

What is History? How do Historians study the past as contrasted with Non-historians?

History is the study of change over time, and it covers all aspects of human society. Political, social, economic, scientific, technological, medical, cultural, intellectual, religious and military developments are all part of history. Usually **professional historians** specialize in a particular aspect of history, a specific time period, a certain approach to history or a specific geographic region.

Non-historians often say that “history repeats itself” or that “things were always this way.” History cannot repeat itself because history is not a living, thinking being. History is an **intellectual discipline** practiced by historians who try to make sense of the past. Because history is about change, nothing was ever “always” a certain way.

Non-historians often romanticize the past and speak of the “good old days” when they believe that things were generally better than at present. Conversely, some see history exclusively as a story of progress with everything constantly improving. People of all eras have made great achievements and committed terrible blunders; so processes of historical change cannot be categorized as either simple progress or regression. Historical processes involve complex relations between interrelated factors.

Non-historians derive information mainly from television, movies, and the internet as well as some books or magazines. They generally accept any sources uncritically as long as the source is interesting. Historians know that all sources, even those original to a particular historical time period, have some biases, omissions, contradictions, or various other limitations. That does not mean that such sources are completely invalid and useless; rather it means that historians have to know and study much to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of different sources.

Historians who write history emphasize the value of **primary sources**, that is those sources actually dating from a particular time period, while understanding the limitations of such sources. Non-historians read books or watch documentaries, while historians do that plus go to archives in search of original records. [Historians who study non-English speaking regions must learn and use foreign languages.]

Historians who write list all the sources that they have used in footnotes and bibliographies in their works. This helps other scholars who are interested to find those sources, and it shows that the writer is careful, thorough, and honestly giving credit for the origin of the writer’s information. Providing **footnotes and a bibliography** is how historians demonstrate their methodology and support their conclusions.

Non-historians assume that historians have always approached history the same way. Historians know that the philosophy and methodology of history have changed over time and will keep changing. Many different interpretations of all historical topics exist. Historians must work to recognize the difference between facts and interpretations in their field. **Historiography** refers to the history, philosophy and methodology of history. Historians must be familiar with the historiography of their particular area of study.

Non-historians often make broad generalizations about people, ideas, events, or time periods in history. Historians tend to focus more on the specific, detailed developments that underpin the generalizations, and sometimes question or reject the generalizations themselves.

Non-historians may assume that time periods are fixed and absolute, whereas historians have various ways of organizing history thematically and chronologically. **Periodization**, to historians, is just a convenient form of broad organization, especially useful for course listings in university catalogs and subject headings in library catalogs.

No historian can be 100% objective, but historians try to recognize their own limitations and biases. Historians try not to place the values, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes of the present onto the topics they study. Historians try to understand their topics in the context of how and why people of that era thought and behaved, and not how people think and act today.