The main difficulty facing historians is not eliminating unanswerable questions about the past but understanding the nature of their subject as human beings. The historian's role is to interpret the past, not to write a history of the future. The historian's task is to study the past, not to predict the future.

Historical investigation can lead to very different results depending on the interpretation of the evidence. Each historian must decide what the evidence tells them about the past. The historian must decide whether the evidence is reliable or not, whether it is relevant to the question being asked, and whether it is consistent with other evidence.

Philosophies of History

Historical investigation involves the use of evidence and the interpretation of that evidence. The historian must decide what the evidence tells them about the past. The historian must decide whether the evidence is reliable or not, whether it is relevant to the question being asked, and whether it is consistent with other evidence.

History and the Everyday World

Most of us are aware of the historical past. Children are always asking their parents the “why” and “how” behind events. Our minds are living in the past and we are constantly trying to understand the past. History is not just about dates and events, but about the way people have lived in the past and how they have thought about the world.

A historian's role is to interpret the past, not to predict the future. The historian's task is to study the past, not to write a history of the future. The historian's role is to understand the nature of the past, not to predict the future.
A central message of early Christianity was the uniqueness of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In societies influenced by the Christian Church — especially in Europe in the Middle Ages — the new concept of divine intervention to overthrow the past weakened the cyclical view. The resulting philosophy of history, the providential school, held that the course of history is determined by God, and that the ebb and flow of historical events represents struggles between forces of good and evil. These struggles are protracted, but the eventual victory of good is foreseen.

That particular idea of the providential school — that history is characterized not by ceaseless repetition but by direction and purpose — became an element in the thinking of the more secular age beginning with the eighteenth century. In this new age of scientific inquiry and material advancement, there arose the progressive school, whose central belief was that human history illustrates neither endless cycles nor divine intervention but continual progress. According to this school, the situation of humanity is constantly improving, and this improvement results not from divine providence but from the efforts of human beings themselves. Each generation builds on the learning and improvements of prior generations and, in doing so, reaches a higher stage of civilization. The idea of history as continual progress remains powerful. Currently, many variations of the progressive philosophy share the field of historical investigation.

The newest school of history is postmodernism. It has not replaced the progressive school but has raised significant questions about the inherent nature of human progress. Postmodernism has influenced many academic disciplines. In history it raises the fascinating question of whether the past can truly be understood from the perspective of the present. Evidence from the past, say the postmodernists, takes on new meanings because the present is so different from the past that they cannot directly communicate with one another. According to postmodernists, when historians search the records of the past, the understanding of the past that they bring back is heavily influenced by the methods they use or the questions they ask. They do not “find” history or discover how things really were; rather, they “create” history in the process of looking for it. Few historians wholly accept this new postmodernist view, but it has affected and weakened the older idea of objectivity — the idea that, with time and effort, the historian could avoid bias and uncover the “truth” about history.

Historiography

Another approach to the study of history is through historiography, the study of changes in the methods, interpretations, and conclusions of historians over time. As historians examine a subject, they become aware that earlier studies of the subject they are pursuing often came to surprising conclusions. For example, between 1920 and 1939, most of the major histories of World War I placed principal blame for the war on Germany. The prevailing view was that Germany’s aggression against its neighbors Germany to disarm, to accept blame, and to pay “reparations” to the even though Germany too had suffered greatly. Despite this general lasting from 1939 to 1945, led many scholars to rethink the origins of many, which directed unprecedented brutality against civilians both before elections, Who were so many Germans willing to follow Hitler?

Before coming to power, the Nazi Party repeatedly charged that Germany had to avenge itself for the war guilt placed on the German nation by the Treaty of Versailles. Slowly, historians of World War I realized that the idea that Germany alone was responsible for that conflict had helped the Nazi Party to exploit the patriotism of the German people. Historians looked more closely at the world of 1914 and concluded that there were many reasons for the eruption of World War I. Germany was no longer considered to be the sole culprit. Economic and strategic competition among the major powers (Germany, England, France, Russia, and the United States) was seen as an important factor. Intensified nationalism in all these nations — not just in Germany — had increased tensions. Also, it was realized that a series of interlocking alliances among the great powers — which turned a minor conflict in the Balkans into an all-European war — was another source of the explosion. The simplistic verdict of German guilt gave way to a complex explanation of the aims and security concerns of many nations. In this case, an attempt to understand Germany’s role in World War II led to a new understanding of the German role in World War I. This kind of reinterpretation or “revision” is not uncommon in history.

Historians’ views of Reconstruction, the period in U.S. history after the Civil War when the defeated South was under the military and political control of the victorious North, also changed. During Reconstruction, for the first time in U.S. history, black people, many of them former slaves, were allowed to be elected to and hold political office. Prior to the 1860s, almost all the books written on this subject (whether by northern or southern historians) concluded that southern politics was corrupt and made ineffective during the Reconstruction period by selfish northerners and ignorant black southerners. Since the 1950s, however, scholars have reached very different conclusions. Most now believe that southern blacks’ participation in state and local government was a healthy development and that the standard of politics in the South was generally equal to that of other regions of the nation at that time.

One reason for this new interpretation was the later historians’ more effective use of basic sources describing the work of the Reconstruction governments of the southern states. Also, historians compared southern
Reconstruction politics with politics in northern and western states of the period (an example of comparative history). And after looking back over the older literature and placing it in the historical context of race relations existing at that particular time, most scholars now conclude that an understanding of racist attitudes toward African Americans does much to explain the negative conclusions of earlier historians. Historiography lets historians use the tools of historical research to study themselves.

Historiography also can show how historians are influenced in their interpretation of the past by the ideas and events current in their own day. Recent decades have seen the breakup of the Soviet Union, the emergence of AIDS, and the globalization of economic change. These events may spur historians to take up questions about the past that may shed light on these recent developments. The breakup of the Soviet Union, for example, might lead to deeper study of the forces that created the Russian Empire. The AIDS crisis might lead to deeper study of the origin and transmission of earlier epidemics that spread across a wide area. Globalization might lead to deeper study of the rise of international trade in the late nineteenth century or its decline in the 1930s.

Changing Directions of Historical Research

When historians investigate the questions that interest them most, they are influenced in their approach by their own values and experiences, their academic training, and their beliefs about which aspects of human nature, human institutions, and the human environment are most important in understanding those questions. As a result, historians might look at a historical question from a wide range of perspectives, including social, cultural, intellectual, political, diplomatic, economic, and scientific.

Social historians often focus their research on the development of human communities and their interaction with the larger society. They might study the changing role of French peasants during the 1800s or the history of fraternal organizations over a broad region or a broad span of time. Cultural historians focus on group attitudes and behaviors and how they change over time; they might research the treatment of beggars in eighteenth-century London. Intellectual historians examine powerful ideas and how they influence beliefs and actions, such as Charles Darwin’s early ideas on evolution. Political historians look at relations of power and how they operate in institutions such as governments, political parties, and interest groups. They might research the role of the colonial governor in Portuguese Angola. Diplomatic historians usually deal with relations between nations and how they change over time; they might examine the treaty system and the outbreak of World War I. Economic historians study developments in technology, production, transportation, consumption, and patterns of wealth and poverty; they emphasize the use of statistical data. An appropriate topic for an economic historian might be centers of Italian trade in the Renaissance. Historians of science examine the evolution of scientific knowledge, how changes in such knowledge arise, and how its application influences society; they might examine the failure of German scientists to develop an atomic bomb.

Demonstrating how current issues influence the direction and subject matter of history, several new approaches have become important in recent decades. Environmental historians, who examine the interaction between human communities and their habitat and the attitudes of these communities toward nature, might examine what nineteenth-century Mediterranean tidal data say about global warming. Historians of sport, media, and other aspects of popular culture might examine radio detective shows. Historians of the family and private life have taken up the examination of the structural and emotional development of small, intimate groups and the interaction of these groups with powerful social forces such as wars, depressions, class and ethnic conflict, and technological change; they might examine children’s role in the French rural family during the eighteenth century. In contrast, the field of world history takes in centuries of change across large areas of the globe, and comparative historians seek to understand the significance of an institution, political system, people, or nation by comparing its history with that of others. Such historians can learn much about Vietnam, for example, by studying the ways in which its culture resembled or diverged from that of China.

Two of the most rapidly expanding areas of research in recent decades have been women’s history and gender studies, enormous topics largely neglected by earlier generations of historians. Women’s historians might study women in the workforce during World War II — who stayed home and who did not. Historians of gender study the ways in which ideas of masculinity and femininity have influenced history; they might study the portrayal of male and female characters in fairy tales.

Two other areas of historical research are revision. Genealogists and local historians are regaining prominence as people in countries or regions undergoing rapid change become concerned with holding onto or rediscovering their past. Genealogy traces the history of a particular family; local history examines the evolution of a town, community, or neighborhood. For more on family and local history, see “How to Research Your Family History” in Appendix B (pp. 245-49).

Methods of Historical Research

Certain kinds of historical research have been influenced by other disciplines: family history by psychology, demography by sociology, ethnohistory by anthropology, political history by political science, and economic history by economics. While still adhering to the special focus of history — examining and explaining the past — historians welcome ideas and methods of analyzing evidence from other fields. For instance, quantitative history (called demetrics) uses quantitative data, such as election returns, price levels, and population figures of earlier periods, to recreate a picture of earlier.
Primary and Secondary Sources of Evidence

Two basic forms of historical evidence help historians answer these different questions: primary and secondary. **Primary sources** (see Figure 1.1 on p. 11 and Figure 1.2 on p. 12) record the actual words of someone who participated in or witnessed the events described or of someone who got his or her information directly from participants. Primary sources can be newspaper accounts, diaries, notebooks, letters, minutes, interviews, and any works written by persons who claim firsthand knowledge of an event. Another primary source is official statements by established organizations or significant personages—royal decrees, church edicts, political party platforms, laws, and speeches. Primary sources also include any official records and statistics, such as those concerning births, marriages, deaths, taxes, deeds, and court trials. Recent history has been recorded by photographs, films, and audio and videotapes. These recordings of events as they actually happened are also primary sources of evidence. **Artifacts** are another primary source. These are things made by people in the past: houses, public buildings, tools, clothing, and much more. For more information on primary evidence, see “How to ‘Read’ Nonwritten Materials” in Chapter 2 (pp. 25–36) and “Evaluating Primary Sources” in Chapter 4 (pp. 102–05).

**Secondary sources** record the findings of writers who were not participants in a historical episode but investigated primary evidence of it, as historians do when they conduct their research. When historians publish the results of their research, they create secondary sources, which are read by other scholars and by students. Most history books and articles are secondary sources, and their footnotes and bibliography identify the primary sources that the historians examined. If your own work is based on primary sources, your research paper will become a secondary source for others to read. For an example of a secondary source, see Figure 1.3 on (p. 13).
In continental Europe, the establishment of public libraries lagged behind developments in the English-speaking countries. The European education system emphasized the preparation of young men for their life's work rather than the production of an informed citizenry. And readers were accustomed to owning books rather than borrowing.

In many countries of the nineteenth-century Europe, illiteracy was high and educational opportunities limited. Even in the more literate countries of western Europe, public libraries served only a small number of people. Municipal libraries were concerned with preserving the nation's literary heritage, not with accommodating the needs of the reading public. Even in those libraries founded specifically for the use of the common people, the book collections reflected the literary standards of intellectuals and cultural bureaucrats rather than the tastes of ordinary readers. Books were chosen more for the conformity to approved political or religious doctrine than for their popular appeal. Serious literature rather than entertaining fiction was the rule. Even as late as 1952, an American visitor observed that "one simply does not find mystery stories and the like in the Parisian public libraries." Subscription fees were often charged, which discouraged poor families from using the public libraries.


**FIGURE 1.3** Example of Secondary Evidence.
This example comes from Fred Lerner, *Libraries through the Ages* (Continuum, 1999), 103-04. Lerner gathered his evidence from a few primary but mostly secondary sources. He points the reader toward these sources by including a footnote.

**When a Secondary Source Becomes a Primary One.** It is important to understand the basic differences between primary and secondary sources, for there are certain situations in which a secondary source becomes a primary one. Here are two examples:

1. A contemporary historian is writing a book that discusses the views of early-twentieth-century historians on the reasons for the decline of the Roman Empire. The works from the early twentieth century that the historian uses as his sources would generally be considered to be secondary works, because they were written more than fifteen hundred years after the end of the Roman Empire. However, they are primary sources for the contemporary historian’s study because they provide direct evidence of how early-twentieth-century historians thought about the decline of the Roman Empire.

2. In 1990 a U.S. senator writes an article about the background of the men in his state who signed the Declaration of Independence. The senator’s article is a secondary source because it is based on primary sources from the time of the Revolution rather than on his direct experience. However, if a later historian writes a biography of the senator that includes an analysis of the senator’s views about the period of the Revolution, then the senator’s article becomes a primary document because it represents direct evidence about the senator’s views.
The Reliability of Primary and Secondary Evidence. The problem of determining the reliability of primary evidence is a serious one. Primary sources can be fraudulent, inaccurate, or biased. Eyewitness accounts may be purposely distorted in order to avert blame or to bestow praise on a particular individual or group. Without intending to misinform, even on-the-scene judgments can be incorrect. Sometimes, the closer you are to an event, the more emotionally involved you are, and this involvement distorts your understanding of it. We can all recall events in which we completely misunderstood the feelings, actions, and words of another person. Historians have to weigh evidence carefully to see whether those who participated in an event understood it well enough to accurately describe it, and whether later authors understood the meaning of the primary sources they used. Official statements present another problem—that of propaganda or concealment. A government, group, or institution may make statements that it wishes others to believe but that are not true. What a group says may not be what it does. This is especially true in politics.

To check the reliability of evidence, historians use the tests of consistency and corroboration: Does the evidence contradict itself, and does it disagree with evidence from other sources? Historical research always involves checking one source against another. For example, Figure 1.4 (p. 15) presents two primary documents that report the fighting at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in 1775—battles that began the Revolutionary War. In what important ways do the two accounts differ? How do you think the conflicting goals of the colonists and the English soldiers biased each report of the battle? What phrases could you pull out of each document to highlight the bias? Note that the American version talks of "some inhabitants of the colony" who were "seized and greatly abused" by the English soldiers. The English officer, in contrast, says that the Americans were "drawn up in military order, with arms" and that his troops were "without any intention of injuring them." You should be able to find other important differences in the two reports of the fighting. Also, as you read the documents, consider what additional sources would help you decide which report is more accurate. The two accounts agree on some facts but disagree on the responsibility for the fighting. Eyewitness accounts from other English soldiers and from American colonials who were there will help in determining which description is more accurate. It might turn out, for example, that parts of each account are correct and other parts are distorted in some way. Sometimes there is no one true source for the history of an event. Still, the more primary sources you read, the closer you will come to knowing the event in all its details and meanings.

The bias of a source also presents difficulties. People's attitudes toward the world influence the way they interpret events. For example, you and politics. These differences can cause you to disagree with them about the value of a rock concert, a Sunday sermon, or the president. Historians

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**American Account of the Battle of Lexington**

Account by the Provincial Congress at Watertown, Massachusetts, April 26, 1775

By the clearest depostions relative to this transaction, it will appear that on the night preceding the fourteenth of April instant, a body of the king's troops, under the com- take or destroy the military and other stores, provided for the defence of this colony, said, whilst travelling peaceably on the road, between Boston and Concord, were seized and greatly abused by armed men, who appeared to be officers of general Gage's array: that the town of Lexington, by these means, was alarmed, and a company of the inhabitants mustered on the occasion—that the regular troops on their way to Concord, marched into the said town of Lexington, and the said company, on their approach, began to disperse—that, notwithstanding this, the regulars rushed on with great violence and first began hostilities, by firing on said Lexington company, whereby they killed eight, and wounded several others—that the regulars continued their fire, until those of said company, who were neither killed nor wounded, had made their escape—that colonel Smith, with the detachment then marched to Concord, where a number of provincials were again fired on by the troops, two of them killed and several wounded, before the provincials fired on them, and provincials were again fired on by the troops, produced an engagement that lasted through the day, in which many of the provincials and more of the regular troops were killed and wounded. 

By order.

Joseph Warren, President.

**English Account of the Battle of Lexington**

Report of Lieutenant-Colonel Smith to Governor Gage, April 22, 1775

I think it proper to observe, that when I had got some miles on the march from Boston, I detached six light infantry companies to march with all expedition to seize the two bridges on different roads beyond Concord. On these companies' arrival at Lexington, I understand, from the report of Major Pitcairn, who was with them, and from many officers, that they found on a green close to the road a body of the country people drawn up in military order, with arms and accoutrements, and, as appeared after, loaded; and that they had posted some men in a dwelling and meeting-house. Our troops advanced towards them, without any intention of injuring them, farther than to intigue the reason of their being thus assembled, and, if not satisfactory, to have secured their arms; but they in confusion went off, principally to the left, only one of them fired before he went off, and three or four more jumped over a wall and fired from behind it among the soldiers; on which the troops returned it, and killed several of them. They likewise fired on the soldiers from the Meeting and dwelling-houses. . . . While at Concord we saw vast numbers assembling in many parts; at one of the bridges they marched down, with a very considerable body, on the light infantry posted there. On their coming pretty near, one of our men fired on them, which they returned; on which an action ensued, and some few were killed and wounded. . . . On our leaving Concord to return to Boston, they began to fire on us from behind the walls, ditches, trees, &c., which, as we marched, increased to a very great degree, and continued without intermission of five minutes altogether, for I believe, upwards of eighteen miles... I have the honor, &c.

F. Smith, Lieutenant-Colonel 10th Foot.
have their own attitudes toward the subjects they are investigating, and these cause them to draw different conclusions about the character and importance of religious, political, intellectual, and other movements. Later historians must take these biases into account when weighing the reliability of the primary and secondary evidence. (See also “Evaluating Sources” in Chapter 4, pp. 100-06.)

Interpreting and Organizing Evidence

When analyzing primary and secondary evidence, historians must find some way of organizing it so that they can make clear its meaning. A mass of facts and opinions concerning a subject is not a historical study. The task of the historian is to arrange the material so that it supports a particular conclusion. This conclusion may have been partly formed in the historian’s mind at the outset, or it might be the result of investigation. If the evidence does not appear to support the conclusion, however, then the historian must either change that conclusion or seek other evidence to support it.

Once a historian is satisfied that research has uncovered sufficient evidence to support a particular conclusion, then he or she works to display the evidence in a manner that will clearly show that the conclusion drawn is a proper one. If any evidence that leads to other conclusions is uncovered, the historian has a responsibility to include it. In doing so, he or she must show how the supporting evidence is stronger than the nonsupporting evidence. There are many ways of organizing evidence in support of a conclusion. The historian’s arguments in favor of a particular conclusion must be strong and convincing, and the logic of these arguments must not be faulty.

You will confront these issues faced by all historians when you conduct your own historical research, an assignment that is part of all advanced (and some beginning) history courses. (See Chapters 4 and 5 for advice on researching and writing such an assignment.)

The Computer and Historical Research

Historians use computers not only to analyze quantitative data but also to gain access to sources of historical information. Unpublished information residing in archives around the world can be made available online to historians and students with access to the World Wide Web. Primary sources that have been placed on Web sites can be read (and even printed out) by researchers anywhere. Secondary sources that are available only in special readable form. History databases containing millions of individual historical texts of documents, articles, and, in some cases, whole books can be access to art, maps, photographs, recordings, and even films that once resided only in faraway archives. (For more information on using computers in your own research, see pp. 84-100.)

HOW YOU CAN USE HISTORY

Experience is said to be the best teacher. Still, our learning would be very narrow if we profited only from our own experiences. Through the study of history, we make other people’s experiences our own. In this way, we touch other times and places and add to our lifetime’s knowledge the knowledge gained by others.

If history is the greatest teacher, what can we do with the knowledge we draw from it? In what practical ways does knowledge of the past help us to accomplish the work we do today or will do tomorrow? History is not merely a course you take in college; it is a way of thinking about the present, one that attempts to make sense of the complexity of contemporary events by examining what lies behind them. Such an examination is intellectual; its goal is to broaden understanding in general, but it can be practical as well.

There are any number of careers in which the tools of the historian are directly employed. You yourself could teach history at the secondary or college level. You could work in the archives of a library, museum, historical site, or large corporation with a record-keeping department. Labor unions have staffs of historians that research the history of important unions. The field of public history is a very large one, and you could be hired to the research staff of the U.S. government’s National Archives and Records Administration, the Library of Congress, or any of the Cabinet departments or U.S. intelligence agencies. There are even more opportunities at the state, county, and local levels. For example, you could work for a local or county historical society. You might do archaeological research at the site of an ancient Indian village or a Civil War battlefield, or you might organize the nineteenth-century records of a great natural disaster or of a major exhibition of farm or industrial machinery. You could be hired to construct a family history from the photographs, diaries, and letters of one of the founding families of a town. Every step back in time calls on the skills of a historian.

When you learn how to read history, how to research the past, and how to write a summary of your findings, you are mastering career skills as surely as if you were taking a course in real-estate law or restaurant management. The ability to see the present in relationship to the past is a skill needed not only by academic, private, and public historians, archivists, historical novelists, and documentary producers; it is an essential preparation for almost any career. Understanding the past can be its own reward, but it pays off in other ways as well. In fact, people who think that history is irrelevant run the risk of history making that judgment of them.