

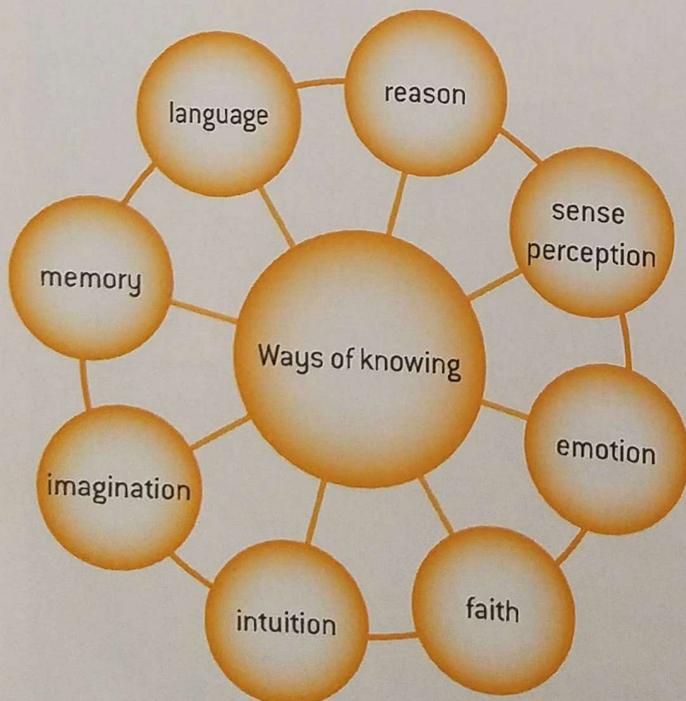
A note to history students

As we enter history as an area of knowledge, we remind you that our exploration of knowledge is not primarily something *we* are doing; it's something *you* are doing. Who should be your guides?

If you are a student of IB history, you are splendidly placed to take a strongly contributive role yourself, bringing what you are learning in your history class into your TOK class. You may be able to explain, amplify, dispute, or illustrate the ideas that we give you in this chapter in your double role as both history student and TOK student. You may also have valuable input into the three activities we suggest: the first a broad introduction to history (Lewis Chessmen), the second a closer look at historical documents (Eyewitness to history), and the third a short research activity (the Oba and Europeans) to apply the ideas. As you deal with topics of this chapter, moreover, you might also be able to pick out, from your own history course, examples to share with your classmates.

Ways of knowing and methods of history

As you move into this part of the book, you are not leaving behind any of the ideas you considered earlier. As we've said frequently, using our metaphor of exploring territory with map



What his imagination is to the poet, facts are to the historian. His exercise of judgment comes in their selection, his art in their arrangement. His method is narrative. His subject is the story of man's past. His function is to make it known.⁵

Barbara Tuchman

and compass, we do keep returning to the same central ideas, but we just approach them from different paths. Consider the next points we raise to be refreshers – reminders of the ideas relevant to history that you are familiar with already from earlier in this book. We will not repeat everything here, but instead encourage you to pick up threads from earlier and carry them forward into this area of knowledge.

1. The events of the past: sense perception and memory

You are likely to have left chapter 5 on sense perception with a heightened awareness of the variable, actively selective, and interpretive nature of sense perception. If someone was a participant in an event of the past, how much of it is he likely to have observed, and how accurately? Could he have been affected by cognitive biases, introduced in chapter 5 and further developed in chapter 12?

And memory? How good is an eyewitness's memory? Do you recall some of the uncertainties raised in chapter 6?

Only very recent history, however, deals with living people's sense perceptions and memories. Despite the uncertainties that surround observation and memory, we do gain first-hand information from eyewitnesses and a chance

For Reflection

We cannot repeat observations of the past. How does the nature of what history studies – the past – affect the methods of study historians use?

⁵ Tuchman, B.W. 1982. *Practicing History: Selected Essays*. New York: Random House.

to ask questions. Especially when many people experienced an event and remember it, we tend to take their reports collectively as justifications for believing accounts of what happened in the past.

The past, though, is gone. Where scientists can replicate experiments to repeat observations, historians cannot rerun the past in order to take better notes. This is the most distinct feature of history as an area of knowledge: it deals with the past, trying to find out what happened from the echoes that remain. (But echoes do repeat.)

2. Evaluating sources: language as a way of knowing, with photographs and other representations

You will also want to bring back to mind all we considered regarding language as a way of knowing. Language is the major means for eyewitnesses to give us their personal knowledge while they are alive, and language is the major way that they leave records behind them – letters, diaries, articles, books, ledgers of trade deals, treaties, and many other forms of writing. Do you recall the early record carved in cuneiform writing from the chapter on language, an account of beer rations?

The archive of the human experience, built up through our accounts in language, is skimpy for the distant past but vast for the recent past – especially since the development of computer technology. In what ways do both pose challenges for historians – having too few records, or having too many?

Do you recall the numerous characteristics we considered of language as a way of knowing in chapter 8, as symbolic and interpretive, as linked to culture and other perspectives? You might find it useful to look back to “Representations and perspectives” (page 150) to refresh your memory on some features of representation that are relevant in considering historical records:

selection of information
emphasis placed on some information
emotional colouring of words and expressions
relationship of parts – linear argument or juxtaposition
framing in context – interpretive headings, apparent purpose.

Any records left require interpretation, keeping in mind these principles. History students, what are you learning about understanding historical documents? Can you amplify what is given here, and even give examples from your own course?

For numerous factors that affect judgment of the reliability of sources, you will probably also want to flip back to “A guide to evaluating knowledge claims” with which we closed Part 2, to refresh your memory on the “three S’s”: the source, the statements, and the self.

3. “Historical event”: language and reasoning as ways of knowing

By now, you are likely to be highly aware of the assumptions, values, and intentions that are active in our process of classifying. Right from the beginning of this book, we have raised this topic – at the beginning classifying knowledge claims to identify different kinds of knowledge, and just recently dealing with the rather elastic category “the arts”. How we cluster and group our observations and concepts, how we emphasize their common characteristics and name them, these can have serious implications, as we considered in the chapter 13. Our categories – “famine” or “citizen” – can affect how we think, what options we consider to be open to us, and how we act.

One of the most significant knowledge questions of history is one that has to be decided before the historian can even begin work: “What counts as a historical event?” or, even more broadly, “What falls into the category of appropriate subject matter of history?” The decision has implications for the

For Reflection

What understanding of documents – what critical literacy – is essential to the methods of studying history?

For Reflection

What makes an event of the past historically significant?

direction of research and the conclusions that are drawn from the artifacts and documents of the past.

Historians, after all, cannot describe everything. They must select information relevant to the stories they want to tell, in response to the questions they want to ask, in the context of an audience of their particular place and time. What, then, do we want to know about the past?

Our interests shift with our times, so that, paradoxically, history frequently needs to be brought “up to date”. During the twentieth century, for example, many historians researched the lives of people marginalized in previous histories, contributing new perspectives on the past through, for example, black histories or women’s histories of the United States.

4. Conjectures about the past: imagination as a way of knowing

What would you consider to be the essential difference between the fictional form of literature – that often uses fact – and the factual form of history that has to fill the gaps with plausible fictions? What is the role of imagination in the writing of history?

Do you recall (from chapter 11 on the imagination) the “creative friction” of the historian between facts and interpretation, and the need to respect, as historian Tom Griffiths put it, “the hard edges of reality”? Since that time, we have considered the arts as an area of knowledge, and the possibility that literature, a fictional form, often uses keen observation and fact in its creation of character, setting, and interpretations of societies. Where does literature leave off and history begin, in the “creative friction”?

Griffiths comments on “history’s commitment to verifiable truth – to evidence that can be revisited”, but suggests that in some regards historians have more freedoms than novelists:

For Reflection

Within what constraints do historians work? What comparisons would you draw with literature?

“Events happen; but to become history they must be communicated and understood. For that, history needs writers – preferably great writers ...”⁶

Barbara Tuchman

Historians, like novelists, are producing literary texts that have their own internal demands of consistency, plausibility and integrity, their own organic rationale derived from decisions about where to begin and end, about which characters to foreground, about what relationships to map. And this internal, textual, literary dynamic wrestles with hard external reality. But historians also have some greater freedoms available to them. Some fiction writers will tell you that historians have a broader canvas to paint on than they do, because truth really is stranger than fiction.⁷

This claim is an appealing one – that historians “have some greater freedoms available to them” than fiction writers do, that “truth really is stranger than fiction”.

5. “Neutrality” in history: emotion and imagination as ways of knowing

In a history that accepts Griffiths’ “commitment to verifiable fact”, is the writing necessarily neutral – denotative rather than connotative – and free of emotion? The facts place constraints on the exercise of imagination. Do they preclude, with an aim of objectivity, any role for emotion in the

For Reflection

To what extent do you think the historian should try to preserve an emotional neutrality to his human subject matter, and write in denotative, dispassionate language? Does “neutral” language increase or decrease the reader’s understanding or even emotional response to the events the writer is talking about?

writing of history? Glance back to the interchapter on Subjectivity and Objectivity (page 108).

In some regards, emotion is inevitably part of the *subject matter* of human experience that history treats. Primary sources such as letters and diaries from the time include expressions of the emotions of the writers, and that written expression becomes potential material for the historian. Expressions of love and fear in letters written home by soldiers in war zones form part of the historical record – and perhaps not just as a means to other informative ends. Maybe such emotions are, in and of themselves, what we want to know about.

Our response to history *as readers* is likely to be emotional as well, as our interest is caught and we sympathize with the people long gone. Indeed, it could well be our emotional response and imaginative engagement that draws us to history in a way similar to literature.

But the real question is whether the *historian* should attempt not to let his emotions affect his writing. Should he remain detached? Should he write about atrocities and oppression without expressing a feeling or a view? It could be argued that an effective presentation of the facts should be enough to convey the significance of the past event for the people at the time. Yet it could equally be argued that to write unemotionally about genocide would be to miss the point of communicating about the topic.

6. Causal connections: reason as a way of knowing, and possibly intuition

We do not *observe* cause; we *infer* cause through reasoning as we make connections between variables. This point is an extremely important one for history as an area of knowledge that aims not simply to describe what happened in the past but to explain why it happened as it did.

In the interchapter “What is ‘cause’?” (page 252), we raised some knowledge questions about causation, with significant implications for how we deal with it in our different areas of knowledge. Within the vast conceptual space of what ideas are involved in “cause”, the historian has to make constant choices. How far “back” and “out” should she go to capture enough detail to explain, but not so much that the connections she draws are confused by details? Should she emphasize causes that lie in peoples’ wills and intentions, or in background circumstances? Is the cause of a

war the *largest influence* (even if the situation not sufficient in itself), or does it stand out as *most unusual*, or the *straw that broke the camel’s back* – the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back”? The historian’s reasoning connects situations and events to her own interpretations of the nature of the world, perhaps broader perspectives on the larger patterns of history.

You might want to turn back, to the interchapter “Fallacies of argument: Errors in the reasoning process”, to refresh your memory of the difference between correlation and cause, and the error known as *post hoc* that confuses a sequence in time (B follows A) with a causal connection (A causes B). The historian by training is aware of both fallacies, but, as she deals constantly with connection and cause, she has particular reason to be on guard.

Human interactions create a massively complex web, within which historians follow particular causal strands. Different historians follow somewhat different connections, and as a result many different historical accounts of the same event emerge. These sometimes contradict each other, but often they complement each other and add to our fuller understanding.

An emphasis on reasoning for causal connections would be incomplete, however, without at least some consideration of an intuitive grasp of patterns, especially when the historian is experienced. You

For Reflection

To what extent do you accept Berlin’s argument on the next page for subjective “understanding” as a justification for writing about human *motivation* in the past? To what extent can we assume universal ways of thinking and acting, and universal motivations for action? What hesitations might you have?

Is this “understanding” of cause closer to ideas of cause and motivation in literature, or closer to ideas of cause and motivation in the human sciences?

Among histories that trace different threads through the causal web, why are some acclaimed and others neglected? What do we look for in good historical explanation?

will recall, from the chapter on intuition, the fast thinking of the brain (System 1) that allows us to recognize large patterns – not always reliably, but roughly. It may be that, in all of the immense detail of historical records, the historian may grasp relationships and causes not by conscious reasoning through all the facts but by intuition.

According to one eminent historian, the historian's grasp of causal connections in history may depend less on rational judgment than on a more holistic understanding of human subject matter. Sir Isaiah Berlin (in 1960) so argues:

If someone tells us "X forgave Y because he loved him", or "X killed Y because he hated him", we accept these propositions easily, because they, and the propositions into which they can be generalized, fit in with our experience, because we claim to know what men are like...because we claim to know (not always justifiably) what – in essentials – a human being is, in particular a human being who belongs to a civilization not too unlike our own, and consequently one who thinks, wills, feels, acts in a manner which (rightly or wrongly) we assume to be intelligible to us because it sufficiently resembles our own or those of other human beings whose lives are intertwined with our own. This sort of "because" is the "because" neither of induction nor of deduction, but the "because" of understanding – *Verstehen* – of recognition...⁸

Berlin's argument here for the "verstehen" position of *understanding* draws on coherence within the human experience such that we, today, can *understand* human motivation of the past.

For Reflection

To the extent that the study of the past illuminates recurrent human patterns, what can we learn from history lessons that will help us to manage our affairs better in the present and future? Without any knowledge of history, are we likely to manage worse?

7. The balance of particular and general: reason and language

Where does history stand in the balance between treating unique events and trying to identify broad generalizations in the human record of the past? Certainly, the same people will never do or experience the same thing in the same place ever again: the Partition of India in 1947 was a single event; the first landing on the moon in 1969 could never happen again; the earthquake in Chile in 2010 hit hard at particular places and people. The events that history records stand out as distinct for all of the journalistic questions we could apply: who, what, when, where, why, how?

Yet in the very fact of naming major historical events we are compelled to categorize in order to apply language, and therefore to identify features that one event has in common with another event. We are forced, to some extent, to generalize. Despite all the differences between armed conflicts, we group many of them into the one category "war". Despite the difficulties of definition, observation, and ideological interpretation, we cluster attitudes and actions into the term "nationalism". Even though no two events or situations are the same, we find the similarities in the very process of naming and communicating. Admittedly, the very process of identifying similarities is interpretive, as historians choose between, say, "civil unrest" or "revolution".

But can history go further in identifying repeating patterns through the past into the present? Can it generalize on all – or at least some – of the particular events, using inductive reasoning to justify knowledge claims regarding broad trends and tendencies? These are major knowledge questions of history. They affect whether we

History teaches us about human nature and our future best choices by teaching us about *possibilities* rather than *regularities*.⁹

Michael Scriven

⁸ Berlin, I. 1966. "The Concept of Scientific History", *Philosophical Analysis and History*. Ed. William H. Dray. New York and London. Harper and Row. Pp 34–5.

⁹ Scriven, M. 1966. "Causes, Connections, and Conditions in History". *Philosophical Analysis and History*. Ed. William H. Dray. New York and London.