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Mizabelle Haines

California State University, Monterey Bay

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History: It's Up To Your Interpretation

Mizabelle Haines

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Many people assume that the study of history as a discipline is all memorizing dates and recording facts. They imagine that the historian's job is a wholly clerical one, concerned simply with compiling clear and thorough historical records, slotting them into place within the one true historical timeline that is then committed to the pages of history textbooks all over the world. However, those same people may be surprised to learn that, in actuality, when it comes to the happenings of the world that belonged to those who came before the modern day, surprisingly few concrete facts are truly known. Newspapers, government documents, eyewitness accounts, census data, ruins, temples, folklore, etc., are but minute pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that historians and scholars must use to attempt to reconstruct the social, political, and economical occurrences surrounding a certain time period or event. Considering that the human mind is impossibly complex, and that history is the summation of the interactions between billions of these minds, it is clearly impossible for a person in the modern age to successfully compose an all-encompassing record of a specific time frame in the past. So what then do historians do with all their time? They've got to be doing something while they wait for someone to build a time machine, don't they?

Well, historians, much like the average Twitter user, usually spend most of their time either arguing about things, or finding evidence to use to argue about things. Simplistic language aside, though, in lieu of a legitimate means for gathering direct observations on the past (again, still no time machine here), historians must resort to making educated guesses on the past through the analysis of historical sources in order to answer questions about

history. They call those guesses *theses*, and they support those theses through what the layman may recognize as an argumentative essay. Through arguing to support their own answers to research questions, as well as against (or even for) the answers given by other historians on similar topics, historians use their collective discourse to enrich the bank of knowledge in the discipline of history.

Due to the historical discipline's aforementioned reliance on analysis of historical sources as the way of reconstructing the past, scholarly writings penned by historians almost always take the form of an argumentative essay. And much like an argumentative essay, these writings almost always begin with a research question. In fact, the ability to pose a compelling research question is expected of prospective history scholars (Carter, 2007), and considered by many to be integral to the disciplinary pursuit of knowledge (Freyhofer, 2000). Once one has found their research question, the process of writing follows a familiar pattern: gathering evidence related to the research question, analyzing that evidence, compiling it, composing a thesis, putting off the assignment until four hours before it's due, then scrambling to finish and submit it. That last little part may just be a personal folly, but the point is that the process, structure, and norms of writing in the historical discipline not only fit the argumentative nature of the discipline's epistemology, but are also not utterly unfamiliar to anyone capable of remembering high school English.

And, again, much like an argumentative essay, writing in the historical discipline is nothing without supporting evidence. Supporting evidence, in the form of sources, make up the foundation for the argumentative portion of scholarly writing regarding history. As can be seen in both the major learning outcome 4 of the historical studies major at CSUMB as well as in the syllabi of several classes within the major, the ability to collect, evaluate, and compile sources effectively to provide a sound basis for one's argument is a skill expected of, and considered necessary for, a history scholar. While all of this is rather par for the course for most scholarly majors, the history discipline does have one unique selling point that somewhat differentiates it from other disciplines that also call for a competent level of reading comprehension. Since the present state of things has no bearing on the past and is at most merely capable

of indicating past trends, any sort of direct, firsthand observations one could make on the present state of things wouldn't be conclusive evidence towards any topic not also directly concerned with the present, and as such, the majority of sources that historians must pull from to support their writing are all secondhand observations. To put it simply, a lowly historian, unable to traverse the bounds of time, is restricted to observing past events secondhand through historical recordings of a person's direct, firsthand observation of said event (referred to by historians as a "primary source").

This is just one of history's unique and fascinating intricacies; the people of the past generally wrote reports or articles or letters or messages for contemporary audiences rather than for reference by historians hundreds of years later. Since maintaining a perfectly unbiased or even wholly truthful record was also not of universal concern, the sources historians must evaluate and decipher before using can range anywhere from only containing half the truth, to being a downright lie, and it is up to the historian in question to determine what is what, and what that means. It may help to think of this process as a century-spanning game of *Telephone*. Now, one may be thinking that it would be a bit difficult to try and construct an entire scholarly discipline around a century-spanning game of *Telephone*, especially one where half the people playing don't even know what telephones are (and are also dead, but that's beside the point). Thankfully though, humankind has been blessed with the gift of critical thinking, and as humans, historians can use that gift to evaluate a historical source in order to determine just what kind of information that source is able to provide, and whether that information can be trusted. Some may know the acronyms for this process already: HIPPO, HAPPY, et cetera. Though different in lettering, they all describe the same five avenues down which a historian should take their analysis of a source: "H" for the *historical context* of the time, "I"/"A" for the intended audience of the source, two "P's" for the *purpose* and the *point of view* of the author, and an "O" for how the source relates to *outside information*, or a "Y" for *why* the source is significant in a broader context. Regardless of the letters used, the purpose remains the same - that being, to judge whether a source can be trusted, and to judge what kind of inferences about the past can be made based on an analysis of the source's contents.

Speaking of, analysis of sources is yet another core component of the scholarly history paper. Granted, that's pretty obvious - analysis is to an essay what muscle tissue is to a human, that is to say, it's what makes the whole thing move. And once more, the historical discipline's unique features when it comes to primary sources helps to differentiate analysis in the historical discipline from the analysis one may remember doing for an English class. After all, when analyzing a source, historians not only have to explain what the source means in the framework of one's own argument, but also what the source means within its own historical context, and how that bears on the analysis of the source itself as well as its relation to other sources within one's essay (Freyhofer, 2000; Carter, 2007; this is also corroborated within the major learning outcomes for the historical studies major at CSUMB, as well as within the previously mentioned syllabi of classes within said major). If the historical "truth," as one may call it, is a complete jigsaw puzzle, and historical sources form the individual jigsaw pieces, then the historian is the child who can't find the box for the jigsaw puzzle and is also missing half of the pieces. Through analysis, the historian attempts to put together the puzzle, piece by piece, using approximations, guesses, and, most importantly, inferences to fill in the blanks left by the missing pieces. These empty spaces become areas of hot contention for historians, even covering such seemingly insignificant details as a historical figure's sexuality (Agarwal, 2018). The inherent unknowable nature of the human mind and its inability to be fully understood from the outside means that in the field of history, there will never not be enough topics to argue over. Historians will likely continue to analyse sources to make inferences about the past forever, endlessly asserting and analyzing their inferences and the inferences of others in a quest for that all too elusive historical truth.

History, as a discipline, a fascination, or even for some an obsession, will always primarily be about interpretation. Of course, there's no denying concrete facts - for example, there is no denying that the 16th president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, existed, and one cannot genuinely assert an argument to the contrary. It's a fact that's set in stone. However, one could begin to form interpretations (based on historical sources) of who Abraham Lincoln

was, as a person. One can look at other historians' interpretations of who Abraham Lincoln was, and judge those interpretations based on the arguments, analysis, and evidence supporting them. One may attempt to refute a common interpretation by offering an alternative interpretation of the available evidence. Others may look at that alternative interpretation, and may elect to offer their own refutation, or others may even take that interpretation and expand on it with other additional evidence. This raging, interweaving cycle of interpreting, refuting, and expanding forms the core of knowledge hunting within the historical discipline and gives humans the chance to look at and learn from the past.

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