

Understanding History & Thinking Historically

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I. A Philosophy of History:

History is often understood as “the past.” But can we really “know” the past? Historians think so!

We use primary and secondary sources to re-construct the past. Historians, therefore, are concerned with re-presenting the past. In this course, we will not only ask: What happened? But also, when possible, why it happened when it happened?

Time can often seem constant. But then “out of nowhere” things drastically change. Historians are interested in these shifts in time—sometimes gradual and prolonged while other times seemingly instant. We are particularly consumed with “change over time.” So whilst we are concerned with dates, people, places, and general events, we are primarily interested in *causality*. So, the “Why” question is utmost on our minds. So, we constantly ask: what events or historical forces have brought about significant change? But we also ask: if historical events necessarily bring about change?

As a result, some events are more important than others. While one event can represent monumental change another can help create conditions for change.

Thus some events are more historical than others. Something is *historical* when it either represents a “pattern” or if it represents a *shift in time or condition*. For example, violence, is *historically* significant in African American history. There is a noticeable pattern of violence—during slavery, during Jim Crow (lynching and police brutality), and in the present (police brutality). The Civil War was *historical* because it signals the end of slavery.

Students are expected to understand and explain:

1. What happened?
2. Why it happened when it happened?
3. Use and interpret primary & secondary sources

Historical actors:

1. Humanize and center historical actors
2. Get a sense of how they understood and viewed their own time period
3. structural forces, state & civil society

Analysis:

*Ability to think historically, analyze historical phenomena, and define and apply concepts, such as race, black public sphere, etc . . .

II. Some key terms:

1. Historical Context
2. Causality
3. “Change over time”

4. Watershed
5. Historical actors or agents
6. Structural forces or conditions
7. Presentism
8. Archive
9. Primary Sources
10. Secondary Sources
11. Historiography