**What Is History?**

What is history? This question may seem really easy, even silly. Most people would say that history is the study of the important people, dates, and events of the past. This answer is true as far as it goes. But who decides what people, dates, and events are important? And why should we bother learning about them?

Let’s dig a little deeper into the question “What is history?” First of all, history is an important way of thinking about the world. To see what this means, imagine waking up tomorrow and not being able to remember a single thing about your past. You can’t remember your name, who your parents or family members are, the rules to your favorite game, or anything you ever learned in school.

Without a knowledge of your own past, you might feel lost and lonely. You wouldn’t even know who you are. And you would have a difficult time making good decisions about what to do next.

In a similar way, history helps us make sense of the world. History is the memory of communities, peoples, and nations. Without history, individuals and whole countries would lose their sense of direction. The next time you watch the news on TV, notice how often reporters, politicians, and others mention something about the past. Humans constantly use their knowledge of the past to help them make sense of what is happening today.

History is also an academic discipline. It is a systematic way of using evidence to make sense of the past.

When you think about it, the past is not an easy thing to study. After all, it’s not here any longer for anyone to observe directly. So historians turn to many kinds of evidence to describe and understand the past. They’re fascinated by old documents, maps, tools, ruins, and many other kinds of evidence. They want to know who created these things and for what reason, and what they can teach us about the past.

**History as an Ongoing Argument**

Some people think that history is just a listing of facts. That is not true.

To make sense of the past, historians must weigh the available evidence and try to figure out what the facts are. Then they need to stitch the facts together to answer the questions that interest them. In doing this, they must use their judgment. And that means that their own viewpoints come into play.

As a result, historians argue all the time. They argue about what the facts really are. They also argue about how to interpret the facts.

History, then, is much more than a listing of “facts.” Some people have even described history as an ongoing argument about the past. Why does the argument go on? Sometimes historians find new evidence, such as an ancient document or a new archeological discovery. The new evidence may lead them to challenge old interpretations. Sometimes historians take a fresh look at existing evidence and see things that others have overlooked. As they do so, they may correct an earlier historian’s error or explain events in a different way.

**Reading History**

Our discussion leads to some key points about how to read history. You can’t just assume that what you’re reading is the final truth. If you read more than one version of history, you are likely to find differences. So when you read history, ask yourself these questions:

* •  Who wrote this document?
* •  When was it written?
* •  What kinds of evidence does the author use?
* •  Is the evidence reliable?
* •  Is the author trying to promote a particular viewpoint?

**An Example of a Historical Argument**  
Let’s look at one example of a historical argument. In *History Alive! The Medieval World and Beyond,* you will learn about the Scientific Revolution. Most textbooks say that the Scientific Revolution began in western Europe with a man named Copernicus. In the early 1500s, Copernicus proposed a startling idea. In his day, most people believed that Earth was the center of the universe, and that it didn’t move. Copernicus suggested that Earth and the other planets travel around the sun.

How did Copernicus come up with his idea? Textbooks will tell you that he studied the work of a man named Ptolemy. Ptolemy had described a picture of the universe back in the second century c.e. In Ptolemy’s description, Earth was the center of the universe. But Ptolemy had trouble explaining the observed motions of the planets in the heavens. To make his picture of the universe work, he had to build a number of complications into his theory.

Copernicus thought that Ptolemy’s account was overly complicated. He argued that things fell into place more simply if Earth and other planets traveled around the sun. Today we know that Copernicus was correct, and he is often honored as the father of the Scientific Revolution.

That’s a neat and tidy story. But is it the whole story? Some historians have pointed out that Copernicus may not have come up with his ideas completely on his own. Instead, he may have found important clues in the work of Muslim scientists.

Muslims are followers of Islam, one of the world’s great religions. In*History Alive! The Medieval World and Beyond,* you will learn that Muslims built an advanced culture during the Middle Ages. After the fall of Rome, learning declined in western Europe. But in the Middle East and Spain, Muslim scholars preserved ancient texts, including the works of Ptolemy. Eventually they passed on much of this learning to western Europe.

Muslim scholars also made many advances of their own. And, according to some historians, the work of a Muslim scholar may have inspired Copernicus.

The Muslim scholar was Ibn al-Shatir. Writing in the 14th century, he noted some of the problems in Ptolemy’s theory. His mathematical arguments are very close to some that Copernicus used later on. Historians know that Ibn al-Shatir’s text found its way to Rome sometime in the 1400s. What’s more, Copernicus once studied in Rome.

These facts raise an interesting possibility. Did Copernicus see Ibn al-Shatir’s work? If so, did he use it in criticizing Ptolemy? Or did Copernicus just happen to come up with the same ideas?

Copernicus’s writings don’t mention Ibn al-Shatir. So we lack proof that he knew about the Muslim scientist’s work. What we have are two facts, plus some logic.

The first fact is that a Muslim text closely resembles some of what Copernicus did. The second fact is that Copernicus *could* have seen this text. The logical argument is that the similarity is not a coincidence. In other words, it is likely that Copernicus learned from Ibn al-Shatir’s work.

Some historians favor this argument. Others argue that Copernicus could have come up with his ideas on his own. They point out that the history of science has many examples of discoveries being made independently by different people.

This is the way history often works. Sometimes the evidence doesn’t allow us to say for sure what happened. Then we are left with probabilities–what is more or less likely. In reading history, it’s up to us to look at the evidence and the arguments and to make our best judgment about who is right.

**Conclusion**  
We started with a simple question: What is history? As you have seen, this question has many answers. History is a study of the past. It is a way of making sense of the world. It is an academic discipline. It is a combination of facts and interpretations of facts. It is also an ongoing argument that changes as new evidence is uncovered. And that is the most exciting thing of all, because it means that history is very much alive.

**Enrichment Activity**

Discuss these questions with a partner, in a small group, or with your class.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. | What is history? |
| 2. | Is history just a listing of the facts? Why or why not? |
| 3. | Why might two different historians come up with different versions of the past? |
| 4. | What is the role of chance, oversight, and error in the writing of history? |
| 5. | Why are historical interpretations subject to change? |
| 6. | How does the example of Copernicus show why it is important to question and evaluate the history we read? |