

Why Study History?

People live in the present. They plan for and worry about the future. History, however, is the study of the past. Given all the demands that press in from living in the present and anticipating what is yet to come, why bother with what has been? Well first off, by studying history you can study anything for the simple reason that everything has a history: ideas, wars, numbers, races, windsurfing, coal miners, pencils, motherhood and yes, even toilet-training. Of all the things in the phenomenal world, there is not one so important as yourself. To know yourself means to be aware of what it is that makes you who you are. In this respect, the one thing which reveals this knowledge is history. But people do not live alone, they live in society. It is in society that the individual comes into contact with other individuals, all of whom are products of their history.

History Helps Us Understand People and Societies

In the first place, history offers a storehouse of information about how people and societies behave. How can we evaluate war if the nation is at peace? Unless we use historical materials? How can we understand genius, the influence of technological innovation, or the role that beliefs play in shaping family life, if we don't use what we know about experiences in the past? How do we understand our own government if we don't know how it came to be? People need to have some sense of how societies function simply to run their own lives.

History Helps Us Understand Change and How the Society We Live in Came to Be

The past causes the present, and so the future. Any time we try to know why something happened (whether a shift in politics in Canada, a major change in the teenage suicide rate, or a war in the Balkans or the Middle East) we have to look for factors that took shape earlier. Often we need to look further back to identify the causes of change. Only through studying history can we grasp how things change; only through history can we begin to comprehend the factors that cause change; and only through history can we understand what elements of an institution or a society persist despite change. We cannot understand the needs and issues related to Aboriginal people in Canada if we do not understand their history. We cannot fathom the importance of not being racist or anti-Semitic if we don't understand the Holocaust or the slavery. We cannot appreciate the freedoms of our country unless we understand how they came to be. Through history we meet people who have weathered hardship not just in some work of fiction, but in real circumstances. We learn about heroes, the great men and women of history who successfully worked through problems, but also of ordinary people who provide lessons in courage and change.

History also helps provide information about how families, groups, institutions and whole countries were formed and about how they have evolved. For many studying the history of one's own family is the most obvious use of history, for it provides facts about your ancestors and family identity.

The light we can throw on the past will help to show the way to the future. It is this that makes history not simply the most interesting, but also one of the most important subjects studied in school.

"We are what history has made us and history will continue to have power over us whether we recognize it or not. We are what we are and our society is what it is because hundreds of years of past struggles for religious freedom, for juries, for the vote for men and women, against child labour, for shorter working hours, against censorship and for peace."

Christopher Hill

History is often developed around five key concepts.

Change: Change happens constantly. It is the process of something becoming different usually through cause and effect. Change can result from changes in population, government, contact with other cultures, war, interaction with the environment, new technology or changes in the economic conditions. ***Ask yourself: What was the change and what caused it?***

Regionalism: Regions are areas with similar physical, economic or political characteristics. Different regions have different concerns, points of view and these affect how they react to change. ***Ask yourself: How did regionalism play a part in our development?***

Power: Much of history is related to who has power and who doesn't as well as the need to gain power. Studying who holds power and how they use it helps us to understand why things happen. ***Ask yourself: Who held power and who didn't? How was the power used?***

Identity: Identity is the way people see themselves. Canada has various individuals and groups of people who have specific identities (aboriginal, British, French, other immigrant groups). We also have a Canadian identity that has developed through our history.

Ask yourself: How did a group's identity affect their experiences?

Cooperation/Conflict: Throughout history people have dealt with change, regionalism, power and identity either through cooperation or conflict. ***Ask yourself what part did cooperation play in our history? What part did conflict play in our history?***

Key Concepts in History

Under each picture write the historical concept you think it represents.

