

The Historian's Practice

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers what it means to study history. History itself is a tricky topic and can cover a lot of ground. For many students, history means the written record of the past they encountered in their high school textbooks, but it is definitely more than that. For this reason, we will cover the historian's practice. That is, we will cover the ways that history itself is created, discuss the many interpretations of what it means to study history, and delve into some of the practices that historians engage in when they create stories of the past.

Our discussion will break down like this:

1. What Is History?

The term **history** may seem straightforward and easy to understand, but historians have debated what constitutes history for quite some time. According to the American Historical Association (2011), history is defined as “the never-ending process whereby people seek to understand the past and its many meanings.” In other words, history is the study of the past.



TERM TO KNOW

History

The study of the past.

Even though there have been other ways in which the term “history” has been defined, sometimes the simplest definition is best. That does not mean that all answers are this simple, however. In fact, many historians have debated about what should be included in the past. Oftentimes, such debates and the questions that historians investigate are a reflection of contemporary issues or concerns. For instance, given the current debates that surround environmental and climate change, environmental history and climate history are relatively recent fields of study. Thus, the study of U.S. history can include a variety of subjects and subdisciplines, including political, social, cultural, and intellectual history.

The issues that one can investigate in U.S. history and the questions that historians ask to investigate those issues are limitless, and so is the information. This leads to another problem that the historian often encounters: when there is so much information about the past, how do you pick and choose the right information to create an honest and representative narrative of the past? This leaves history open to both **bias** and interpretation.

Bias can come naturally. We often show prejudice toward an event, group of people, or set of objects

because we most commonly identify with them or view them in a negative light. It is, therefore, the challenge of the historian to remain **objective** in their interpretation of the past, guaranteeing that a sense of accuracy and an awareness of the historical context is conveyed.



TERMS TO KNOW

Bias

Prejudice toward an event, group of people, or set of objects when compared to another.

Objective History

Viewing past people and events without taking the historian's personal view into account; unbiased history.

Even though objectivity is the goal of the historian, it is still impossible to fully separate the historian's own experiences, ideas about the past, and understanding of the truth from their interpretations of the past. To make matters even more complicated, historians need to consider bias and worldviews in the documents they are using.

With all of that said, it is important to remember that the historian navigates all of these issues and concerns—sometimes with success, sometimes with failure. Reading and interpreting the past can be more difficult than it sounds.

This is why defining a term like “history” can be such a debatable topic in the world of the historian.

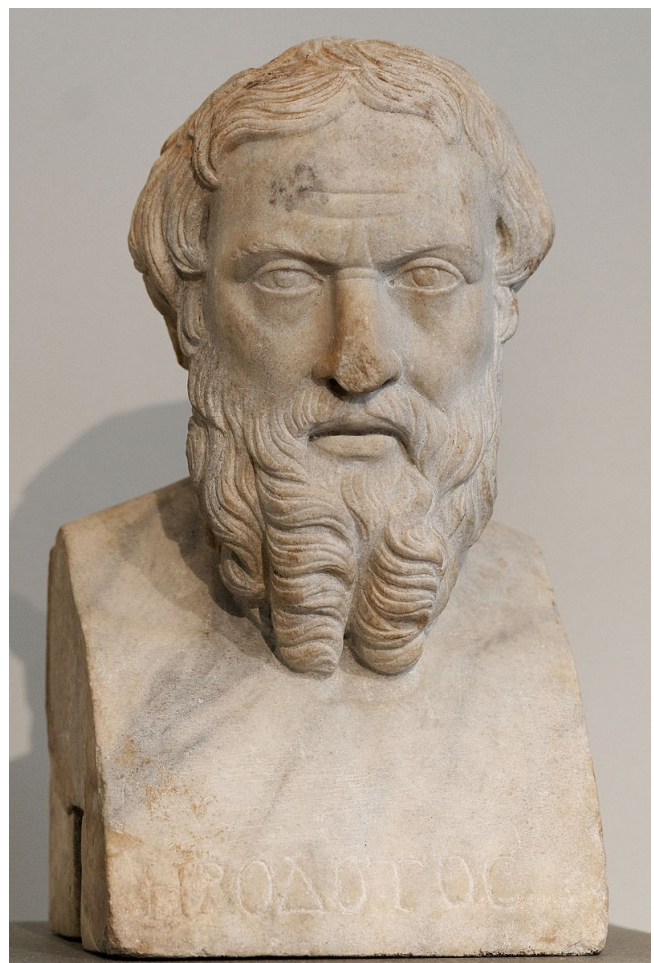
2. The Historian's Practice

Throughout this course, you will be asked to think about a number of questions in a way that mimics a historian. At a very basic level, historians read and interpret evidence from the past to create a narrative of events. They also ask themselves quite a few deep questions about past events and about the nature of history, in general. These questions could include the following:

- Why should one study history?
- What should a historian focus on?
- What does it mean to be a good historian?

Even though this is a course that covers the history of the United States, from its prehistoric beginnings to the Civil War and Reconstruction, we will focus on the heart of these questions as well. We will embark upon these tasks because understanding how history is created can arguably be just as important as learning about the key events in the American past.

It is not every day that we stop and think deeply about the past, nor is it common to dive into an intellectual exchange about the nature of history and the historian's practice writ large. Yet, history is all around



you. Many students experience history by reading a book on a topic like World War II or visiting a historical landmark like the Roman Colosseum. Others might experience history by watching films or witnessing a historical reenactment. Still others experience history by investigating genealogy or listening to family stories.

Herodotus has been called the “Father of History.”

His histories of the Roman Empire have been considered one of the earliest examples of a historian treating past events as an important field of study.

Most of us, however, learned history in a classroom by memorizing important dates and names in order to answer questions about past events. Learning history through memorization is an important part of being a historian. Historians compile knowable information about past events (some would call these facts or the truth). Then, they create narratives, or stories, about the past so it is easier to understand.

The history-making process gets more complicated from this point forward. The historian (a) takes one of many perspectives on how to view the past, (b) selects the most important information that they believes is relevant to the story being told, and (c) pieces the events together like a puzzle to ensure the story makes sense. This has led to a number of debates within the historical field on how to approach the history-making process. Many of these debates will be covered in this tutorial.

3. What Is Historiography?

One thing to remember is that history often traces past events in terms of change over time. For example, historians can examine the antislavery arguments that women made before the outbreak of the Civil War and trace how those arguments were altered and used to advocate for women having the right to vote by the end of the 19th century.

No matter the topic, change over time is an essential part of the historical process—so essential, in fact, that it is applied to historians themselves. The term **historiography** has been used to refer to the study of historical writing, or the history of history.



TERM TO KNOW

Historiography

The study and interpretation of historical writings.

Just as trends and events in the U.S. have changed over time, historical interpretations of past events have changed over time as well. In other words, ideas regarding how to write about history change. For example, political and economic history were popular fields of study for much of the 20th century. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, a new field called **social history** emerged as the United States grappled with the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and other social issues. Social history refers to the study of people and their social groups. The study of social history gave rise to specific historical fields like women’s history, Black American history, and the history of the working class. The emergence of social history shows how historical research is subject to the social, cultural, and intellectual environments in which it is written. For this reason, it is important to see the historian’s practice as something that changes over time.



TERM TO KNOW

Social History

The history of the average person, especially in terms of demographic groups.

4. The Historian's Practice and U.S. History

Up to this point, we have discussed the historian's practice using theoretical language and have attempted to stimulate deeper thinking on the subject. You might be asking yourself, how does this actually apply to U.S. history? Nearly every historian with a specialization in U.S. history has gone through this process; they have asked themselves the same questions we have asked you. As mentioned previously, their answers varied depending on (a) their own perspective about the past, (b) when they wrote their account of history down, and (c) what they viewed as most important in retelling past events.

Let us take a quick look at how some historians have approached the history of the American Revolution in order to think about the ideas we have covered. One of the first people to write a history of the American Revolution was George Bancroft. In his *History of the United States* (1830s), he argued that the Revolution began as an act of God that would bring “everlasting peace.”



Not all historians focus on battles when they tell the story of the American Revolution. Rather, many historians have argued over the causes of the Revolution and its meanings for American history.

Beginning in the early 20th century, historians started challenging Bancroft's argument. By this point, the United States had (a) endured a Civil War, (b) witnessed bloody conflicts between workers and factory owners, and (c) experienced political upheaval. Such trends were reflected in subsequent histories of the American Revolution. During the early 20th century, historians such as Carl Becker and Charles Beard examined the American Revolution through the lenses of political and economic conflict. Becker defined the American Revolution as a political struggle among the colonists themselves as they attempted to determine “who should rule” once the War for Independence was over. Charles Beard, meanwhile, argued that the Founding Fathers created the Constitution in order to protect their own economic interests. Both Becker and Beard disagreed with Bancroft's original interpretation of the Revolution as an act of divine intervention. Rather, they framed the Revolution as a struggle among competing political and economic interests. No longer was the war seen as an act of divine intervention, but of division both with England and within America, itself.

Ideas about the American Revolution shifted once more after World War II. After the war, Americans celebrated their sense of independence and their will to fight for freedom around the world, so historians like Daniel J. Boorstin framed the American Revolution within this context. He argued that American colonial ideas about liberty were, in fact, similar to post-World-War-II beliefs about freedom. When examined this way, the American Revolution was not a product of internal political or economic strife. Rather, Boorstin believed that the American colonists were fighting for universal constitutional rights.

Interpretations of the American Revolution changed again with the rise of the study of social history during the 1960s and 1970s. Gary B. Nash and other social historians argued that the American Revolution was sparked by angry, impoverished colonists who were frustrated by the economic conditions they lived under. The lower classes resented the British Crown for tax policies, and they turned to riots and other revolutionary actions as a result. Social historians also examined the experiences of Black Americans, women, Native Americans, and other groups that Bancroft, Beard, and other historians had previously ignored.

Historians continue to interpret the American Revolution in new ways. Recently, historians have thought about the role that culture played during the American Revolution. They have asked questions like what did it mean to be an American or how did the colonists feel about breaking away from Great Britain? For example, historian Sarah Knott answered these questions through an examination of cultural items (e.g., clothes and books). She argued that consuming similar items or discussing the same ideas prepared colonists for a new sense of self during the Revolution—one that we would call American.



THINK ABOUT IT

In what ways have historians interpreted the American Revolution? Can you think of other ways that historians might interpret the Revolution?



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we covered the historian's craft. The creation of historical narratives can be a complicated and often hotly debated issue, but we outlined some of the primary roles and responsibilities of history. We covered the historian's responsibility toward objectivity, discussed the many ways in which historians have approached the past, and even highlighted the role that historiography has played in the creation of historical narratives. Finally, we covered a few of the ways that historians have interpreted the American Revolution.

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REFERENCES

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TERMS TO KNOW

Bias

Prejudice toward one event, group of people, or set of objects when compared to another.

Historiography

The study and interpretation of historical writings.

History

The study of the past.

Objective History

Viewing past people and events without taking the historian's personal view into account; unbiased history.

Social History

The history of the average person, especially in terms of demographic groups.