



Western Civilization from 1650 to the Present

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TOPIC 1.1 USING PRIMARY SOURCES

<p>WHAT IS HISTORY?</p> <p>An Industry, an Art, and a Philosophy</p> <p>Other Definitions of History</p>	<p>Throughout the years, scholars, public figures, notable personalities, and comics have tried to define history. Some of their characterizations are amusing, others are thought provoking. These are some of my favorites:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>History is Philosophy teaching by examples.</i> – Thucydides ■ <i>HISTORY, n. An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools.</i> – Ambrose Bierce ■ <i>History is more or less bunk.</i> – Henry Ford ■ <i>Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.</i> – Santayana ■ <i>The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.</i> – Karl Marx <p>The one I keep returning to, however, was written by fellow travelers (philosophers), rather than historians. I like this definition so much that I incorporate it into the syllabus:</p> <p><i>Obviously historiography [writing history] cannot be a science. It can only be an industry, an art, and a philosophy – an industry by ferreting out the facts, an art by establishing a meaningful order in the chaos of materials, a philosophy by seeking perspective and enlightenment." - Will and Ariel Durant, The Lessons of History (1968)</i></p> <p>It gives us a list of things to do to be good students of history. It also parallels the first three steps in the historiographical process (what historians do):</p> <table border="1" style="margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: center;">Things to Do:</th> <th style="text-align: center;">What Historians Do:</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ferret out the facts. 2. Establish a meaningful order in the chaos of materials. 3. Seek perspective and enlightenment </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discover 2. Analyze 3. Interpret 4. Communicate </td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>If you'd like to explore other definitions of history, there are a considerable number at these web sites:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ More...What is History? http://www.unf.edu/~clifford/craft/what.htm ■ The History Guide: What is History? http://www.historyguide.org/history.html A series of quotations about history and the historian's craft. ■ Renaissance Secrets: What is History? http://www.open2.net/renaissance2/what/what.html Four historians ask the question "What is history," exploring issues of evidence, interpretation, race, gender and crisis. ■ History in Focus: What is History? http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/ Articles focusing on the theme "What is history?" ■ The History of Women's History http://www.infoplease.com/spot/womensintro1.html 	Things to Do:	What Historians Do:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ferret out the facts. 2. Establish a meaningful order in the chaos of materials. 3. Seek perspective and enlightenment 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discover 2. Analyze 3. Interpret 4. Communicate
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<p>PRIMARY SOURCES</p>	<p>One of the most exciting ways to study history is through primary sources. The distinction that the Library of Congress makes between primary and secondary sources is an excellent one:</p> <p><i>Primary sources are actual records that have survived from the past, such as letters, photographs, articles of clothing. Secondary sources are accounts of the past created by people writing about events sometime after they happened.</i></p>
<p>How Historians Use Primary Sources</p>	<p>Historians discover primary sources in archives and attics, put order into the chaos of materials, analyze and interpret them, and then communicate what they have learned to others.</p> <p>Historians speak to us in behalf of the men and women of the past. However, the men and women of the past speak directly to historians – through letters, diaries, newspaper ads, public documents, photographs, remnants of clothing, furniture, tools, and other artifacts.</p> <p>Using primary sources gives students of history an opportunity to enter the laboratory and to do what historians do. If you were taking a biology course, there would be a laboratory component and you would have to dissect worms, grasshoppers, and other unspeakable things – just like a biologist does. In this course, you will have an opportunity to discover, analyze, interpret, and communicate primary sources – just like the historian does. And there won't be any formaldehyde involved. I promise.</p>
<p>LIBRARY OF CONGRESS ACTIVITY</p>	<p>To get you started and to give you a better understanding of primary sources, you will need to visit the Library of Congress web site and read what they have to say about primary sources and the historical record.</p> <p>What Are Primary Sources? http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/psources/source.html</p> <p>When you have done that, do the Mindwalk Activity at the Library of Congress web site. http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/psources/mindwalk.html</p>
<p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS</p>	<p>What is your favorite definition of history? Why?</p> <p>Does your definition of history relate to any of the steps in the four-step historiographical process of discovery, analysis, interpretation, and communication? Explain.</p> <p>What would a future historian be able to tell about your life and your society based on evidence of your daily activities that might be preserved for the future? (Please base your answer on the records you kept during a 24-hour period.)</p> <p>If future archaeologists had the materials listed below, what could they infer or conclude about your life? What might the materials tell historians about your family, community, region, and/or nation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The trash you have thrown away; ▪ Material objects you use every day (coins, paper money, stamps, computers); ▪ Objects in the place you live (especially in your own bedroom); ▪ Items in your locker or automobile. <p>Watch an episode of <i>West Wing</i> and keep records of all the evidence, both public and private, that historians might be able to use in the future to tell the story of the Bartlett administration. What's on your list? What kinds of records would you find in the White House today that you would not have found in Washington's day?</p>