

# Unit History



# Introduction

History tells us about past events. While there is a consensus among people about the importance of history, controversy never ceases over such issues as the definition, nature and authenticity of history and how we can put history into perspective. Historians are considered authorities on those issues. However, opinions differ as to what historians do, and even who can qualify as a historian. The discussion on the vocation of historians typically involves the subtle distinction between “history” and “the past”, the “artistic” narrative style of historians as storytellers and their responsibility to put history into perspective. “Historical awareness” is very important to historians. Though different from social memory, historical awareness can be regarded as a universal psychological attribute. In this sense, all people are historians.

## Pre-reading Tasks

- 1 How much do you know about historians' work?
- 2 What's the difference between historians' and novelists' work?
- 3 How do you understand historical awareness?





# What Do Historians Do?

*John Fea*

1 What is history? Anyone who types this question into an Internet search engine will discover an array of answers. Henry Ford famously said, “All history is bunk.” Voltaire, the eighteenth-century philosopher, believed that history is “the lie commonly agreed upon.” The American satirist Ambrose Bierce wrote that history is “an account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools.” In a quote that warms the heart of many historians, the Irish writer **Oscar Wilde** said, “Anyone can make history; only a great man can write it.” Are those who do not remember the past condemned to repeat? The Spanish philosopher George Santayana thought so, and so do thousands of Americans when asked why students should study the subject. What is the purpose of studying history? What do historians do? Does everyone who conducts a serious study of the past qualify as a historian? “In my opinion,” writes Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Gordon Wood, “not everyone who writes about the past is a historian. Sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and economists frequently work in the past without really thinking historically.” What does Wood mean?



## History and the past

2 Any introductory conversation about the vocation of the historian must begin by making a distinction between “history” and “the past”. Most average people think that these two terms are synonymous. They are not. The past is the past—a record of events that occurred in bygone eras. The past is dates, facts, and things that “happened”. The past is what probably turned many of us off to the subject of history during our school

years. Perhaps some of you may recall the economics teacher in the popular 1986 film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. This teacher reinforces a common stereotype, made famous by Arnold Toynbee, that history is a little more than “one damn thing after another”. Played brilliantly by actor Ben Stein, the teacher stands before the class in a tweed sport coat, tie, and thick glasses, rattles off details about the [Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act](#) and “[voodoo economics](#)”, and monotonously asks his bored students to finish his sentences:

In 1930, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, in an effort to alleviate the effect of the ... *anyone, anyone?* ... the Great Depression, passed the ... *anyone, anyone?* ... the tariff bill, the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act which ... *anyone, anyone?* ... *raised or lowered?*... raised tariffs in an effort to collect more revenue for the federal government. Did it work ... *anyone, anyone?* ... *Anyone know the effects?* ... It did not work and the United States sunk deeper into the Great Depression.

3 This teacher, with his knowledge of certain facts about economic life in America, might be a successful candidate on Jeopardy, but he is not teaching history.

4 We all have a past. So do nations, communities, neighborhoods, and institutions. At times we can be reasonably sure about what happened in the past. We know, for example, that the Battle of Lexington and Concord took place on April 19, 1775, or that Islamic terrorists attacked the first tower of the World Trade Center in New York City at 8:46 a.m. on [September 11, 2001](#). But at other times, as the chronological distance from a particular moment in the past grows greater, our memory starts to fail us. Sometimes the documentary or oral evidence that tells us what happened in the past is limited or untrustworthy. Whatever the case, the past is gone. Yet we would be foolish to suggest that it has not had its way with us—shaping us, haunting us, defining us, motivating us, empowering us.

5 History is a discipline. It is the art of reconstructing the past. As historian John Tosh writes, “All the resources of scholarship and all the historian’s powers of imagination must be harnessed to the task of bringing the past to life—or resurrecting it.” The past is messy, but historians make sense of the mess by collecting evidence, making meaning of it, and marshaling it into some kind of discernible pattern. History is an exciting act of interpretation—taking the facts of the past and weaving them into a compelling narrative. The historian works closely with the stuff that has been left behind—documents, oral testimony, objects—to make the past come alive. As John Arnold has noted, “The sources do not ‘speak for themselves’ and never have done [so]... They come alive when the historian reanimates them. And although the sources are a beginning, the historian is present before or after, using skills and making



choices. Why *this* document and not another? Why *these* charters and not those?" There is a major difference between a work of history and a book of quotations.

- 6 Historians are always driven by the sources—they cannot make things up—but they do have power to shape their narratives in a style that might be described as “artistic”. Too often I have heard historians describe their work entirely in terms of research. They spend years in the archives combing ancient records, and once the research is complete, they describe the next phase of the historical task as “writing it up”. This phrase implies that they will simply translate their research into prose form without paying any attention to the literary quality of what they are “writing up”. Anyone who has read a scholarly history journal knows what I mean. This problem is not new. In 1939 historian Allen Nevins, a strong advocate of making history accessible to general audiences, said, “The worst examples of how history should never be written can be discovered in past files of *American Historical Review*.” (*The American Historical Review* was, and continues to be, the most important scholarly history journal in the world.) Such an approach to doing history is common when writing an academic paper, a master’s thesis, or a doctoral dissertation, but too often the bad habits learned in graduate school stay with historians as they enter their professional careers. In the 1990s an academic journal staged an annual “Bad Writing Contest”. One of the winning entries came from a scholarly article about the history of American imperialism. Here is a taste:

When interpreted from within the ideal space of the myth-symbol school, Americanist masterworks legitimized hegemonic understanding of American history expressively totalized in the metanarrative that had been reconstructed out of (or more accurately read into) these masterworks.

- 7 While many historians do make an effort to write well, others do not. This is unfortunate because the effective and compelling dissemination of one’s work is at the heart of the historian’s vocation. Since the professionalization of history in the late nineteenth century, the literary quality of historical writing that defined an even earlier era has been largely lost, replaced by the accumulation of data and evidence in what professional historians call a “monograph”. While there is much to learn from the skills and practices of academic historians, and historical narratives build off of specialized research, this particular development in the history of the profession has been unfortunate. Whether it is through a book, article, website, exhibit, lecture, or lesson, all historians present their ideas to the public in some fashion and should do so in ways that are accessible.
- 8 The best historians tell stories about the past—stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Most stories end with a lesson or a “moral”. While a historian

may not explicitly preach the moral of his or her story, if told in a compelling fashion, the moral will always be evident to the reader. We use narratives to make sense of our world. It is how we bring order to our own human experiences and the human experiences of others. Jonathan Gottschall, in his recent *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, reminds us that the mind “yields helplessly to the suction of story”. If a quick glance at the *New York Times* best-seller list over the course of the last decade is any indication, the history books that have reached the largest audience are written by narrative historians. Writers such as David McCullough, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and the late Stephen Ambrose have brought the past alive to ordinary readers through their gifted prose and storytelling abilities. They have proved that a book about the past, in the hands of a skillful historian-writer, can be a page turner. This is because, as historian William Cronon writes,

As storytellers we commit ourselves to the task of judging the consequences of human actions, trying to understand the choices that confronted people whose lives we narrate so as to capture the full tumult of their world. In the dilemmas they faced we discover our own, and at the intersection of the two we locate the moral of the story. If our goal is to tell tales that make the past meaningful, then we cannot escape struggling over the values that define what meaning is.

### The five C's of historical thinking

9 Historians are not mere storytellers. Not only do they have the responsibility of making sure that they get the story right; they are also charged with the task of analyzing and interpreting the past. In other words, they need to think like *historians*. Historians Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke have boiled down the task of historical interpretation into what they call the “five C's of historical thinking”. I have found this introductory approach to historical thinking to be extremely helpful in teaching students how to go about their work as apprentice historians. According to Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, when doing their work, historians must always be sensitive to change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity.

10 Historians chronicle change over time. While there is continuity between past eras and our time, there has also been significant change. For example, the United States changed considerably between 1776 and 1900: the meaning of the Constitution was defined more clearly by a bloody civil war; the demographic makeup of the country changed immensely with the arrival of new immigrants. Historians trace these changes. As we will see, their task is to take their audiences on a journey by shedding light on the ways in which life in past eras was different from the world in which we now live.



- 11 Historians also study the past in context. First, historians, like any interpreters of documents and sources, analyze words in a given historical text as part of the message of the entire text. The context provides meaning. Second, any event from the past should be understood in light of the circumstances, setting, or belief systems in which it occurred. This is especially the case when analyzing and narrating the history of ideas. The ideas of great thinkers, such as Plato or Thomas Aquinas or John Locke, are the products of the cultural worlds in which these men lived.
- 12 Historians also realize that specific events in the past are best understood in relation to other events; in other words, historians are concerned with causality—the examination of cause and effect. In this sense, the historian moves beyond the mere recitation of facts and tries to explain why particular events happened in the way they did or how events have been shaped by previous events. What were the social, cultural, economic, or political factors that “caused” the American Civil War? How does the long history of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow laws explain why the civil rights movement emerged when it did? What role did the immediate aftermath of World War I play in motivating Adolf Hitler to form the Nazi party? The historian used the sequence of events in an attempt to determine causality.
- 13 Historians are also concerned with contingency—the free will of humans to shape their own destinies. As historian David Hackett Fischer notes, people’s choices matter. It is the historian’s task to explain the way people are driven by a personal desire to break free from their circumstances and the social and cultural forces that hold them in place. History is thus told as a narrative—an often exciting and heroic one—of individual choices made by humans through time.
- 14 Finally, historians realize that the past is complex. Human behavior does not easily conform to our present-day social, cultural, political, religious, or economic categories. Take Thomas Jefferson for example. Jefferson is the most complex personality of all the so-called founding fathers. He was the primary author of *The Declaration of Independence*—the document that declared that we are “endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. He was the author of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom—one of the greatest statements on religious freedom in the history of the world. He was a champion of education and founder of one of our great public universities—the University of Virginia. As a politician, he defended the rights of the common man, and he staunchly opposed high and centralized governments that threatened individual liberties. As president, he doubled the size of the United States and made every effort to keep us out of war with Great Britain. At the same time, Jefferson was a slaveholder. Though he made several efforts to try to bring this institution to an end,

he never succeeded. Jefferson needed his slaves to uphold the kind of Virginia planter lifestyle—complete with all its consumer goods and luxury items—that he could not live without.

(2,230 words)



## EXERCISES

### Cognitive Reading

I. Summarize the text in no more than 100 words.

II. Decide whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F) according to the text.

- |  | T                        | F                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Everyone who writes about the past is a historian.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Historians are always driven by the sources and they have the power to shape their narratives in an artistic way.       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Any event from the past should be understood in light of circumstances, setting or belief systems in which it occurred. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Historians need not be concerned with the examination of cause and effect.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Human behavior can easily conform to our present-day social, cultural, political, religious, or economic categories.    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

III. Answer the following questions according to the text.

1. What's the distinction between "history" and "past"?
2. What is at the heart of the historian's vocation?
3. What are the responsibilities of historians?
4. What are "the five C's of historical thinking"?
5. How do you understand that historians should study the past in the context?

IV. Paraphrase the following sentences.

1. But at other times, as the chronological distance from a particular moment in the past grows greater, our memory starts to fail us. (Para. 4)



2. Yet we would be foolish to suggest that it has not had its way with us—shaping us, haunting us, defining us, motivating us, empowering us. (Para. 4)
3. It is the art of reconstructing the past. As historian John Tosh writes, “All the resources of scholarship and all the historian’s powers of imagination must be harnessed to the task of bringing the past to life—or resurrecting it.” (Para. 5)
4. This is unfortunate because the effective and compelling dissemination of one’s work is at the heart of the historian’s vocation. (Para. 7)
5. While a historian may not explicitly preach the moral of his or her story, if told in a compelling fashion, the moral will always be evident to the reader. (Para. 8)

## Critical Reading

### I. Answer the following questions according to the text.

1. How do you define history? What is history for?
2. What traits do you think a historian should have?
3. It is commonly acknowledged that historians have no way to write the human past accurately. Can you offer some suggestions on how historians can come near the true story as much as possible?

### II. Have a group discussion based on the following topic.

As the Chinese saying goes, “A bystander is always clear-minded.” Do you think a historian serves as a bystander of history or a creator of history? Why? Use some examples to illustrate your idea, then form a group with your classmates and prepare a five-minute presentation.

## Language Enhancement

### A Vocabulary

Choose from the given words one that best completes each sentence.

1. For people with workaholic tendencies, work is often \_\_\_\_\_ with worth, so the more they work, the better they feel.  
a. same                      b. equal                      c. synonymous                      d. tantamount
2. When you are in a bad mood, it’s easy to look for things to fuel that bad mood or \_\_\_\_\_ it.  
a. underpin                      b. reinforce                      c. buttress                      d. intensify

3. The government has provided fixed economic compensation for more than ten years to laid-off workers in order to \_\_\_\_\_ their pressure.  
a. alleviate                      b. assuage                      c. appease                      d. soothe
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ from tourism is the biggest single item in the country's invisible earnings.  
a. returns                      b. proceeds                      c. takings                      d. revenue
5. Modern science and technology \_\_\_\_\_ human beings to control natural forces more effectively.  
a. authorize                      b. empower                      c. sanction                      d. vest
6. High energy prices and technological breakthroughs helped \_\_\_\_\_ the idea.  
a. rejuvenate                      b. revivify                      c. resurrect                      d. resuscitate
7. Knowledge visualization, i.e. putting knowledge into easy-to-understand image, helps to promote its innovation and \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. dissemination                      b. distribution                      c. broadcasting                      d. propagation
8. Fundamentally, intelligence is an \_\_\_\_\_ of skills—not an innate thing.  
a. accretion                      b. addition                      c. accrual                      d. accumulation
9. In the \_\_\_\_\_ of everyday life, it's very easy to focus on the negative and to lose sight of what really matters.  
a. uproar                      b. hubbub                      c. tumult                      d. pandemonium
10. This world lived by human being is the world being full of \_\_\_\_\_ per se.  
a. emergency                      b. contingency                      c. exigency                      d. likelihood

## B Usage and Grammar

- I. Fill in the blank(s) in each sentence with a word or a phrase taken from the box in its appropriate form.

|                |                    |                 |               |            |
|----------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------|
| an array of    | be accessible to   | resurrect       | dissemination | causality  |
| marshal...into | make a distinction | be harnessed to | boil down     | rattle off |

1. An Internet art gallery aimed to \_\_\_\_\_ surfers around the world is now online.
2. Some scientists are working hard at how tide can \_\_\_\_\_ produce electricity.
3. But some media companies are dying, and a new gadget will not \_\_\_\_\_ them.