

Name _____ Date _____

What Is History?

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

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?

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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.

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?

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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.

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.

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.

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