

The Method of History

Before we begin our second session, let me strongly suggest that you listen with care and take notes—Notes that will be useful to you during the semester. Now, let's review the main points discussed in our first session, "What is History".

The intent of the first session was to establish the perimeters in which our discussion of the American Experience from the pre Columbian period to the era of Reconstruction will take place. In that discussion it was concluded that:

- History is the memory of the total group experience. If it is forgotten or ignored, we cease in that knowledge to be human. Without history we have no knowledge of who we are or how we came to be. Please note that there are many areas of study in History and each are influenced by other academic disciplines such as economics, geology, geography, archeology, and anthropology. Consult your syllabus glossary for the various categories of history.
- History is a road map to self knowledge and a means of understanding how and why the attitudes and actions of

people of diverse backgrounds are intertwined and woven into the creation of American civilization.

- There are many lessons to be learned from history. If we learn those lessons we will not be destined to repeat the mistakes of the past.
- The study of history demands detail and close impartial observation. We all come to the table with our own biases and prejudices about our culture, values and beliefs. Remember, you as student historians have the same responsibility as the professional historian. In order for us to maintain our objectivity we attempt to transcend those elements that might color our interpretation of the facts. Facts do not change but rather it is the interpretation of those facts that changes from generation to generation.
- Final judgement must be reserved until all of the facts can be examined.

Now that the context, in which our study will take place, has been established, it should be obvious that the method of history

is really an investigatory process. In effect, all of you will, during this term, become detectives. Your investigation will be broken down into two stages. In order to do this detective work you must have some tools.

Stage One: During the course of the term you will be presented with various facts (events and things known to have happened). Subsequently, it will be your task to make assessments about how and why those facts are relevant. Or to put it another way, what do all these facts mean? In this process your focus will be on who, what, where, when, how and why?. Your answer as to how and why the facts under consideration are relevant formulates your conclusion, premise, contention, hypothesis, interpretation, or thesis. You are now ready to move on to stage two of the historical process.

Stage Two: Once your thesis has been formulated you are charged with the responsibility of proving the validity or truth of that thesis. You must test your thesis. This is done by challenging the thesis with an antithesis. For example: Your

careful consideration of the facts about the Civil War have led you to conclude that all of the people who fought in the Civil War were poor people . The antithesis (the opposite) to this observation is that all people who fought in the Civil War were not poor people. The tools used to develop the thesis are the same tools used to develop the antithesis. As you develop your case, collect and organize your evidence (ground for belief or disbelief, i.e., facts or data on which to base truth) so that it supports your thesis. Weigh the evidence on both sides of the argument. In this step you are synthesizing and asking the question, " what does all this mean?" The end result of the synthesis will create another thesis that will do one of three things, reinforce the validity of your original thesis, prove that the original thesis has no validity or suggest that argument for both side has no merit. Whatever you conclusion, you must be able to prove the validity of that position. This, of course, means that the process starts all over again.

In this process what you are actually doing is studying

casual relationships or cause and effect . When we speak of causes of change in history we are trying to show how and why a particular society, movement, or institution developed in a distinctive way. History, studies the links between events

Using this method, you can take any position that your want. You don't have to agree with me, your text or other written materials or other forms of information that you are exposed to, you don't even have to agree with each other.

However, before you come to any kind of conclusion weigh all of the facts. The historical method is a wonderful instrument in that it can teach us how to be critical and perceptive. And it can teach us how to make good sound judgements. Your interpretations of the facts will most likely be more accurate because you have taken the time to see the whole picture as opposed to only part of the picture.

The next session "The First Americans."

