

Lesson 4 How Historians Study the Past

MAIN IDEAS

Culture Historians often ask questions about the past in order to understand the present.

Culture Historians use a variety of methods to help them answer questions about what happened in the past.

Culture Historians examine evidence and draw conclusions as they answer historical questions.

Understanding the Past

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What questions do historians ask to help them understand the past?

Why Study History?

- Studying history involves culture, religion, politics, economics
- Historians seek patterns, explanations, causes and effects
 - they seek insight into human nature, answer historical questions
 - questions help them compare societies, draw conclusions about past

Asking Historical Questions

- How have groups, societies interacted? What were the results?
- How have leaders governed societies?
- How have belief systems developed, changed?
- How have societies dealt with differences among their people?
- How have societies tried to protect people's security?
- How are societies similar and different?

REVIEW QUESTION

Why do we study history?

The Historian's Tools

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What methods do historians use to help them answer questions about what happened in the past?

Primary Sources

- **Primary source**—something created by person who witnessed event
 - letters, diaries, eyewitness articles, videos, speeches, artifacts

Secondary Sources

- **Secondary source**—created after event by person who didn't witness it
 - books, paintings, media reports based on primary sources
 - appear after event and can provide more balanced view of event

Oral History

- Some cultures have no written records
- **Oral history**—unwritten verbal accounts of events
 - stories, customs, songs, histories, traditions
 - passed from generation to generation

REVIEW QUESTION

What tools do historians use to learn about the past?

How Knowledge of the Past Changes

ESSENTIAL QUESTION What steps do historians take as they answer historical questions?

Fact or Fiction?

- Historians use evidence from sources to answer questions
 - must sort through evidence, choose important, trustworthy evidence
- Some information turns out to be false, like the “mummy’s curse”
 - many thought it killed archaeologists entering “King Tut’s” tomb
 - records proved the archaeologists lived to average age of 70 years

Drawing Conclusions

- Some historians arrive at different conclusions using same facts
- For example, the building of Stonehenge around 3000 B.C.
 - early theories claimed temple was built for priests
 - later experts realized was finished before priests lived in area
 - today some historians think builders were sun worshipers
 - others think we’ll never know its true purpose

REVIEW QUESTION

How are historians like detectives?

Lesson Summary

- Asking historical questions can help solve mysteries about the past.
- A historian’s most important tools are primary sources, secondary sources, and oral histories.
- Examining evidence can lead to a new answer to a question or deepen a mystery.

Why It Matters Now...

The answers to historical questions can help people as they respond to today’s events and challenges.