

Uncovering the Past: Exploring and Interpreting the Sources in History

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Abstract

This paper aims to introduce the key concepts for understanding, interpreting, and evaluating historical sources, a crucial aspect of the discipline of History. History extends beyond mere descriptions of past events; it seeks to comprehend their significance. Historical inquiry relies on evidence, which historians must interpret and reflect upon, as evidence itself cannot provide explanations. To grasp the complexities of an event, historians must employ diverse types and pieces of evidence. Various methodical approaches exist in History to make events comprehensible. Consequently, historians must collect evidence, discern its significance, develop interpretations that make sense of the evidence, and present their findings effectively. This paper focuses on the following themes to elucidate the methodology of uncovering the past: historical writing styles, understanding primary and secondary sources, and the processes of evaluating and interpreting sources to construct historical arguments. By exploring these themes, we can gain a deeper understanding of historical methodologies.

Key Words: Evidence, Argument, Interpretation, Evaluation, Narrative

Introduction: History as a Discipline¹

The 'Past' is not the same as 'History'. Historians and thinkers have defined History differently in the exercise of understanding the past. Following are some of the most impactful definitions of History throughout the ages:

- *'History is the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illuminates reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity.'*
- **Cicero** (c.106-43 BCE)
- *'Readers should be very attentive to history and critical of historians, and they in turn should be constantly on their guard.'*-**Polybius** (c. 208-125 BCE)
- *'The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things rotten through and through, to avoid.'*
-**Livy** (c.59 BCE-17 CE)

¹ https://assets.cambridge.org/97811070/21594/excerpt/9781107021594_excerpt.pdf

- *'History is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.'* -**Edward Gibbon** (1737-1794)
- *'You have reckoned that history ought to judge the past and to instruct the contemporary world as to the future. The present attempt does not yield to that high office. It will merely tell how it really was.'* -**Leopold von Ranke** (1795-1886)
- *'History does nothing, possesses no enormous wealth, and fights no battles. It is rather man, the real, living man, who does everything, possesses, fights. It is not History, as if she were a person apart, who uses men as a means to work out her purposes, but history itself is nothing but the activity of men pursuing their purposes.'*
-**Karl Marx** (1818 - 1883)
- *'To each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a great civilization present a different picture. In the wide ocean upon which we venture, the possible ways and directions are many; and the same studies which have served for my work might easily, in other hands, not only receive a wholly different treatment and application, but lead to essentially different conclusions.'* -**Jacob Burckhardt** (1818-1897)
- *'Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time.'*
-**Frederick Jackson Turner** (1861-1932)
- *'An historian should yield himself to his subject, become immersed in the place and period of his choice, standing apart from it now and then for a fresh view.'*
-**Samuel Eliot Morison** (1887-1976)
- *'History is for human self-knowledge. Knowing yourself means knowing, first, what it is to be a person; secondly, knowing what it is to be the kind of person you are; and thirdly, knowing what it is to be the person you are and nobody else is. Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what they can do until they try, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.'*
-**R. G. Collingwood** (1889-1943)
- *'The function off the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present.'* -**E. H. Carr** (1892-1982)
- *'Everything must be recaptured and relocated in the general framework of history, so that despite the difficulties, the fundamental paradoxes and contradictions, we may respect the unity of history which is also the unity of life.'*

-Fernand Braudel (1902-1985)

From the above definitions we might come to an agreement that History requires evidence, History is not everything that happened in the past, just the important things, History is not merely a description of what happened in the past, but also an attempt to understand it. And to 'understand', a historian requires 'interpretations'.

Interpretation in History²

An interpretation is a way of making sense or understanding of a particular event. The historian must develop an interpretation because the evidence cannot speak for itself. Some things we can learn only indirectly by drawing inferences from the evidence. Understanding an event requires using many different types and pieces of evidence. There are no formulas or equations into which we can plug historical evidence to give us an understanding. Evidence of the past is often ambiguous.³

Different people at different times and places make different judgments about what is and what isn't important. There are many different ways to make an event understandable. Therefore, the historian gathers evidences, draws inferences from the evidences, and decides what evidence is important to develop an interpretation or way of making sense of the evidence, finds an appropriate way of presenting that interpretation.

Forms of Historical Writing⁴

Generally speaking, historical interpretations can be presented in three different forms that correspond to the basic forms of historical writing⁵:

- *Argument*: An argumentative essay presents the interpretation in the form of a thesis and reasons for that thesis.
- *Narrative*: A narrative essay presents the interpretation in the form of a narrative or story.
- *Description*: Descriptive essay gives a portrayal of a person, place or object at a particular moment in time.

Depending on the point to be made, a particular author might make use of only of these forms or might use different ones at different points in the work.

² https://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/slatta/hi216/hist_interp.htm.

³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8497.1971.tb00838.x>.

⁴ <https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/history.original.pdf>.

⁵ https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/bg_writing_history.pdf.

Understanding Primary Sources⁶

Historians get their information primarily from two different kinds of sources-primary and secondary. Primary sources are first hand sources; secondary sources are second-hand sources. For example, suppose there had been a car accident. The description of the accident which a witness gives to the police is a primary source because it comes from someone actually there at the time. The story in the newspaper the next day is a secondary source because the reporter who wrote the story did not actually witness it. The reporter is presenting a way of understanding the accident or an interpretation.

Primary sources are interesting to read for their own sake: they give us first hand, you-are-there insights into the past. They are also the most important tools an historian has for developing an understanding of an event. Primary sources serve as the evidence an historian uses in developing an interpretation and in building an argument to support that interpretation. You will be using primary sources not only to help you better understand what went on, but also as evidence as you answer questions and develop arguments about the past.⁷

Reading a Primary Source⁸

Primary Sources do not speak for themselves, they have to be interpreted. That is why, we can't always immediately understand what a primary source means, especially if it is from a culture significantly different from our own. It is therefore necessary to try to understand what it means and to figure out what the source can tell us about the past. To interpret primary sources, one should think about these questions to examine the sources.

Place the source in its historical context: contextualizing the collected sources historically is very significant in the process of assessing them. Questioning with the 'wh' words can be very effective in this regards: for example,

- Who wrote it? What do you know about the author?
- Where and when was it written?
- Why was it written?
- To what audience is it addressed?
- What do you know about this audience?

Classification of Sources: Classification of the historical sources is yet another important step to see historical events. These classifications are based on the originality of the material and

⁶ <https://www.ramapo.edu/crw/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2013/03/20-15.pdf>.

⁷ <https://libguides.charleston.edu/primarysources>.

⁸ <https://history.rutgers.edu/docman-docs/pdf-documents/778-how-to-read-a-primary-source/file>.

how close the source is to the origin of the topic or event. The following questions might be helpful for doing so:

- What kind of work is it?
- What was its purpose?
- What are the important conventions and traditions governing this kind of source?
- Of what legal, political, religious or philosophical traditions is it a part?

Understanding the source: A primary source is a first-hand or contemporary account of an event or topic. Primary sources are the most direct evidence of a time or event because they were created by people or things that were there at the time or event. These sources offer original thought and have not been modified by interpretation. Following questions might help us in the process of understanding them:

- What are the key words in the source and what do they mean?
- What point is the author trying to make? Summarize the thesis.
- What evidence does the author give to support the thesis?
- What assumptions underlay the argument?
- What values does the source reflect?
- What problems does it address? Can you relate these problems to the historical situation?
- What action does the author expect as a result of this work?
- Who is to take this action?
- How does the source motivate that action?

Evaluate the source as a source of historical information: Evaluating sources is the process of determining if the information from a source is credible and relevant to your research.

- How typical is this source for this period?
- How widely was this source circulated?
- What problems, assumptions, arguments, ideas and values, if any, does it share with other sources from this period?
- What other evidence can you find to corroborate your conclusions?

Understanding Secondary Sources

There is a strong temptation in a history class to believe that the answers to all the questions are found in the books written and that the objective of the specific courses is to learn the books referred. While it is certainly possible to approach the courses in History in that manner, however with this methods the learners will not learn as much since they will be just a passive recipient of knowledge, rather than an active participant in the learning process, and

it will actually mean more work for you since you will be doing more than you need to. This section of the present paper is to suggest how to use the books more efficiently and effectively as secondary sources for understanding historical events.

Ways to use the Secondary Sources⁹

As generally accepted, the secondary sources involve analysis, synthesis, interpretation, or evaluation of primary sources. They often attempt to describe or explain primary sources. Scholarly journals, although generally considered to be secondary sources, often contain articles on very specific subjects and may be the primary source of information on new developments.

Primary and secondary categories are often not fixed and depend on the study or research you are undertaking. For example, newspaper editorial/opinion pieces can be both primary and secondary. If exploring how an event affected people at a certain time, this type of source would be considered a primary source. If exploring the event, then the opinion piece would be responding to the event and therefore is considered to be a secondary source.

The major three methods of using secondary sources are explained here.

A. As a collection of facts: One might use a secondary source if one needs to find out a particular piece of information quickly. One might need to know, for example, when Ghengis Khan lived, in what year the cotton gin was invented or the population of London in 1648.

B. As a source of background material: If one interests are focused on one subject, but one needs to know something about what else was going on at that time or what happened earlier, one can use a secondary source to find the background material one might need. For example, if someone is writing about Luther's 95 Theses, then he/she should use a secondary source to help him/her understand the Catholic Church in the Renaissance.

C. As an interpretation: Since the facts do not speak for themselves, it is necessary for the historian to make, give them some shape and to put them in an order so that people can understand them. This is called an interpretation. Many secondary sources provide not only information, but a way of making sense of that information. One should use a secondary source if one wish to understand how an historian makes sense of a particular event, person, or trend.

Purpose of using Interpretations in History¹⁰

⁹ <https://www.library.illinois.edu/hpnl/tutorials/secondary-sources/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.pearsonhighered.com/assets/samplechapter/0/1/3/1/0131840339.pdf>.

One of the most important tasks in reading a secondary source is find and understanding that particular author's interpretation. How does that particular author put the facts together so that they make sense?

A. Finding the interpretation: Good authors want to communicate their interpretation. Because the reason for writing a book or article is to communicate something to another person, a good author will make the interpretation easy to find.

1. In an essay: In an essay, particularly a short one, an author will often state the interpretation as part of the thesis statement. The thesis statement is the summary of what the author is going say in the essay. The thesis statement is usually found at the end of the introductory section or in the conclusion.

2. In a book: In a longer work, such as a book, the author will very likely have many thesis statements, one or more for each section or chapter of the book. The thesis for the book as a whole will often be found either in the introduction or in the conclusion. The thesis for individual chapters are often found in the first or last paragraph. Topic sentences of paragraphs will also often have important clues as to the author's interpretation.

B. The importance of the interpretation

An interpretation is the how a historian makes sense of some part of the past. Like a good story, well done history reveals not only the past, but something about the present as well. Great historians help us to see aspects of the past and about the human condition which we would not be able to find on our own.

C. Historians often disagree on interpretations

Some facts are ambiguous. Historians ask different questions about the past. Historians have different values and come to the material with different beliefs about the world. For these and other reasons, historians often arrive at different interpretations of the same event. For example, many historians see the French Revolution as the result of beliefs in liberty and equality; other historians see the French Revolution as the result of the economic demands of a rising middle class. It is, therefore, important to be able to critically evaluate an historian's interpretation.

Evaluating an interpretation

A. The Argument

1. What historical problem is the author addressing?
2. What is the thesis?
3. How is the thesis arrived at?
 - a. What type of history book is it?

- b. What historical methods or techniques does the author use?
- c. What evidence is presented?
- d. Can you identify a school of interpretation?
- 4. What sources are used?

B. Evaluation

- 1. Did the author present a convincing argument?
 - a. Does the evidence support the thesis?
 - b. Does the evidence in fact prove what the author claims it proves?
 - c. Has the author made any errors of fact?
- 2. Does the author use questionable methods or techniques?
- 3. What questions remain unanswered?
- 4. Does the author have a polemical purpose?
 - a. If so, does it interfere with the argument?
 - b. If not, might there be a hidden agenda?

C. The Debate

- 1. How does this book compare to others written on this or similar topics?
- 2. How do the theses differ?
- 3. Why do the theses differ?
 - a. Do they use the same or different sources?
 - b. Do they use these sources in the same way?
 - c. Do they use the same methods or techniques?
 - d. Do they begin from the same or similar points of view?
 - e. Are these works directed at the same or similar audience?
- 4. When were the works written?
- 5. Do the authors have different backgrounds?
- 6. Do they differ in their political, philosophical, ethical, cultural, or religious assumptions?

Reading a Historical Argument¹¹

An argument is a set of propositions designed to demonstrate that a particular conclusion, called the thesis, is true. An argument is not simply a statement of opinion, but an attempt to give reasons for holding certain opinions. An historical argument gives reasons for holding a certain opinion about an event in the past.

¹¹ <https://memoriousblog.com/2024/01/30/reading-advice-for-young-historians/>.

There are many disciplines in which the answers to questions can be presented in a straightforward, unambiguous manner. History is not one of these. Unlike physics or chemistry, where there is usually only one generally accepted answer to any question, in history there are usually many ways that one can understand, or interpret, what has happened in the past. It is therefore necessary to choose from among these possibilities and decide which one is correct. This choice should be based on a solid understanding of the issues and the evidence. We should be able to give reasons for our choice, our opinion, on that subject. This choice should be based on evidence.

As we have discussed earlier, there are two principle sources of evidence we can use for developing our opinions about what happened in the past: primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources are useful because they present the conclusions of those who have more knowledge and expertise on the subject than we are likely to have. On the other hand, if we want to find out what really happened for ourselves, we need to look at the primary sources, just as those who wrote the secondary sources did. This exercise, therefore, will help you develop an argument based on primary sources.

Parts of an Argument¹²

A. *Thesis*: that statement which you are trying to prove. In an argumentative essay, this conclusions would appear as your thesis statement. In an philosophy class, this would be called the "conclusion."

B. *Argument*: the reasons you give for your conclusion. An argument is considered persuasive if the reasons given are good reasons for the conclusion; an argument is considered unpersuasive if the reasons are not good reasons for the conclusion. In an argumentative essay, these reasons will generally appear as the topic sentences of individual paragraphs. In a philosophy class, these reasons would be referred to as 'premises.'

C. *Evidence*: the concrete 'facts' upon which you base your argument. Evidence can be descriptions of events, philosophical concepts, economic statistics, laws, battles, paintings, poems or any other information you have about the past. Some of this information you will find in secondary sources, such as your textbooks, but for this course, most of the evidence should come from primary sources.

Evaluating an Argument¹³

¹² <https://www.brandeis.edu/writing-program/resources/students/academic/drafting-revision/elements-of-academic-argument-humanities.html>.

¹³ <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/academic-skills/criticalthinking/evaluatingargumentsandevidence/>.

- Is the argument persuasive? That is, does the argument in fact give reasons to believe the thesis?
- Are the reasons plausible?
- Is there sufficient evidence to support the argument? While writers often cite an example as a way to illustrate a particular point, a single example is often not sufficient to support a generalization.
- Are the examples representative? That is, do the examples chosen truly reflect the historical situation or were they chosen to exclude evidence which would tend to disprove or complicate the thesis?
- Does the argument present enough background information so that the reader can assess the significance of the evidence presented?
- Does the argument take into account counterexamples?
- Does the argument refute possible objections?
- Does the argument cite sources?

Reading a Historical Description

Not all historical writing is in the form of arguments. Many historical works are in the form of descriptions. Historical descriptions are like historical arguments in that they are based on evidence and reflect the author's understanding or interpretation of the event. But rather than express that interpretation in an argument, that interpretation is presented in the form of a description. Just as the writer of a story might describe the setting of a story or describe the personality of a particular character, so a historian might tell us what London looked like at the time of Henry VIII or might give us a sketch of Nelson on the deck of the Victory.

Interpreting a Historical Description¹⁴

Like a historical argument, a historical description presents the author's understanding or interpretation of the events under discussion. Unlike an argumentative essay, a narrative does not have a thesis statement. The author does not always explicitly state the interpretation. Often it is very difficult to give a one sentence summary of an interpretation of an event presented in the form of a narrative. The trick, then, is to uncover the author's interpretation even though the author does not necessarily explicitly state it.

One way of getting at the interpretation is to think about how the historian developed that description. There are thousands of things that could be said about London at the time of

¹⁴ <https://academic.oup.com/book/4688/chapter-abstract/146885133?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

Henry VIII. The historian has to decide which aspects of London he or she believes are important to tell us and which can or must be left out. One important consideration is the subject of the book. This may sound obvious, but it is incredibly important. One would not expect to find a significant description of merchant housing in a work entitled ‘The Homes of Henry VIII.’ However, if the author describes Henry’s homes as ‘grand’ or ‘magnificent,’ he or she is trying to convey a different impression than if terms such as ‘gaudy’ or ‘drafty’ are used.

Evaluating a Historical Description as a Work of History¹⁵

On one level, a historical description should be judged as one would judge other types of historical writing:

- Does the author support the story with reference to specific historical sources?
- Are the sources credible?

Evaluating a Historical Description as an Interpretation

On another level, a historical narrative should be judged as one would judge other forms of interpretation:

- What kind of language or images does the author use in description? What attitudes does this choice of words reveal?
- What does the author want you to understand about the person, place or object as a result of this description?
- To what other times, places, people or events does the author compare this object to?
- What does the author not talk about? That is, what aspects of the event, person or place does the author fail to mention? What does this reveal about what the author considers important or unimportant?

Reading a Historical Narratives

Not all historical writing is in the form of arguments. Many historical works are in the form of narratives, or stories. Historical narratives are like historical arguments in that are based on evidence and reflect the author’s understanding or interpretation of the event. But rather than express that interpretation in an argument, a historical narrative presents it in the form of a story. But unlike other forms of narrative, such as a novel, historical narratives are about events that actually happened. However, like novels, they have plots and subplots, characters and settings.

¹⁵ <https://phi.history.ucla.edu/nchs/historical-thinking-standards/3-historical-analysis-interpretation/>.

Interpreting a Historical Narrative¹⁶

Like a historical argument, a historical narrative presents the author's understanding or interpretation of the events under discussion. Unlike an argumentative essay, a narrative does not have a thesis statement. The author does not always explicitly state the interpretation. Often it is very difficult to give a one sentence summary of an interpretation of an event presented in the form of a narrative. The trick, then, is to uncover the author's interpretation even though the author does not necessarily explicitly state it.

One way of getting at the interpretation is to think about the narrative as one would think about a novel and interpret it in a similar way. To understand a novel, one wants to know who the main characters are and what they are like. In fact, the author's interpretation might simply be a character sketch. One also wants to know about the setting. Sometimes, the setting is very important to a story; other times the setting is not so important. The author's interpretation might be the way the characters or the plot of the story are related to the setting. One also needs to know the plot. The author's interpretation might be found in the plot. The author might present the story in a way that makes a particular event or series of events more important than others.

Evaluating a Historical Narrative as a Work of History

On one level, a historical narrative should be judged as one would judge other types of historical writing:

- Does the author support the story with reference to specific historical sources?
- Are the sources credible?

Evaluating a Historical Narrative as a Narrative

On another level, a historical narrative should be judged as one would judge other forms of narrative:

- Does the author present credible characters? That is, does the author present believable characters, explaining their personalities and the changes those personalities might undergo?
- Does the author indicate the setting for the story? Does the author situate the characters in this setting? Do the events of the narrative make sense in this setting?

¹⁶ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/how-to-read-historical-narrative>.

- Does the plot of the narrative make sense? Are there significant gaps in the story? If so, are they accounted for?

Conclusion

In concluding remarks, it may be argued that, historians vigorously debate the role of primary sources in uncovering the past, questioning their reliability, authenticity, and interpretations. Methodological approaches are also contested, with scholars weighing the merits of quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as the impact of digital tools and techniques. Interdisciplinary perspectives from sociology, anthropology, and literature enrich the discussion, highlighting the value of collaborative approaches. However, historians also acknowledge the challenges of uncovering the past, including bias, incomplete records, and the influence of contemporary perspectives. New discoveries and reinterpretations of historical sources challenge existing narratives, offering fresh insights and prompting a re-evaluation of the past. Furthermore, the impact of technology, such as digital archives and artificial intelligence, is transforming the field, while the need to decolonize historical sources and narratives is increasingly recognized. Ultimately, historians emphasize the importance of public history, community engagement, and collaborative research in uncovering a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the past.