

Think about everything that has happened in your life. How long would it take to tell another person your life story? Would you be able to retell all these events objectively without including your own thoughts or feelings?

History is very similar to a life story. However, it has a much broader subject! Rather than encompassing a single human life, history is made up of many past events. Studying the past helps humans better understand how civilizations have evolved and why changes have occurred over time. Some believe it also helps people make more educated choices for the future.

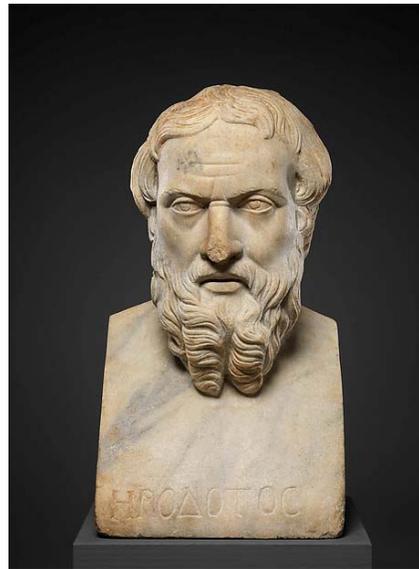
The Role of Historians

Historiography is the writing of human history. Historians keep records of history by writing about events in the present and the past. It is the job of historians to research and collect facts about events from available resources. They then must piece this information together to tell a complete story. It may seem simple, but this job is not as straightforward as it sounds. In fact, it is often much more complicated than you would think!

Unless a historian is actually present to bear witness to an event in person, historical evidence must be gathered via outside sources. These sources include letters, diaries, court records, business ledgers, written or oral testimony from actual witnesses, and art or literature from a specific time period. Often, historical “facts” are incomplete, biased or confused, or only partially accurate.

There is a famous saying: “History is written by the winner.” This saying implies that the “winners” in history, the people and groups that are victorious in war or successful in business, get to tell the story. Often, the story that is told shows those “winners” in a positive light.

Historians must look hard for perspectives beyond those of the “winners” to include the stories that might be hidden. It is the job of historians to make sense of the information they collect and compile an objective account to help others understand the past. This means they must sift through their research with a critical eye, paying close attention to any information that seems like opinion rather than fact and studying everything they can about the time period they are researching to understand possible



Greek historian Herodotus has been called the Father of History. His account of Persian Wars is recognized as the first great historical narrative of the Western world.

biases. In addition, it is important to remember that historians, too, are human beings with their own personal opinions and biases. For example, imagine there are two historians writing a biography about Abraham Lincoln. One historian is a supporter of the Confederacy. The other is a former Union Army soldier. Do you think both writers would interpret Lincoln's presidency in the same way?

A Feat or a Tragedy?

Let's look at Columbus Day as an example of how history can be subject to bias. Columbus Day is a national holiday in the United States and several other countries. It celebrates the anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of the Americas in 1492. This exploration eventually led to the European colonization of the region. Although the Spanish created some written records of both this feat and the subsequent conquest of the native peoples, American scholar William Hickling Prescott was one of the first to write a comprehensive history of the time period. His accounts, written between 1830 and 1860, told an epic tale of how European heroes defeated Native Americans to create a civilized world in the Americas.

Prescott had a strong bias toward the Europeans. He depicted Spanish leader Hernando Cortez as a morally righteous, brave, and strong leader. He painted the Mexican leader Montezuma to be barbaric and cruel. As a whole, his interpretation of the Conquest of the Americas was a triumph of a civilized, Christian culture.

Prescott's historical interpretation profoundly influenced later accounts of the conquest, including stories told in literature and on film. It was not until around the 1960s when historians began writing about smallpox, measles, and other epidemic diseases that the Europeans brought with them to the Americas. Some historians now argue that such diseases wiped out as much as 90 to 95 percent of the native people during the 100 years following the arrival of the Europeans. This altered the vision of the conquest somewhat, changing from a test of military strength and moral good over evil to one of the largest death tolls by disease in human history.



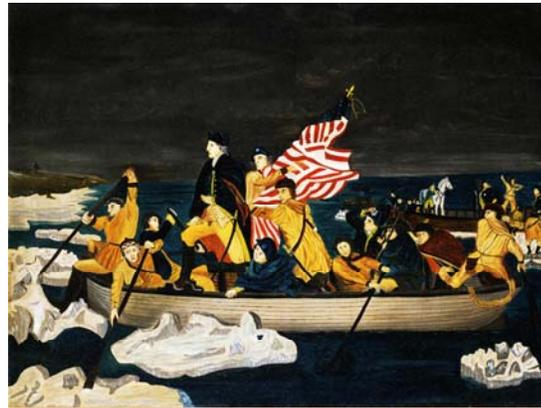
Modern historians have coined the term "Columbian Exchange" to describe how the Europeans affected native populations in the Americas. Deadly diseases like smallpox are now considered part of this exchange.

Thanks to newer research and perspectives, more modern histories of the time period now include information about the epidemics and their effects. More recent historians have also paid attention to the greedy motives and cruel tactics of Columbus, Cortez, and other explorers. Finally, historians and anthropologists have drawn on Native American sources to tell the stories of the diverse cultures that were devastated by disease and conquest. They often provide more insight into the cultures of the destroyed civilizations. We now know that the Aztecs had an advanced government system and language, for example. We also know that their empire had flourished for over a century before Cortez arrived.

Evolving Interpretations of a Revolution

Let's look at another historical subject you might have studied: the American Revolution. The American Revolution conjures up images of heroic men and women risking their lives to break free from a ruthless king across the sea. There are accounts of Paul Revere gallantly riding his horse through the dead of night to warn colonists that "the British are coming!" Paintings show George Washington bravely leading a rag-tag group into battle against heavily armed British soldiers. Legends surround Betsy Ross secretly sewing the first true symbol of American freedom, the flag. But was the fight really that black and white? Do we really know the true causes of this major event?

Throughout the 1800s, historians continued the "fight" for American independence as a story of a tyrannical government looking to crush colonial freedoms. However, in the early 1900s, some scholars found evidence of class struggle between the colonists themselves. The elite, or rich upper class, supported British policies, while the middle-class merchants rejected those policies. At the time, this changed people's impression of the war. According to these historians, the Revolutionary War not only a war between Great Britain and its colonies; it was a battle between the colonial social classes themselves.



A painting from the 1800s shows George Washington and his troops triumphantly crossing the Delaware River to beat back the British.

In the 1950s, historian Robert Brown challenged the interpretation yet again, arguing that the colonies did not have extreme class conflicts. According to Brown and other colleagues, the war was fought because the British were changing their policies. New British policies meant that colonists were losing the liberties they had enjoyed for many years. Since that time, other historians have offered up yet another interpretation of the cause of war: fear of government. These modern researchers believe that the colonists harbored an extreme fear of government power and were quick to pass judgment on every British action, warranted or not. Based on this interpretation, the reasons for the war might have been blown out of proportion.

Which of these historical interpretations is the most accurate? What new light will future research shed on the past? How much do the writer's ideas shape his or her interpretation of history? These are all questions we must keep in mind as we study history. These questions are the foundation of historiography.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. What is the meaning of the term *objective* as it is used in the introduction and first section of the passage *The Role of Historians*?
 - A. goal
 - B. impersonal
 - C. prejudiced
 - D. intentional

2. Which statement best summarizes the central idea of the second section of the passage *A Feat or a Tragedy*?
 - A. Early historians did not always have accurate information about the past.
 - B. Christopher Columbus' discovery of the Americas is not an event we should be celebrating.
 - C. Historians always record history according to their own beliefs and prejudices.
 - D. Historical accounts of the Conquest of the Americas have changed over time.

3. Which excerpt from the text best reflects the author's point of view on whether history changes or not?
 - A. "Historiography is the writing of human history."
 - B. "Some historians now argue that such diseases wiped out as much as 90 to 95 percent of the native people during the 100 years following the arrival of the Europeans."
 - C. "But was the fight really that black and white? Do we really know the true causes of this major event?"
 - D. "In addition, it is important to remember that historians, too, are human beings with their own personal opinions and biases."

4. Do you believe that history changes? Provide at least two examples with details and evidence from the passage to support your answer.