

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# What Is History? - Answer Key

Use the text to answer each question below.

1. It might seem like history is just a collection of dates and names. Queen Elizabeth I ruled England from 1558 to 1603. Ruby Bridges became the first black child to attend William Frantz Elementary School in 1960. The people who study and write about history are called historians. But why would we need historians if history is just a collection of hard facts?

It turns out history is a lot more than facts. You can think of history as being made up of thousands of different stories, opinions and perspectives. Historians sift through these different pieces and analyze them to come up with theories about the way things went and why. Why is it important to study history? Because our past helps us figure out who we are in the present and who we might be in the future.

Which of the following is most like the work of an historian?

- A. A novelist makes up the plot of a book.
- B. A chef works for years to create the perfect recipe for a dish.
- C. A mathematician works on finding a single proof for a theorem.
- D. A police officer takes statements from lots of witnesses to try to understand a crime.

*According to the passage, "Historians sift through these different pieces and analyze them to come up with theories about the way things went and why." This is closest to a police officer trying to reconstruct a crime by talking to lots of people who saw it happen.*

2. As you study history, approaching it like an historian can give you the fullest picture. Historians start by asking questions. What happened? Why? Who was involved? What were their roles in this event? How did they think about their roles? How could things have gone differently? What happened before the event took place? What happened afterwards?

To answer these questions, historians become detectives. They look for evidence from which to draw conclusions. For historians, the evidence is often in the form of documents: books, letters, interviews, diary entries, photographs, film footage, newspaper articles and more. Anything that was created at the time of the event or provides a firsthand account is called a primary source.

Guillermo is researching the Freedom Riders, people who rode buses into the American South in order to protest segregated bus terminals during the Civil Rights Era. Which of the following is not a primary source he could use?



- A. a section in a history textbook that covers the Freedom Riders

*According to the passage, a primary source is "Anything that was created at the time of the event or provides a firsthand account," including "books, letters, interviews, diary entries, photographs, film footage, newspaper articles and more." A history textbook that covers the Freedom Riders would not be considered a primary source.*

- B. a set of photographs of the Freedom Riders depicting their protests
- C. a letter written by one of the Freedom Riders to her brother about her experience
- D. a news report from the era that features interviews with some Freedom Riders

3. When reading primary sources, historians ask even more questions. Who wrote or created the document? Who was the intended audience? When and why was it written? What was going on at the time? What can we tell about the author from the document?

Consider the situation of a soldier in a war. The report that they give to their commanders or to the government has different content and tone than the letters they write home to their families. Both documents have important information, but the *kind* of information is very different because of the context of the documents.

Read the following excerpt from a letter by Civil War soldier Alexander Hunter.

*Sunday, Sept. 21, 1862*

*Dear Folks,*

*On the 8th we struck up a refrain of "Maryland, My Maryland!" and camped in an apple orchard. We went hungry, for six days not a morsel of bread or meat had gone in our stomachs -- and our menu consisted of apple; and corn. We toasted, we burned, we stewed, we boiled, we roasted these two together, and singly, until there was not a man whose form was not caved in...Our socks [were] worn out, and half of the men were bare-footed, many were lame and were sent to the rear; others, of sterner stuff, hobbled along and managed to keep up, while gangs from every company went off in the surrounding country looking for food... In an hour after the passage of the Potomac the command continued to march through the rich fields of Maryland. The country people lines the roads, gazing in open-eyed wonder upon the long lines of infantry...*

Which of the following questions can you answer based on the information in this document?

A. When was it written?

B. Where was it written?

C. For whom was it written?



D.

all of the above

*The letter is dated "Sunday, Sept. 21, 1862," so you know when it was written. The letter mentions that the soldiers marched "through the rich fields of Maryland," which suggests that the writer is in Maryland. It starts, "Dear Folks," which tells you that it was written for the author's parents.*

4. Historians are never satisfied with reading only one source. That would be like deciding someone is guilty based on an account from only one witness. Historians need to research multiple accounts, which helps them verify and compare facts and opinions in their sources to see if they represent the events accurately. They read other documents and determine if the documents agree. If they don't agree, why not? Historians can then form a theory about how and why events occurred from the evidence they've collected.

Often a historian will publish their theories as an article or a book. These are valuable resources as well: they are called secondary sources. A secondary source is information that was created after an event, by someone who was not there him or herself. Secondary sources can also help you get a quick overview of a time period you are studying to contextualize primary sources.

It is important to remember that even though some things seem indisputable, historical thinking and theories change all the time. When using secondary sources, be sure to use the most recently published ones.

Elana is writing a history paper about American women in the 1920s. She has read several letters and diary entries from the time. She has a theory that women in the 1920s were conflicted about the new freedoms that society allowed them. She thinks her argument would be stronger if another historian had a similar theory. Which of the following sources would best support her argument?

- A. a letter from a woman to her mother from 1925
- B. an interview with a woman who was born in 1927
- C. a book about women's struggles in changing societies from last year
- D. an article about women's rights in the 1920s published in *Life Magazine* in 1944



*A book about the struggles of women in changing societies is a recently published secondary source on a similar topic. It could help Elana support her conclusion.*