What is Historiography?

What is historiography? In simple terms, historiography is the history of history. Historiography is the history of the history of the event, this includes the way the history of the event has been written, how it has been documented, the conflicts and differences of the writers opinions or viewpoint of the event, and the way in which these factors shape our understanding of the actual event, and of history itself.

Questions of historiography include the following:

* Who writes history, with what motivation or agenda do they have in mind, and do they have a predetermined bias?
* How accurate can a historian ever hope to be, analyzing past events from the vantage point of the historian's present?
* Does the historian's own perspective contribute to an "agenda" that the historian's work could potentially be playing into, unconsciously or consciously?
* The [types of sources](https://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/sources/index.html), both [primary](https://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/sources/primary.html) and [secondary](https://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/sources/secondary.html), the historian chooses to utilize makes a difference on how they discern the event. Did these sources contribute to a biased opinion of the event?
* Does the selection of sources and the decision to exclude certain sources prejudice the outcome of the work in certain ways?

It is difficult to not be biased and it is true that historians may have agendas and select sources with the intent of proving their point, or persuading their point of view. History should not be considered to be truly objective because it is always a construct that presents the viewpoint of the writer. History presents basic facts (dates, events, etc.) that are known, the task of the historian is to interpret those facts as an interpretation that is subjective. It is important therefore for historians to do their due diligence and research all sides and facets of an event to determine as accurately as possible. Asking the types of questions bulleted above of any historical text you read will push you to delve more deeply into the subject, allows you to explore both the event and the historian whose work you are reading in greater detail, and to research additional sources. Though the outcome may complicate or change your view of things, determining the true historiography of the event will give you a greater appreciation for the many factors that contribute to the interpretation of an historical event, including factors of [bias and prejudice](https://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/writing/history/critical/bias.html). This appreciation will make you a more careful and thoughtful reader and writer of any subject, not just history.

Why is teaching historiography important for students?

Students should learn history by assessing multiple sources including textbooks, primary sources, and lectures. These components are essential to giving students a view of historical events from multiple perspectives to give a clearer understanding of the events. One perspective alone can not give a truthful account of a historical event. If we expect to learn the truth, or at least the closest truth we can, we have to be able to look at the event from different viewpoints to eliminate bias. By using multiple methods to teach history we can not only give students the ability to assess these multiple perspectives, but we are giving them multiple ways to learn the information and thus help retention. Students cannot depend solely on a textbook to get the multitude of interpretations about an historical event. Utilizing multiple primary and secondary sources is the best way to flesh out a truer interpretation of history. Historian Jennifer Nelson put it this way, the textbook is like the bones of the skeleton, primary source materials are the flesh, muscles, etc., and the lecture is the skin.[[1]](#footnote-0) We need all the components in order to live just as the student needs all the components to learn history effectively.

Teaching students to critically think, research, and write history will benefit them in all future courses as well as future careers. Penn GSE Professor Abby Reisman contributed to the development of the Reading Like a Historian curriculum, which develops students’ critical thinking skills. Below are her tips for teaching historiography:

* Use texts as evidence. Shifting through multiple interpretations of an event is neither natural nor automatic. Few students recognize that every historical narrative is also an argument or an interpretation from its author. Students can learn to weigh and evaluate competing truth claims, consider the author’s motive and purpose, and draw inferences about the broader social and political context. These are especially important skills in a world where information, both useful and bogus, is a mouse click away.
* Develop historical reading skills. Train students in the four key strategies historians use to analyze documents: sourcing, corroboration, close reading, and contextualization. With these skills, students can read, evaluate, and interpret historical documents in order to determine what happened in the past.
* Demonstrate through modeling. Students greatly benefit from seeing their teacher think aloud while reading a historical document first. A teacher should work through the text, evaluating the author’s reliability, and raising broader questions about the event in question. Eventually, students will be ready to try it on their own and in small groups.[[2]](#footnote-1)

1. Jennifer Nelson*, "What Goes around Comes Around: History Education in the 1890s and the 1990s."* The History Teacher 25, no. 4 (1992): 463-69. doi:10.2307/494354. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. https://www.gse.upenn.edu/news/educators-playbook/teaching-students-think-historians [↑](#footnote-ref-1)