

HISTORY VS. HISTORY

Understanding Historical Thinking and Historiography

U.S. HISTORY / BEGINNING-1830

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HISTORIOGRAPHY?

Historiography is the study of how history has been written, studied, researched, and analyzed over time. When historians look at specific historical documents, they want not only to learn what it says about an event or person, but also to understand who wrote it, where they wrote it, and when. Historians want to know this information because they are trying to figure out what may have influenced the author(s) perspective, biases, and interpretation of the specific person or event detailed in the source.

Every historian knows that when authors write something they are not doing so in a perfect vacuum or even being completely objective about their topic. Rather, each document (or source) was produced at a time when certain cultural, political, religious, geographic, economic, and/or social events were swirling around them. Therefore, historians would argue that the time period in which the source was written affected how its author(s) saw the world around them.

It is also important to note that very few historical figures lived their lives with the thought they were living “in history.” Rather, most people live day-to-day without considering that in the future their daily actions might be analyzed, researched, written about, and debated. For example, the immigrants who came to the United States in the late 1800s did not sit around saying to one another, “Isn’t it great living in this historical time period known as the Gilded Age?” They were much more concerned about surviving and getting set up in their new home and were probably not considering how people in the future would view them either individually or as a larger group. Therefore, when they wrote letters home, kept journals, or communicated with people in their own community, they wrote what they felt and knew at that moment. Now, because of historical research, we know that there were certain political, economic, geographic, religious, social, and cultural things going on at that time, all of which may have had a direct impact on how these new immigrants viewed the world.

What does all this mean for the study of history today? Consider the following scenario. Today, two historians end up researching the same historical event. For arguments sake, let’s say they are interested in why the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and which world leader should get credit for this event. They are researching the same topic and reading many of the same documents, but when they write up their final report they have two very different perspectives on this same event. One discussed how it was U.S. President Ronald Reagan who was the key player in ending the Cold War by forcing Germany to tear down the Berlin Wall, while the other argues that it was obviously Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and his policies in the former Soviet Union that ended the Cold War.

These two historians came to completely different interpretations of what caused this major historical event probably because their sources emphasized different perspectives. These historians then based their arguments on what individuals from the past had written about the event at the time the event occurred. Some of the sources could have

been an East German who had just left his country to get into West Germany, a Soviet soldier who was stationed in East Berlin at the end of the 1980s, or even an American diplomat working in the U.S. Embassy in East Berlin at this time. Each participated in the exact same event but may have seen and remembered it differently from the others.

After considering all of this, think about one more thing. You have been assigned to read articles about who should get credit for the Berlin Wall coming down in your history class. And, as any good history student does, you check out the sources and footnotes for the articles in front of you and you notice that one has been written by an American historian, and the other by a Russian historian. This forces you to ask another historiographical question: “Does their nationality impact how they researched and perceived this event?”

This is historiography. It allows the reader to think about history from a larger perspective by forcing them to consider not only what was happening at the time of the historical event, but also what is happening in our own time which might affect how we learn about this event.

This perspective is what makes history so interesting, useful, and significant. Studying history is not just about names, dates, and places; applying historiography forces students and teachers to engage with the material, to consider why sources were written the way they were and when they were, and to ask how they relate to our world today. Because, in the end, students must remember that they too will become a part of history, and that current geography, economics, politics, society, culture, and religion may all affect how they view historical events as well.

This workbook will use eight historiographical time periods from American history to examine the external societal impacts that may have influenced how each textbook was written. Use this handout as a reference to help you understand how historians have categorized the different historiographical periods of American history. This will help you get a better sense of some of the major social, political, economic, religious, and cultural issues that may have influenced how these history textbooks were written. It can also help shed some light on the author(s) own interpretation, bias, and perspectives concerning the historical events they were writing about at these specific times in American history.

COLUMBUS'S LANDING IN THE NEW WORLD

Columbus's voyage to the New World is one of those historical stories that are found in every U.S. history textbook. For decades, textbook authors typically told this story within the context of it being part of the "founding" of the United States. Columbus has usually been portrayed as a great hero, especially for his persistence with his ideas about exploration, his bravery to go on this adventure, and for his "discovery" of the New World.

These textbook selections, from various U.S. history textbooks, demonstrate how students over the years learned about one of the first contacts between Europeans and Native Americans in North America.

1794

Noah Webster, *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking*

Note: *Originally published in the 1780s, this textbook's purpose was to improve students' grammatical and oral speaking skills; therefore, it was not what we today would consider a true "historical textbook." By the time the third edition of this textbook was released in 1787, approximately half of the entire book was dedicated to historical content, arguably making this textbook one of the first to record the historical events that led to the founding of the new nation. Spelling has been modernized in this excerpt.*

. . . He [Columbus] therefore proposed that they should obey his orders for three days longer and, should they not discover land in that time, he would then direct his course for Spain. They complied with his proposal; and happily for mankind, in three days they discovered land. This was a small island, to which Columbus gave the name of San Salvador. Their first interview with the natives was a scene of amusement and compassion on the one part, and of astonishment and adoration on the other. The natives were entirely naked, simple and timorous; and they viewed the Spaniards as a superior order of beings, descended from the Sun, which in that island, and in most parts of America, was worshipped as a Deity. By this it was easy for Columbus to perceive the line of conduct proper to be observed toward that simple and inoffensive people.

Source: Noah Webster, *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews), 1794, 72–73. <https://books.google.com/books?id=NQBEAQAAAJ>

1830

Salma Hale, *History of the United States, from Their First Settlement as Colonies, to the Close of the War with Great Britain in 1815*

At sunrise, Columbus, in a rich and splendid dress, landed, and, with a drawn sword in his hand, and displaying the royal standard, took possession of the island for the crown of Spain, all his followers kneeling on the shore and kissing the ground with tears of joy. The natives, who had assembled in great numbers on the first appearance of the ships, stood around the Spaniards, gazing in speechless astonishment.

“The Europeans were hardly less amazed at the scene before them. Every herb, and shrub, and tree was different from those which flourished in Europe. The inhabitants appeared in the simple innocence of nature, entirely naked. Their black hair, long and uncurled, floated upon their shoulders or was bound in tresses around their heads. Though not tall, they were well shaped and active. They were shy at first, through fear, but soon became familiar with the Spaniards; from whom, with transports of joy, they received various trinkets, for which in return they gave such provisions as they had, and some cotton yarn, the only commodity of value they could produce.”

1866

S. G. Goodrich, *A Pictorial History of the United States with Notices of Other Portions of America North and South*

This proved to be what was called by the natives Gu-a-na-han'-i, one of the Ba-ha'-mas; but Columbus named it San Sal-va-dor'. It was several leagues in extent, and had inhabitants upon it. As Columbus landed, he knelt and kissed the new earth, at the same time thanking God, who had prospered their enterprise. His men, impatient and mutinous as they had been during the voyage, now crowded around him and begged his forgiveness. The scene must have been truly affecting.

The native inhabitants of the island, who have since been called Indians, were naked and copper-colored, with long black hair, and without beards. These gathered around the new comers in wonder, not knowing what to make of them. They looked at the ships with even greater amazement than at the men, regarding them as some gigantic species of animal; and when cannon were discharged, they imagined them to be engines with eyes of fire and voices of thunder.

Source: Salma Hale, *History of the United States, from Their First Settlement as Colonies, to the Close of the War with Great Britain in 1815* (Keane, NH: J. and J. W. Prentiss, 1830), 10. <https://books.google.com/books?id=Y7hXAAAACAAJ>

Source: S. G. Goodrich, *A Pictorial History of the United States with Notices of Other Portions of America North and South* (Philadelphia: E. H. Butler & Co., 1866), 24–25. <https://books.google.com/books?id=So8ZAAAAYAAJ>

1881

John J. Anderson, *A Popular School History of the United States*

On landing, he threw himself on his knees, kissed the earth, and returned thanks to God with tears of joy. His example was followed by the rest, whose hearts, indeed, overflowed with the same feelings of gratitude. Columbus then rising, drew his sword, displayed the royal standard, and assembling round him all who had landed, took solemn possession in the name of the Castilian sovereigns, giving the island the name of San Salvador. Having complied with the requisite forms and ceremonies, he called upon all present to take the oath of obedience to him as admiral and viceroy, representing the persons of the sovereigns.

The feelings of the crew now burst forth in the most extravagant transports. They had recently considered themselves devoted men hurrying forward to destruction; they now looked upon themselves as favorites of fortune, and gave themselves up to the most unbounded joy. They thronged around the admiral with overflowing zeal, some embracing him, others kissing his hands. Those who had been most mutinous and turbulent during the voyage were now most devoted and enthusiastic. Some begged favors of him as if he had already wealth and honors in his gift. Many abject spirits, who had outraged him by their insolence, now crouched at his feet, begging pardon for all the trouble they had caused him, and promising the blindest obedience for the future.

1946

Leon Canfield, et al., *The United States in the Making*

Setting out under the Spanish flag from the little harbor of Palos, in August, 1492, Columbus and his badly frightened crew reached one of the Bahama Islands the following October. "After a passage of seventy-three days," he wrote, ". . . I discovered very many islands inhabited by people without number: and of them all I took possession for their Highnesses with proclamation and the royal banner unfurled, no one offering any contradiction."

Source: John J. Anderson, *A Popular School History of the United States* (New York: Clark & Maynard, Publishers, 1881), 22.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=VmgAAAAAYAAJ>

Source: Leon Canfield, et al., *The United States in the Making* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946), 11.

Items for Analysis

1. Using the graphic organizer below, and the textbook selections above, give examples to show if the authors of these textbooks viewed in a positive or negative way the Native Americans with whom Columbus first came into contact.

Columbus and Native Americans	Positive Image	Negative Image
1794		
1830		
1866		
1881		
1946		