3. History and Ideas

History is the study of the past.

The most important thing we can remember about this branch of study is that for every ten observers of an historical event, there will be ten different versions of what actually happened. This means that historians--those who write about history--have a number of different ways of deciding what is important to write about, and what is not.

The following parable illustrates this problem of why there are so many different ways to understand and interpret history.

The Four Blind Men

There is a story of four blind men in India who were asked to describe what was before them in a courtyard. Each went up to the object. One ran his hands up the object and said, "It is a wall."

A second blind man grabbed something long and narrow and said, "It is a rope."

A third reached out and felt something thin and flexible. "It is a palm tree," he said, "or at least a palm from a palm tree."

But the fourth blind man, the wisest of the four, listened to his companions' reports; then, taking his time, he went over the object thoroughly. Finally he announced, "You are all fools. You are
right in thinking it is a wall, a rope, and a tree. But how little you know! The object before us today is none other than an elephant."

Examining history is like examining an elephant we cannot see. The more complex, the more major, the events of history, the more variations we will hear, when people try to tell us what happened. Our wisest move is to be like the wise blind man who listened to all the other versions first, then made his own direct examination, and finally reached a more holistic conclusion.

Similarly, when we study history, we should be careful to listen to more than one historian's view of what happened. In the humanities, this means that we can and should view an event of history not from just, for example, the political or geographical point of view, but also from the points of view of the country's culture, its philosophy and religion, its artistic influences, language, and from the eyes of people in several different economic and social classes.

**First And Second Sources**

Also, like the wise blind man, we should make a thorough study ourselves, as directly as possible, of the event in question. The best way of doing this is, of course, to actually be there. But since historians (and we) have no time machines, we must content ourselves with the next best thing: direct reports. Direct reports are much better than indirect discussions by those writing from far away in time or place. This requirement of having direct reports--and not just indirect ones--is one of the most important rules for writing accurate histories.

Each of these two perspectives, the direct and the indirect, have a name in the study of history and in other disciplines. These names are as follows:

**Primary Sources:** reports by those who were there

**Secondary Sources:** discussions of the reports

Visit this link from Princeton University to learn more about primary and secondary sources.

[http://www.princeton.edu/~refdesk/primary2.html](http://www.princeton.edu/~refdesk/primary2.html)

Primary sources are the reports of participants, journalists, bystanders, and people who see the direct or immediate impact of the event on others. Secondary sources are theorists: they only learn of the event by listening to or reading what others tell them. They have no first-hand knowledge. The four blind men examining the elephant are good examples of primary sources: as we can see, it is difficult enough just to get primary sources to agree on what they have seen, heard, or felt.
With secondary sources, the problem becomes even greater. Secondary sources may help us in showing how different historians are interpreting history: knowing all the different approaches or methods may help us in writing our own histories in better, more full ways. However, if we depend on just one or two secondary sources, we may find ourselves in trouble as historians.

Each secondary source may only examine or have available a small part of the primary-source evidence. The writer of the history--the historian--also will add his or her own emotional and intellectual bias as she writes the history. The result will be a history that may be very different from actual reality, reassembling only one part of what actually happened--as if with a warped mirror in a fun house.

What if, for example, an historian of crime and punishment had listened to just the reports of blind men one and two? He might have concluded, "These two men probably are discussing a rope thrown over a prison wall so that convicts may escape." Or what if an historian of ancient civilizations had listened to blind men one and two? This historian might have concluded, "These men probably discovered the wall of an ancient palace or stone castle, over which vines now are growing."

Each secondary source adds its own flavor for better or worse.

**School Book Histories**

An obvious example of secondary sources are most school textbooks. They present general summaries of events. They are not written by people who were there. They are written by those who have only studied what others have said about the events--the information in textbooks is second-hand (or worse, sometimes, it is third or fourth-hand) information.

Such textbooks are excellent, sometimes, for getting a quick general understanding of a period. But they also often leave a lot out. This is why it is good to follow these three steps in any kind of serious scholarly study of history:

1. read several secondary sources to get several general points of view,
2. use even more primary sources, which are direct reports of actual events,
3. then try to form your own, more complete and more balanced, point of view.
For example, let us consider this topic: "The History of Farms and Farmers in 1800s America." This may not sound like such an exciting topic, but let's see what we can do with it. Here are five ways historians of different persuasions with different purposes might discuss the topic:

Grade school primer, early 1900s: "American farmers in the 1800's were poor but sturdy folks who worked the land hard, owned their own acreage, and gradually built up a decent life and economic living from taming the wilderness of trees or prairie grass and turning it into a rich, crop-bearing land."

Agricultural manual on soil conservation, mid-1900s: "It is only in the last several decades that farmers in America widely have learned the continuing need for yearly soil conservation. The dust bowl years of American agriculture impoverished many farmers who were forced to watch their life work blow away. It was a bitter lesson. Yet it was only one dramatic one at the end of years of less obvious but equally harsh problems farmers endured. Throughout the history of farming in America, huge numbers of farmers have lost their farms because they misused the land."

What are some of the similar strands running through each of these secondary source examples? What are some of the differences? How is each of these commentators right? How might each be wrong--or at least "missing" part of the whole truth? Most important, what kinds of primary sources would be useful in learning the truth about American farms and farmers in the 1800's?

**Myth Versus Hard Truth**

There are numerous ways of creating history. These methods extend far beyond the basic, important need for primary sources.

One problem in how we interpret history is how much we allow popular myth to affect history, and how much we keep strictly to the facts. This problem may seem an easy one to solve at first--on the surface of things. Of course we want to know the truth. Of course we want to see what really happened, and of course we don't want to make up fairy tales.

However, the problem isn't that simple.

For example, think of all the historical centers you have visited that set up a display, an exhibit, or perhaps even a whole village about some past part of history or peoples. Or think about the historical movies you have seen in theaters or on TV. The majority of time, these centers and movies do not depict the past as it actually happened.

It is not that such centers and movies lie. Usually they tell the truth. But it is a limited kind of truth. They do not tell the whole story. They tell only part of the elephant of the parable about the Four Blind Men.
And this partial truth-telling leads to conclusions about history that may be far from the truth. For example, it is an important part of the cultural history in the United States to show the winner in any major war as being almost completely in the right, and the loser as almost completely in the wrong.

One great example of this is how we think of one of the heroes of the Civil War, Ulysses S. Grant.

School book histories of the Civil War suggest that Ulysses S. Grant was a brilliant general who beat Robert E. Lee by outwitting him. Grant later became President of the United States. Many historians now believe, however, that Grant may have won just as much by luck as by brilliance; in addition, history records that Ulysses S. Grant was an alcoholic who performed many of his duties while drunk.

The problem that these two examples show is that so often, we wish to live by partial myths.

We want our heroes and heroines to be bright, intelligent, moral, and in all other ways as perfect as possible. We want poor people to be good inside, success to be based on strength of character, and the needy to have problems easy to solve if they just can get schooling or money.

So we tend to sweep our heroes and heroines' alcoholism, cruelty, and immorality under the rug. We refuse to look at the facts that show the majority of poor people are just as bad when given the chance as are the rich, that success often comes most often to those least well rounded of character, and the needy often will always be needy because they are mentally, physically, or emotionally dysfunctional.

Historians themselves can easily bend to the needs of publishers, editors, and audiences who want myths created or kept up. It is a brave historian, often, who refuses to write history as the publisher, editor, or audience wants it, and instead writes history exactly as he believes the research shows.

This is why one of the most important and continuing problems in the field of history is the need to write from fact and not from myth.

**Heroes and Heroines Versus Mass Groupings**

A second and less easily solved problem in how we interpret history is whether we follow what might be called the "single events" theory of history or the "process of events" theory.

The "single events" theory of history suggests that history is best understood by looking at the singular heroes, heroines, and unusual turning points in history, and not the slower and more spread out changes that happen in mass groups of people over decades and centuries.
The "process of events" theory suggests that history is best understood by looking at the slower and more spread out changes that happen in mass groups of people over decades and centuries, rather than the singular heroes, heroines, and unusual turning points of history.

Most good historians try to do justice to both methods of interpretation. Singular heroes, heroines, and special events sometimes are unique in the way they can change and create history. If someone else, or no one else, had been there, history would have been different. However, mass movements of groups over time clearly show the dominating sweeps of the waves of history in the ocean of humanity. It is these great currents of time and people that determine much of what will happen and what will not.

So both theories of interpreting history, the "single events" and the "process of events" theories, are valid and useful tools in studying and creating history.

Studying history accurately means getting as many viewpoints--and best of all, as many primary sources--as possible. This is, in fact, the great difference that divides good scholars from poor, whether in history or in any of the humanities, that requires a look at some event in the past. We need to be honest for everyone's sake--most of all our own.

Lesson 3 Review

Directions: Follow the directions in each exercise below. Use complete sentences and correct English writing rules in your responses.

Exercise 1

Write your own "History of Myself" in a page or two.

Exercise 2

Write a one or two page history of yourself from your parents' perspective.

Or, interview your parents about your history. Prepare five to ten questions ahead of time so that you will have one to two pages of notes after you have interviewed them.

Exercise 3

Write a compare and contrast paper that compares the two “versions” of the history of “you.” How are the two versions alike? How are they different?

Note: In a “compare and contrast” paper, it is customary to provide a minimum of three similarities and three differences.