of history deals with all aspects of past human activity and belief, for there is no subject or concern that lacks a history.*** Therefore, each of us can and should explore the origins and historical evolution of whatever is most important to us. Beyond that, history exposes us to new interests, new ways of perceiving reality, and new vistas as we study cultures and times that once were quite unknown to us but which, through our study of the human past, become quite familiar to us.

Regardless of what our questions and interests, old or new, might be, the study and interpretation of our historical heritage involves coming to grips with the dynamics of the historical process. It means exploring how human societies reacted to challenges, threats, and opportunities and how they sought to reshape themselves and the world about them to meet their needs. It means exploring the complex interplay of geography, technology, religion, social structures, and a myriad of other historical factors. It means exploring the ways societies change and the ways they resist change. It means exploring the traditions that have imprinted themselves upon a culture and the ways those traditions have provided continuity over long periods of time. It means exploring the roles of individuals in shaping the course of history and the ways individuals have been shaped by historical circumstances. Indeed, the questions we ask of the past are limited only by our imaginations; the answers we arrive at are limited only by the evidence and our ability to use that evidence thoroughly and creatively.

By studying sources it will help you discover some of the major lines of global historical

development and understand many of the major cultural traditions and forces that have shaped history around the world. The word history, which is Greek in origin, means "learning through inquiry," and that is precisely what historians do. They discover and interpret the past by asking questions and conducting research. Their inquiry revolves around an examination of evidence left by the past. For lack of a better term, historians call that evidence primary source material.

Primary Sources: Their Value and Limitations

Primary sources are records that for the most part have been passed on in written form, thereby preserving the memory of past events. These written sources include, but are not limited to, official records, law codes, private correspondence, literature, religious texts, merchants' account books, memoirs, and the list goes on and on. No source by itself contains unadulterated truth or the whole picture. Each gives us only a glimpse of reality, and it is the historian's task to fit these fragments of the past into a coherent picture.

Imagine for a moment that a mid-twenty-first-century historian decides to write a history of your high school class. Think about the primary sources this researcher would use: the student handbook,



class lists, academic transcripts, and similar official documents; class lecture notes, course syllabi, examinations, term papers, and possibly even textbooks; diaries and private letters; the school newspaper, yearbooks, and sports programs; handbills, posters, and even photographs of graffiti; recollections written down or otherwise recorded by some of your classmates long after they graduated. With a bit of thought you could add other items to the list, among them some unwritten sources, such as recordings of popular music and photographs and videotapes of student life and activity. But let us confine ourselves, for the moment, to written records. What do all these documentary sources have in common?

Even this imposing list of sources does not present the past in its entirety. Where do we see the evidence that never made it into any written record, including long telephone calls home, e-mail notes to friends and professors, all-night study groups, afternoons spent at the student union, complaints shared among classmates about teachers and classes? Someone possibly recorded memories of some of these events and opinions, but how complete and trustworthy is such evidence? Also consider that all the documents available to this future historian will be fortunate survivors. They will represent only a small percentage of the vast bulk of written material

generated during your high school career. Thanks to the wastebasket, the "delete" key, the disintegration of materials, and the inevitable loss of life's memorabilia as years slip by, the evidence available to any future historian will be fragmentary. This is always the case with historical evidence. We cannot preserve the records of the past in their totality. Clearly, the more remote the past, the more fragmentary our documentary evidence will be. Imagine the feeble chance any particular document from the twelfth century had of surviving the wars, worms, and wastebaskets of the past eight hundred years.



Now let us consider the many individual pieces of surviving documentary evidence relating to your class's history. As we review the list, we see that no single primary source gives us a complete or totally unbiased picture. Each has its perspective, value, and limitations. Imagine that the essays submitted by seniors on college applications were a historian's only sources of information about the student body. Would it not then be reasonable for this researcher to conclude that the school had only the most gifted and interesting people imaginable?

Despite their flaws, however, essays composed by applicants for admission are still important pieces of historical evidence -when used judiciously. They certainly reflect the availability of options that the high school had for all its students. That student handbook, of course, presents an idealized picture of campus life. But it has value for the careful researcher because it reflects the values of the faculty and administrators who composed it. It also provides useful information regarding rules and regulations, classes, school organizations, and similar items. That factual information, however, is the raw material of history, not history itself, and certainly it does not reflect the full historical reality of your class's collective experience.

What is true of the hand book is equally true of the student newspaper and every other piece of evidence pertinent to your class. Each primary source is a part of a larger whole, but as we have already seen, we do not have all the pieces. Think of historical evidence in terms of a jigsaw puzzle. Any of the pieces are missing, but it is possible to put most, though probably not all, of the remaining pieces together in a reasonable fashion to form a fair accurate and coherent picture. The picture that emerges might not be complete (it never is), but it is useful and valid. The keys to fitting these pieces together are hard work and imagination. Each is absolutely necessary.

Examining the Sources

Hard work speaks for itself, but students are often unaware that the historian also needs imagination to reconstruct the past. After all, many students ask, doesn't history consist of strictly defined and irrefutable dates, names, and facts? Where does imagination enter into the process of learning these facts?

Again, let us consider your class's history and its documentary sources. Many of those documents providing factual data -dates, names, grades, statistics. While these data are important, individually and collectively they have no historical meaning until they have been **interpreted**. Your class is more than a collection of statistics and facts. It is a group of individuals who, despite their differences, share and help mold a collective experience. It is a community evolving within a particular time and place. Influenced by environment, it is, in turn, an influence on that environment. Any valid or useful history must reach beyond dates, names, and facts and interpret the historical characteristics and role of your class. What were its values? How did it change and why? What impact did it have? These are some of the important questions a historian asks of the evidence. The answers the historian achieves help us gain insight into ourselves, our society, and our human nature.

To arrive at answers, the historian must examine each and every piece of relevant evidence in its full context and wring from that evidence as many **inferences** as possible. Facts are the foundation stones of history, but inferences are its edifices. **An inference is a logical conclusion drawn from evidence, and it is the heart and soul of historical inquiry.**

Every American schoolchild learns that "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." That fact is worthless, however, unless the individual understands the motives, causes, and significance of this late-fifteenth-century voyage. Certainly a historian must know when Columbus sailed west. After all, time is history's framework. Yet the questions historians ask go far beyond simple chronology. Why did Columbus sail west? What factors made possible Spain's engagement in such enterprises at this time? Why were Europeans willing and able to exploit, as they did, the so-called New World? What were the short and long-term consequences of the European presence in the Americas? These are some of the significant questions which historians seek inferential answers, and those answers can only be found in the evidence.

One noted historian, Robin Winks, has written a book titled ***The Historian as Detective***,



and the image is appropriate although inexact. Like the detective, the historian examines clues in order to reconstruct events. The detective, however, is essentially interested in discovering what happened, who did it, and why, whereas the historian goes one step beyond and asks what it all means. In addressing the question of meaning, the historian transforms simple curiosity about past events into a humanistic discipline.

As a humanist, the historian seeks insight into the human condition, but that insight cannot be based on theories spun out of fantasy, wishful thinking, or preconceived notions. It must be based on a methodical and probing investigation of the evidence. Like a detective interrogating witnesses, the historian also must carefully examine the testimony of sources. First and foremost, the historian must evaluate the validity of the source. Is it what it purports to be? Artful forgeries have misled many historians. Even if the source is authentic (and most are), it still can be misleading. The possibility always exists that the source's author lied or deliberately misrepresented reality. Even if this is not the case, the historian can easily be led astray by not fully understanding the perspective reflected in the document. As any detective who has examined a number of eyewitnesses to an event knows, witnesses' reports often differ radically. The detective has the opportunity to re-examine witnesses and offer them the opportunity to change their testimony in the light of new evidence and deeper reflection. The historian is usually not so fortunate. Even when the historian compares a piece of documentary evidence with other evidence in order to uncover its flaws, there is no way to cross-examine it. Given this fact, it is absolutely necessary for the historian to understand as fully as possible the source's perspective. Thus, the historian must ask several key questions, all of which share the letter W. What kind of document is this? Who wrote it? For whom and why? Where was it composed and when?

The what is important because understanding the nature of a particular source can save the historian a

great deal of frustration. Many historical sources simply do not address the questions a historian would like to ask of them. That future historian would be foolish to try to learn much about the academic quality of your school's courses from a study of the registrar's class lists and grade sheets. Student and faculty class notes, copies of syllabi, examinations, papers, and textbooks would be far more useful sources.

Who, for whom, and why are equally important questions. The student handbook undoubtedly addresses some issues pertaining to student social life. But should this document, designed to attract potential students and to place the school in the best possible light, be read and accepted uncritically? Obviously not. It must be tested against student testimony, which is discovered in such sources as private letters, memoirs, posters, the student newspaper, and the yearbook.

Where and when are also important questions to ask of any primary source. As a rule, distance in space and time from an event colors perceptions and can diminish the validity of a source's testimony. The recollections of a person celebrating a twenty-fifth class reunion could be insightful and valuable. Conceivably this graduate now has a perspective and information that he or she lacked a quarter of a century earlier. Just as conceivably, however, that person's memory might be playing tricks. A source can be so close to or so distant from the event it deals with that its view is distorted or totally erroneous. Even so, the source is not necessarily worthless. Often the blind spots and misinformation within a source reveal to the researcher important insights into the author's attitudes and sources of information.

The historical detective's task is difficult. In addition to constantly questioning the validity and particular perspectives of available sources, the historical researcher must often use whatever evidence is available in imaginative ways. The researcher must interpret these fragmentary and flawed glimpses of the past and piece together the resultant inferences and insights as well as possible. While recognizing that a complete picture of the past is impossible, the historian assumes the responsibility of recreating a past that is valid and has meaning for the present.