

# Unit 1 History





# Introduction

History is an evolving process. Over time people's definition of history changes in accordance with events, but the importance of history has remained constant among people. George Santayana remarked on history's cyclical nature that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," while according to Winston Churchill, "the farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." Some nations treat history as cookbooks: Whenever they are uncertain about what to do next, they turn to history and look up the proper recipe, or "the lesson of history". History can be enlightening and inspirational, and even bring a certain group of people a sense of identity. History, including both oral and recorded history, is essential to modern civilizations. However, there are disputes, even among historians, over such issues as the nature of history, the authenticity of historical "facts" and the way to view or interpret history.

## Pre-reading Tasks

- 1 Many people argue that it is important to learn history. Why is it important to learn history?
- 2 Can you name some historical figures or events? What do you know about them?
- 3 Is it possible to seek the truth of history? Do you think history is absolutely objective? Why or why not?

# The Importance of History (Excerpts)

*David Crabtree*

1 History is important. In centuries past this statement would have seemed self-evident. Ancient cultures devoted much time and effort to teaching their children family history. It was thought that the past helps a child understand who he is. Modern society, however, has turned its back on the past. We live in a time of rapid change, a time of progress. We prefer to define ourselves in terms of where we are going, not where we come from. Our ancestors hold no importance for us. They lived in times so different from our own that they are incapable of shedding light on our experience. Man is so much smarter now than he was even ten years ago that anything from the past is outdated and irrelevant to us. Therefore the past, even the relatively recent past, is, in the minds of most of us, enshrouded by mists and only very vaguely perceived. Our ignorance of the past is not the result of a lack of information, but of indifference. We do not believe that history matters.

2 But history does matter. It has been said that he who controls the past controls the future. Our view of history shapes the way we view the present, and therefore it dictates what answers we offer for existing problems. Let me offer an example to indicate how this might be true.

3 One of my children comes running up to me, "Papa, Stefan hit me!" Another child comes close on the heels of the first, "I did not. You hit me!" As a parent I have to determine what happened. Usually I have to sort through conflicting testimony to get to the truth of the matter. Part of my information is my knowledge of human beings in general; part of my information is the knowledge I have assembled over the lifetimes



of these particular children. All of this is essentially history. It is knowledge about the past. I must have a good understanding of the past in order to know how to deal wisely with these children in the present. Any punishment or chastisement will depend on my reconstruction of what actually happened. The children realize this, and thus they present very selective histories of the event in an attempt to dictate my response. In these kinds of situations, children very clearly understand that history matters.

4 So history matters, but what is history? My advisor in graduate school had a simple definition that I have grown to appreciate: “History is a story about the past that is significant and true.” This simple definition contains two words packed with meaning which must be understood in order to understand history.

5 The first word is “significant”. No one could record everything that is true about an event in the past: temperature, humidity, soil type, molecules bouncing around, hearts beating, lungs inflating and deflating, and so forth—there is no end to what could be listed. History is the process of simplifying. Of all that could be said about an event, what is most important or most significant? The goal of history is to tell a story about the past which captures the essence of an event while omitting superfluous details.

6 Significance is determined by the historian. The historian sorts through the evidence and presents only that which, given his particular world view, is significant. What a historian finds significant is not entirely a personal choice; it is largely shaped by his training and his colleagues. In order for a historian to have his works published, he has to receive the approval of his fellow historians. Therefore, the community of historians has a large say in deciding what about the past is significant. But historians are just as much a part of society as anyone else, and we are all greatly influenced by those around us. As a result, the community of historians tends to share the same notion of significance as is held by society as a whole. Therefore, historians tend to tell stories which reflect the dominant values of the society in which they live.

7 This leads to a curious feature of historical narrative: The past is fixed—no one can change what happened—but as the values of society change, the historians’ depiction of the past changes also. It has been argued that history tells us more about the time in which it is written than the time about which it is written. The past does not change, but history changes with every generation.

8 I said that history is a story about the past that is significant and true. I have talked about the word “significant”; now I want to talk about the word “true”. What does it mean to say that a historical account is true? Most modern historians would claim there is no absolute truth. This would imply there is no basis for saying that one

historical account is true and another one false. I know of no historian, however, who actually operates this way in practice. Most historians use the word “true” to mean any perspective well supported by facts. The tricky thing is that every historian uses facts to build his case. Rarely does a historian consciously distort the facts; and although minor factual errors are common, they seldom undermine the overall presentation. But even though most histories are built on facts, the histories can be very different, even contradictory, because falsehoods can be constructed solely with facts.

9 My parents once put in a new front lawn. Soon after it was planted, my mother discovered bicycle tracks running across the yard. She had a pretty good idea who had done it, so she asked this boy if he knew anything about the tracks. He said, “Yes, I do. My sister’s bike did it.” This is a wonderfully crafted statement. It is built on facts, but it is designed to create a false impression. We often refer to such statements as “half-truths”. For history to be true, it must not only be based on facts, it must present those facts in a balanced, well proportioned manner. Too often histories are half-truths.

10 I need to point out quickly that most historians do not intentionally distort history to serve their purposes, as this boy did. The process is much less malicious, yet far more insidious. Historians interpret evidence through the eyes of their own world view. This is natural; we could not expect anything else. Therefore, the accuracy of a historian’s version of past events depends greatly on the soundness of his world view.

11 I suspect this is contrary to most people’s image of history. People generally think of history as a very objective discipline. This perspective dominated the field about a century ago, and most of us were led to believe this in the course of our education. We were taught that objective historians began to piece together a picture of the past, and every new generation of historians discovers new facts which alter our understanding of the past. With each generation, therefore, we get closer to the truth of history, but these refinements do not significantly alter the assured findings of science. This perspective would find few adherents today. It has become painfully obvious that no researcher is a blank slate. We all start with some preconceived notions about what is true and what is not. It should not and can not be otherwise. All history is, in this sense, biased. For the reasons I have listed, history is a value-laden discipline.

12 History teaches values. If it is true history, it teaches true values; if it is pseudo-history, it teaches false values. The history taught to our children is playing a role in shaping their values and beliefs—a much greater role than we may suspect.

*(1,313 words)*





## WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

<b>adherent</b>	/əd'hɪərənt/	<i>n.</i> someone who supports a particular belief, plan, political party, etc. 拥护者
<b>assemble</b>	/ə'sembəl/	<i>vt.</i> to bring people or things together, or gather together in one place, often for a particular purpose 集合, 聚集
<b>assured</b>	/ə'ʃʊəd/	<i>adj.</i> certain to happen or to be achieved 确实的, 确定的
<b>biased</b>	/'baɪəst/	<i>adj.</i> unfairly preferring one person or group over another 有偏见的
<b>capture</b>	/'kæptʃə/	<i>vt.</i> to succeed in recording, showing, or describing a situation or feeling, using words or pictures (用文字或图像) 表现, 描绘, 刻画
<b>chastisement</b>	/'tʃæstɪzmənt/	<i>n.</i> (formal) criticism of someone for doing something wrong 惩罚
<b>claim</b>	/kleɪm/	<i>vt.</i> to state that something is true, even though it has not been proved 声称
<b>discipline</b>	/'dɪsɪplɪn/	<i>n.</i> an area of knowledge or teaching, especially one such as history, chemistry, mathematics, etc. that is studied at a university 学科, 科目
<b>distort</b>	/dɪ'stɔ:t/	<i>vt.</i> to report something in a way that is not completely true or correct 扭曲, 曲解
<b>dominate</b>	/'dɒmənɪt/	<i>vt.</i> to be larger and more noticeable than anything else in a place 占据支配地位
<b>enshroud</b>	/ɪn'fraʊd/	<i>vt.</i> to cover or surround something so that it is not possible to see, understand, or explain it 遮蔽; 笼罩
<b>humidity</b>	/hju:'mɪdəti/	<i>n.</i> the amount of water contained in the air 湿度
<b>ignorance</b>	/'ɪgnərəns/	<i>n.</i> lack of knowledge or information about something 无知
<b>indifference</b>	/ɪn'dɪfərəns/	<i>n.</i> lack of interest or concern 漠不关心
<b>insidious</b>	/ɪn'sɪdiəs/	<i>adj.</i> slowly and subtly harmful or destructive 潜伏的; 暗中危害的
<b>malicious</b>	/mə'lɪʃəs/	<i>adj.</i> very unkind and cruel, and deliberately behaving in a way that is likely to upset or hurt someone 恶意的, 蓄意的
<b>notion</b>	/'nəʊʃən/	<i>n.</i> an idea, belief, or opinion 概念
<b>omit</b>	/əʊ'mɪt/	<i>vt.</i> to not include someone or something, either deliberately or because you forget to do it 忽略
<b>perceive</b>	/pə'sɪv/	<i>vt.</i> (formal) to notice, see, or recognize something 觉察
<b>perspective</b>	/pə'spektɪv/	<i>n.</i> a way of thinking about something, especially one which is influenced by the type of person you are or by your experiences 视角, 看法
<b>preconceived</b>	/'pri:kən'si:v/	<i>adj.</i> (of ideas, opinions, etc.) formed before you really have enough knowledge or experience (观点) 事先形成的; 先入为主的

<b>pseudo</b>	/ˈsjʊːdəʊ/	<i>adj.</i> false or not real 假的, 伪的
<b>reconstruction</b>	/ˌriːkənˈstrʌkʃən/	<i>n.</i> a description or copy of an event or a place, which you produce by collecting information about it 重现, 再现
<b>refinement</b>	/ˌrɪˈfaɪnmənt/	<i>n.</i> something which is an improved version of an existing product, system, etc. 改进, 完善
<b>superfluous</b>	/suːˈpɜːfluəs/	<i>adj.</i> more than what is needed or wanted 多余的
<b>testimony</b>	/ˈtestəməni/	<i>n.</i> a fact or situation that shows or proves very clearly that something exists or is true 证词, 证言
<b>undermine</b>	/ˌʌndeˈmaɪn/	<i>vt.</i> to gradually make someone or something less strong or effective 削弱, 损害



## EXERCISES

### Cognitive Reading

#### I. Select from the following statements one that best expresses the main idea of the text.

- The text presents the different attitudes towards history between the ancient cultures and the modern society.
- The text presents the relationship between history and values.
- The text presents the definition and importance of history.
- The text presents the significance and truth of history.

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

- |  | T                        | F                        |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Modern people do not pay due attention to the past for lack of information.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. What is significant is determined by historians, who can make their judgment free from bias and influence.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. It has been argued that history tells more about the time when people write about the past events than the age itself that people write about, because what has happened cannot be changed but how people look at the past varies with generations. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Facts are a double-edged sword, which can build falsehoods as well as truth. What really matters is a balanced, proper way to present and interpret the facts.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

5. The historians' interpretation of evidence on the basis of their own world views may be potentially misleading even though they do not intend to distort history.



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

1. At the beginning of the text, why does the author present the different attitudes towards history between the ancient cultures and the modern society?
2. What's the importance of history?
3. How did the author's advisor define history?
4. Why does the author cite the examples of his children's conflicting statements about their fight and the bike tracks across the yard?
5. What is the relationship between history and values?

### IV. Paraphrase the following sentences.

1. Modern society, however, has turned its back on the past. (Para. 1)
2. Therefore the past, even the relatively recent past, is, in the minds of most of us, enshrouded by mists and only very vaguely perceived. (Para. 1)
3. Usually I have to sort through conflicting testimony to get to the truth of the matter. (Para. 3)
4. The goal of history is to tell a story about the past which captures the essence of an event while omitting superfluous details. (Para. 5)
5. This perspective would find few adherents today. It has become painfully obvious that no researcher is a blank slate. We all start with some preconceived notions about what is true and what is not. (Para. 11)

## Critical Reading

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

1. How would you define "history" after learning the text?
2. How do you understand "fact" and "truth"?
3. It has been said that he who controls the past controls the future. Do you agree or disagree with this perspective? Why?

### II. Have a debate on the following topic.

Do you agree with the statement "All history is biased." (Para. 11)? Why or why not? Clarify your standpoint and find your supporters in your class, and then have a debate with those who hold the opposite opinions.



## Language Enhancement

### A Vocabulary

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

1. Though Ben had lost two games, he still spoke in a calm, \_\_\_\_\_ voice.  
a. reassured                      b. assured                      c. insured                      d. ensured
2. Over the years, the landscape in the rainforest has been radically \_\_\_\_\_, severely damaging wildlife.  
a. altered                      b. varied                      c. modified                      d. adjusted
3. If you \_\_\_\_\_ a gas leak, do not strike a match or even turn on an electric light.  
a. doubt                      b. guess                      c. suspect                      d. think
4. At the conference, the president said that the international community should not be \_\_\_\_\_ against the developing countries.  
a. critical                      b. biased                      c. unfair                      d. partial
5. Nowadays we get so used to looking at mobile phones, so dependent on its various functions, that it begins to \_\_\_\_\_ our lives.  
a. direct                      b. dominate                      c. guide                      d. lead
6. Tissue engineering has been a newly developed \_\_\_\_\_ which represents the new direction of biological medicine engineering.  
a. object                      b. course                      c. area                      d. discipline
7. How you present the world tells something of your interests, politics, culture and \_\_\_\_\_.  
a. outlook                      b. point                      c. perspective                      d. view
8. Nasty pieces of \_\_\_\_\_ code such as viruses, Trojan horses and worms sometimes make computer users suffer a great loss.  
a. malicious                      b. vicious                      c. mean                      d. spiteful
9. Under no circumstance should the media \_\_\_\_\_ the truth so as to cater to the market.  
a. interfere                      b. alter                      c. deform                      d. distort
10. Our confidence in the team has been seriously \_\_\_\_\_ by their recent defeats.  
a. undermined                      b. damaged                      c. questioned                      d. harmed

## B Usage and Grammar

### I. Fill in the blank in each sentence with a word or a phrase taken from the box in its appropriate form.

shed light on	be enshrouded by	dictate	on the heels of	be contrary to
inflate	superfluous	distort	proportion	sort through

1. In an adjoining room he summoned one of his secretaries and began to \_\_\_\_\_ his last will and testament.
2. My lungs \_\_\_\_\_ with a deep breath of air, and I stretch my limbs out in all directions for about two seconds.
3. Recent research has \_\_\_\_\_ the causes of the disease, and it is very possible to cure it.
4. The city \_\_\_\_\_ the heavy grey clouds because of the environmental pollution.
5. The lust for the \_\_\_\_\_ is folly, for it has no bounds.
6. In order to finish his thesis, he \_\_\_\_\_ lots of papers to find some relevant reference.
7. Unfortunately, bad news has come hard \_\_\_\_\_ good ones.
8. Do they \_\_\_\_\_ the record of the past to produce a dramatic story or to promote a political point of view?
9. We all felt frustrated because the results \_\_\_\_\_ our expectations.
10. He said that the effect was to actually balance out the \_\_\_\_\_ of men and women in the population.

### II. Each of the following sentences contains one error. You are to find out the error and correct it.

1. As many as one thousand years ago in the Southwest, the Hopi and Zuni Indian of North America were building with adobe—sun baked brick plastered with mud.
2. Their homes looked remarkable like modern apartment houses.
3. These buildings were usually put up cliffs, both to make construction easier and for defense against enemies.
4. They made excellent pottery and wove marvelous baskets, some so fine which they could hold water.
5. The Southwest has always been a dry country, water is scarce.