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## THINKING ABOUT HISTORY

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Writing history involves a special way of thinking because the past in all its complexity cannot be recaptured like an instant replay. Real life has no instant replay; history does not repeat itself. The stuff of history—human experience—moves ceaselessly, changing endlessly in a process so complicated that it is like a turning kaleidoscope that never makes the same pattern twice. Consequently, knowing history is only possible through the stories that are told about it, stories that are told by many people, supported by many different kinds of evidence, told in different ways in different times and in different places. Historical research and historical thinking always involve listening to a multitude of voices, mute perhaps on the page but speaking through human intellect as historians try to sort them all out and arrive at the story that is most plausible.

A consciousness of history begins with the knowledge that present and past are different. The writing of history flourished when people fully realized that times were changing, that the new was replacing the old, and the stories of the old should be written down before they were lost. Very soon historians understood as well that to write history means to make an effort to tell the story of the past in language that makes sense to readers in the present, an effort that may distort the story. Yet it is necessary because the past has such power. Human beings want to know how things got this way. They yearn to understand origins and purposes, and essential

parts of their own lives in the present are influenced by their understanding of the past.

Not long ago debate was raised anew about the origin of an explosion that sank the U.S. battleship Maine in Cuba's Havana Harbor on February 15, 1898. Shortly after the event, American newspaper reports stirred public opinion to believe that almost 200 American sailors were lost when the Maine was sunk by a bomb planted against its hull by Spanish agents. Not long afterwards the United States declared war against Spain. American troops defeated the Spaniards in Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and other territories, and the United States acquired an overseas empire for the first time. Now some evidence seems to suggest that a fire in a coal bunker in the ship itself ignited ammunition stored nearby, sinking the ship. Historical research into the origins of that now distant war serves to make many people cautious when the government tells citizens today that the nation must go to war because its honor or morals are in peril if it does not. Present and past work together to condition attitudes toward both of them.

What *really* happened? That is the fundamental question everyone would like to know about the past. But the problems of history resemble the problems of memory. What were you doing a year ago today? If you keep an appointment book, you can find in it the names of people you saw that day. But what did you say to each other? The journal does not tell you everything. Someone might say to you, "I remember when we sat on the beach at Pawley's Island, South Carolina, year before last in August and talked about Elvis Presley's death." "Oh," you may reply, "I thought that was three years ago in a cafe in Charleston." You may have recorded the conversation in your journal; or you may have forgotten to make an entry that day. So where did the conversation take place? You have sources to check your own memories, as do historians. But like your own sources, the ones historians look to may not provide immediate answers to every puzzle.

The sources for history have been conditioned by when they were created and are also conditioned in the present by how they are read. For example, legends of the saints told in the Middle Ages are filled with miraculous happenings. Saint Denis was said to have been beheaded in Paris while preaching to the pagan Gauls. Legend has it he walked with his head in his hands to the site that later became the monastery of Saint Denis outside the city, and he set his head down there to mark the place where he should be buried. The kings of France were later buried in the monastery church built on the site. A statue of the saint, holding his head in his hands, stands now on the front of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, a reconstruction of a statue torn down by mobs during the French Revolution.

Most of us don't believe that people walk about holding their severed heads in their hands, yet you can respect this tale as a charming legend, not literal truth. Did the people of medieval Paris believe the story of the miracle? In a supremely reasonable attitude toward the past, you may assume that the story of Saint Denis was a good way for the bishops of Paris to emphasize the importance of their city and the truth of the orthodox Christian theology they professed. Paris achieved a sacred status because of the miracle. But who can tell? Maybe the medieval bishops *did* believe the story! And perhaps you may have to revise your nice, reasonable explanations for its origins.

The stories historians tell are about human beings living in particular times and places. Human motives are in every age complex, mysterious, and often absurd. Many people in every land do crazy and destructive things for what seems to be no reason, and scapegoats for national calamities or imagined enemies are summoned up by hysterical leaders to be blamed and to have horror inflicted upon them. "Rational" people cannot believe Saint Denis walked across Paris carrying his severed head in his hands. But how could "rational" people also acquiesce in the

systematic slaughter of their supposed enemies, as in Armenia at the beginning of the twentieth century or in Rwanda nearer its end?

All this is to say that history involves you in modes of thought common to daily life as well as in the effort to understand acts and ideas utterly foreign to your own. You must weigh evidence, deciding what to believe and what not, what you know and what you think is probable or at least plausible. As historians tell stories about what happened, they try to discover what it all means—and in so doing try to understand better what it is to be a human being. You will begin to think creatively in the study and writing of history by questioning your sources.

## QUESTIONING SOURCES

Good history essays are built on primary sources, but secondary sources are also essential to the historian's task, and you should always use them. The trick is not to follow slavishly the materials you find in any of your sources. Use them to add to your own knowledge and to help you shape your own questions about the past. As you read, keep these familiar questions in mind—*who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why*—as your guide; try to answer them briefly as you read. They will help you sort things out and organize your approach to the topic you are writing about.

These questions correspond to an almost universal way that literate people respond to information, and they have long been used by historians in working with sources. When they focus on something that happened, historians ask who the people involved were, what exactly happened, when it happened, where, and why. The answers often overlap. To explain *what* happened is sometimes to explain *why* it happened. And you can scarcely separate a *who* question from a *what* question, because to write about someone is to discuss what that person did.

The overlap of questions is the very reason they are so useful in research. A complex event

is like an elaborate tapestry tightly woven of many different-colored threads. The threads are distinct, but they are hard to sort out. These questions help keep your eyes on this or that important thread so you can see how it contributes to the whole. They will help immeasurably in analyzing human actions. The emphasis you place on one question or another may determine the approach you take to writing an essay about a historical event. And thus the focus of your questioning may alter the problems you identify and the story you will tell. Remember, too, that there is not just one *who* question or one *what* question or one *why* question. There may be dozens. Ask as many of them as you can. Push your mind.

These research questions can frequently help you work through the malady referred to as writer's block. All writers experience this affliction at one time or another. You cannot seem to get started writing, cannot go on, or cannot finish. When this happens, it is important to find a place to make a start, even if it is only a small step. Try writing out each of the questions about your topic that occurs to you; don't worry if they seem to overlap. Then try writing various answers to each of them. Often you can give your mind a push by writing out almost anything that comes to mind. Even a nonsense poem, composed out of your frustrations, may help to inspire you to further writing. Certainly, writing stimulates the mind; we cannot emphasize that point enough. Almost any process that makes you write about your topic will fill your mind with thoughts you could not have had if you had not started writing first. Sometimes the rigid discipline of spending ten minutes each day writing a journal entry about your efforts—even if they have not produced anything else that day—can start you on further writing sooner rather than postponing your efforts until later. Or perhaps you can enlist a friend in an electronic chat about your efforts at a regular time each day as another means to jump-start your writing. But above all, don't retreat from your questioning without making *some* effort to write down

*something* about your questions and, if you can, what answers you have begun to find.

### ***“Who” Questions***

Many historical topics center on individuals. If your topic is one of these, you will want to begin with who questions. Who was Pearl Buck? Whom did she write about? Who loved her work? Who were some of her critics? Who was influential in interpreting her work? As you ask such questions while reading your sources, keep a record of them and jot down the answers—or note that you don’t know the answers. You should also recognize a multitude of other questions which occur as you do this. Where did she live in China? What did her missionary experience there contribute to her view of that country? What did she do to influence American attitudes toward China? Why did she win the Nobel Prize? When was the prize given to her? What did literary critics say about her work? What did her fans say about her? What do people say about her work now? When did the attitude about her work begin to change? Why did it change? All these questions will take you to still other sources.

As you ask—and attempt to answer—these additional questions, your thought evolves. You begin to see relations between some of your questions. For example, you may push yourself to ask a dozen or more *where* questions or a multitude of *why* questions. And you may begin to read some of your sources differently. For example, you likely know that American public opinion was shocked when the Communists under Mao Zedong took over the Chinese mainland in 1949. Many politicians, including Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, claimed that the United States had “lost” China for democracy because the U.S. Department of State was infested with Communist agents. Did Pearl Buck’s idealistic books about China, especially her classic *The Good Earth*, help create an unreal impression of the situation there? Questions such as these can lead you to read—or perhaps reread—Buck’s books, reviews of her work written in her own

time, and articles written about her since. From them you can find your way to a good essay. And your initial *who* questions will have opened the door to your essay.

### ***“What” Questions***

*What* questions, of course, have their basis in the fundamental problem for historical understanding: What happened? But as you probe your sources, asking *what* questions may involve weeding out legends and misunderstandings to see what really happened. A frequent question that will come to mind as you read your sources is, “What does this mean?” Often you will be trying to see what people in the past meant by the words they used. These meanings can confuse us because they often change.

In the nineteenth century the word “liberal” was used to describe businessmen who wanted to make a place for themselves in a country ruled by an aristocracy with its power based on land. The liberals were capitalists who thought government ought to keep its hands off business. Most liberals believed that the economy ran by implacable laws of supply and demand and that any effort to help working people interfered with those laws and was bound to lead to catastrophe.

In the twentieth century, the word “liberal” was used by Americans to describe those who wanted government to hold the balance of power between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor. At the beginning of the twenty-first century neither major American political party wants to use the word because it implies spending by the government for programs to help the poor and the weak, and consequent taxes to support that spending. In some political rhetoric “the ‘L’ word” has become a special category for scorn.

What relations exist between the use of the words in these different ways? Liberals in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries advocated “liberty,” the root word of “liberal.” Nineteenth-century liberals wanted to create liberty for the business classes who suffered under

customs that gave political power to landed aristocrats. Twentieth-century liberals tried to create more liberty for the poor, including the liberty to have a public school education with its recognition of talent and opportunities for advancement. What changed in American life to account for the difference in the concept of liberty? And what brought about the shift in attitudes toward the words “liberal” and “liberalism”?

When you use such broad terms in your writing, you must define what you mean by them. Be on guard against reading today’s definition into yesterday’s words. Do not rely on simple dictionary definitions; look for the origins of the words and their etymologies, including examples of how they have been used over time. Words are defined by their historical context in time and place, and you must be sure to understand what they originally meant and how that has changed.

In answering *what* questions, historians sometimes try to distinguish between the unique qualities in events and the qualities that seem to repeat themselves. For example, What qualities helped some large states endure for long periods of time? What qualities have seemed to doom others to fall? The questions are fascinating, but the answers are uncertain. One historian may see a pattern of repetition; another may see, in the same events, circumstances unique to a specific time and place. Some Greek and Roman historians believed that history involved cycles of repetition and that to know the past allowed people to predict the future. Few modern historians would make such claims. Some broad patterns repeat themselves. Empires, countries, and cultures rise and fall. To some scholars, these repetitions make it seem that all history is locked into invariable cycles. Viewing history in this way, though, suggests a treadmill on which human beings toil endlessly without getting anywhere. And it can limit the historian’s capacity to discover what really happened.



### ***“When” Questions***

Sometimes you know exactly when something happened: the moment the first Japanese bombs fell on Pearl Harbor, the day Franklin Roosevelt died, and exactly when the Confederate charge reached its high-water mark on the third day of the battle of Gettysburg. Of course, this certainty is born of our acceptance of a common system of measuring time. Historians know this has not always been the case, and to some extent it is not the case today. The Islamic method of reckoning time, for example, is based on different initial assumptions—the *hijrah* (or flight) of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, rather than the birth of Jesus—and a different method—lunar rather than solar—of calculating the passage of days. The history of calendars is itself a fascinating subject of historical study. Nonetheless, historians generally accept the western, or Gregorian, method of time calculation to avoid confusion, and it has been a practical and realistic way to answer many *when* questions.

But asking when something happened in relation to something else can provide a fascinating topic of research. When did volcanic eruptions destroy Minoan civilization on Crete? The question is related to the rise of power on the Greek mainland under states such as Athens and Sparta. When did Richard Nixon first learn that members of his White House staff were involved in the now infamous Watergate burglary of June 17, 1972? “When did you know” became an important question put to Nixon and his aides in the subsequent investigations. That question has come to epitomize a skeptical approach to historical sources. And it is one you would do well to adopt in your research and in answering all of these essential questions.

### ***“Where” Questions***

Questions about where things happened can often be absorbing. No one knows the exact location of the Rubicon River. Julius Caesar crossed it with his army in violation of a law of the Roman

Republic that forbade the army to approach near the capital. But wherever it was, it has another name today. The Rubicon was in northern Italy and formed the border between the Roman province known as Cisalpine Gaul and the Roman Republic itself. But which modern Italian river was then called the Rubicon is a matter of dispute. However, deciding where the Rubicon was might help historians understand how much warning the Roman Senate had when Caesar moved with his troops on the capital.

*Where* questions involve geography, and you should think about geography when you write. Geography may not yield anything special for your work, but if you ask the right questions, geography may open a door in your mind onto a hitherto unimagined landscape of events and explanation. The Annales school of historical study in France made geography one of its fundamental concerns, asking such questions as how long it took to travel from one place to another in Europe, where the major trade routes were, where different crops were grown, and what cities had the closest relations to one another. For all historians, a good topographical map showing roads, rivers, mountains, passes, coasts, and location of towns remains an indispensable resource. Using such a map, you will be able to ask better questions about your sources.

### ***“Why” Questions***

Sometimes you know what happened. But basic curiosity should lead you to ask *why* did it happen: Why did it have the influence it did? These questions—essentially about cause and effect—create an eternal fascination. But cause and effect are like unruly twins. In historical study they are inseparable, yet it is often difficult to see just how they relate to each other. You might call the precipitating, or triggering, cause the one that sets events in motion. The background causes are those that build up and create the context within which the precipitating cause works. Precipitating causes are often dramatic and fairly clear. Background causes are

more difficult to sort out and often ambiguous.

The precipitating cause of the American Civil War was the bombardment and capture of Fort Sumter by the forces of South Carolina on April 12, 1861. No one would claim that the incident in Charleston Harbor all by itself caused the Civil War. Behind the events of that Friday morning were many complex differences between North and South. These were background causes of the war, and historians ever since have been trying to sort them all out to tell a sensible and precise story to explain why America's bloodiest war came.

Background causes offer rich possibilities for writing about the *why* of history. They allow writers opportunities for research, analysis, inference, and even conjecture. But precipitating or triggering causes can be worthwhile subjects in themselves. Exactly what happened at Fort Sumter on that April day in 1861? Why were passions so aroused on that particular day in that particular year? The *what* question and the *why* question come together—as they often do.

Good historical writing considers how many different but related influences work on what happens and sees things in context—often a large context of people and events. Nineteenth-century historians thought that if they understood the leaders, they knew everything they needed to know about why historical events happened as they did. But thinking in context means you try to sort out and weigh the relative importance of various causes when you consider any important happening. As a result, more historians are now asking questions such as, Why did a rebellion of Indian soldiers in the service of the East India Company in 1857 in Bengal lead to massacres of British settlers all over India? Why were the British able to persuade other Indians to unite with them in committing horrifying atrocities to put down the rebellion? Such questions lead to investigations into the lives of people often scarcely literate who have left few written records behind. Since it is hard to resurrect the life of the masses, the problem of answering the *why*

questions of history becomes complex, sometimes uncertain, yet very fascinating.

Some *why* questions may seem to have been answered more definitively. Yet an inquiring historian may reexamine the original puzzle and find another possible answer that contradicts accepted wisdom. Realizing the potential of this process—known as *revisionism*—should be motivation enough for caution in accepting uncritically what may seem to be settled historical truth. Such skepticism is an essential part of writing history. Asking questions that may have been overlooked, thinking about accepted answers in new ways, carefully reexamining the evidence, and discovering previously unexamined sources, may all turn up new possibilities for retelling a story about the past. Yet this process does require care to ensure that you avoid the many common fallacies that often creep into historical writing.

## **HISTORICAL FALLACIES**

“A fallacy is not merely an error itself,” historian David Hackett Fischer observed a number of years ago, “but a way of falling into error. It consists in false reasoning, often from true factual premises, so that false conclusions are generated.”<sup>1</sup> In his book on the subject, Professor Fischer suggested quite a number of specific fallacies—and offered examples of each from historical writing. For several years after his book appeared, historians scanned its pages hoping not to find their names included! Far better, though, simply to keep a few of the most common errors in mind so that you might avoid them in your writing.

One of these—the fallacy of the single cause—sometimes emerges out of the difficulties in finding answers to complex *why* questions. A particular possibility may seem to be especially attractive, but it is almost always a mistake to lay too much responsibility for any happening on only one cause. Do not be tempted to give easy and simple causes for complex and difficult problems. For example, do not argue that the Roman Empire fell only because Romans drank

water from lead pipes or that the South lost the Civil War only because Lee was defeated at Gettysburg. These events were caused by complex influences, and you should take care to acknowledge those complexities.

By all means you should also avoid the fallacy that comes wearing an elaborate Latin name—*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, “after this, therefore because of this.” It refers to the fallacy of believing that if something happens after something else, the first happening caused the second. A more subtle problem with this fallacy arises with events that are closely related, although one does not necessarily cause the other. The New York stock market crashed in October 1929; the Great Depression followed. But it is a mistake to say that the crash caused the Depression; both seem to have been caused by the same economic forces. When you confront this sort of relationship of events in writing essays, you must carefully think out the various strands of causation and avoid making things too simple.

In a similar fallacy of oversimplification, many nineteenth-century historians believed that history was the story of inevitable progress, culminating in a predictable conclusion, such as the triumph of the white races because of their supposed superiority over people of color throughout the world. They viewed this as a step forward, making the entire world better as a result. Other historians have seen history moving according to God’s will: when people do good, they thrive; when they violate the laws of God, they decline and suffer. But on close investigation, the swirls and waves of the historical process don’t appear to move in such easily predictable patterns.

Similarly, those who assume that learning about the past will allow them to avoid mistakes in the future underestimate the continuous flow of the “new” into human events. New inventions, new ways of thinking, or new combinations of ideas can upset all predictions. Most modern historians understand the need to be cautious in suggesting what history can tell us of both the

present and the future. For one thing, they no longer predict inevitable progress in human affairs. It is possible to know history well and still be startled by events. In recent decades, thousands of historians young and old studied the history of the Soviet Union. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency employed historians to help our government understand how to deal with the Soviet Union and predict what it might do. Yet not one of these scholars predicted anything like the sudden collapse and breakup of the entire Soviet empire in 1989 and 1990.

You may also be familiar with another common fallacy associated with the term “straw man.” People set up straw men when they argue against positions their opponents have not taken or when, without evidence, they attribute bad motives to opponents. In response to the idea that the sixteenth century in Europe was marked by much skepticism in matters of religion, an opponent might counter that the sixteenth century could not have experienced religious skepticism because the scientific worldview of Galileo and Newton was unknown—as if religious skepticism depended on a scientific worldview. Such an argument is simply beside the point. Worse, an opponent might advance an *ad hominem* argument, contending that since the historian was not himself religious, she wanted to find skepticism in a distant time as well. This fallacy, of course, is based on attacking the person making the argument rather than on the logic or evidence supporting it. Avoid the temptation. Be fair to opposing views, describe them accurately, and criticize them on their merits.

And you should also eschew the bandwagon fallacy, the easy assumption that because many historians agree on an issue, they must be right. Consensus by experts is not to be scorned. But experts can also be prone to prejudices or succumb to a desire not to be alone in their opinions. The democratic desire to seek a majority opinion is not always the best way to arrive at historical conclusions. Great historical work has been done by people who went doggedly in pursuit of

evidence against the influence of a historical consensus. But be sure you have the evidence when you attack a consensus!

## **MAKING INFERENCES**

We certainly want to encourage you to apply your mind to your evidence and also, in questioning your sources, to utilize the ability of the mind to infer. Humans manage their daily lives by making inferences. If in the morning you see low, dark clouds piled in the sky, when you leave home, you take along an umbrella. Why? You have seen such clouds before, and they have often meant rain. You infer by calling on past experience to interpret a present event or situation. You cannot always be certain that what you infer is true. Sometimes black clouds blow away quickly, leaving the skies clear so that you lug around a useless umbrella and maybe a raincoat all day long. But without inference humans would have to reinvent the world every morning.

Historians always infer some answers to their questions. They strive to make sense of a document, of other evidence, or of inconsistencies between several sources. They try to decide exactly what is reliable and to understand why the evidence was created, when it might have been, where, and by whom. The aim of inference is coherence. Historians try to fit what they know into a plausible whole. For example, you would likely infer that there is something fishy about documents that use words not coined until long after the purported age of the document itself. Suppose you read this sentence in the diary of a pioneer woman who supposedly crossed the plains on her way to California in 1851: “We are having a very hard time, and I know that Americans who drive through Nebraska in years to come on Interstate 80 will scarcely imagine what we have endured.” You would immediately infer that something is seriously wrong with the claims of this document!

In practice, historians face similar problems in dealing with all sorts of evidence. This is particularly true when the written documents are missing, are not very helpful, or seem to be inconsistent. But that does not keep a good historian from asking questions, and making inferences, in trying to tell a true story about the past. For example, after reading accounts of Hernando de Soto's sixteenth-century journey through what is now the southeastern United States, Alfred W. Crosby was struck by the inconsistencies between those descriptions and the accounts of the first intended settlers two centuries later:

In eastern and southern Arkansas and northeastern Louisiana, where De Soto found thirty towns and provinces, the French found only a handful of villages. Where De Soto had been able to stand on one temple mound and see several villages with their mounds and little else but fields of maize between, there was now wilderness....

In the sixteenth century, De Soto's chroniclers saw no buffalo along their route from Florida to Tennessee and back to the coast, or if they did see those wonderful beasts, they did not mention them—which seems highly improbable. Archeological evidence and examination of Amerindian place names also indicate there were no buffalo along the De Soto route, nor between it and salt water. A century and a half later, when the French and English arrived, they found the shaggy animals in at least scattered herds from the mountains to the Gulf and even to the Atlantic. What had happened in the interim is easy to explain in the abstract: An ecotone opened up, and the buffalo moved into it. Something had kept these animals out of the expanse of parklike clearings in the forest that periodic Amerindian use of fire and hoe had created. That something had declined or disappeared after 1540. That something was, in all likelihood, the Amerindians themselves, who naturally would have killed the buffalo for food and to protect their crops.

The cause of that decline and disappearance was probably epidemic disease. No other factor seems capable of having exterminated so many people over such a large part of North America.<sup>2</sup>

Crosby's questions led him to seek additional information—in this case from ecology and geography—and then arrive at an answer on the basis of probable inference. Similar examples of inference abound in the writing of history on any subject.



## *Quantitative Data and History*

Even some sources that on their surface seem to offer uncontroverted certainty often require the historian to reach conclusions by inference. This is certainly true in use of statistics, which in recent years have become a major source for writing history. Modern governments keep statistics with nearly religious passion, and other agencies, such as various polling organizations, collect statistics with the same avid compulsion. To some students of history, statistics seem tedious; to others they are exciting and open new windows to the past. But statistics require interpretation. “Like all data,” warns Priya Joshi, a historian of British India, “statistics ought to be regarded as approximations at best, only as good as the tools to retrieve and manipulate them, and therefore only provisional until different or better statistics—or different or better methods of historical inquiry—emerge.”<sup>3</sup> What historians infer from statistical data may reveal a great deal, but if historians infer badly, they can make serious errors.

One of the more controversial historical studies based on statistics in recent years was *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* by Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, an effort to see the face of slavery by looking at statistics from slave days before the Civil War. This method, known since the mid-twentieth century as “cliometrics”—the study of human history primarily from the analysis of statistical, and especially economic, data—was given extraordinary prominence after the publication of *Time on the Cross*.<sup>4</sup> In writing about *Truth in History*, Professor Oscar Handlin discussed the contention of Fogel and Engerman that the average age of slave mothers when they gave birth to their first child was 22.5 years. Handlin pointed out that Fogel and Engerman drew their data from wills probated in “fifty-four counties in eight Southern States between 1775 and 1865 which enumerated 80,000 slaves.”<sup>5</sup>

Eighty thousand is a considerable figure. One might assume that statistical data drawn from

such a sampling would have validity. But what about the significance the authors put on their finding that the average age of slave mothers was 22.5 years? They argued that slave mothers were mature women at the birth of their first child and, therefore, they must have been married. This fairly late age for the first birth would indicate a stable family life. Yet that is not clear, although Fogel and Engerman use this evidence to infer that sexual promiscuity among slaves was limited and that family life was close and enduring. Handlin argues that such an elaborate conclusion cannot be drawn from the evidence.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, other historians have refined the use of statistical data. In her book on a similar subject, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*, Professor Brenda E. Stevenson studied black and white families in Loudon County, Virginia, before the Civil War when tobacco plantations formed the basis of the economy. Using court records and business ledgers, including those in which records of white plantation owners were kept, she analyzed the effects of gender on the antebellum slave economy. At first black males predominated, but later black women began to be brought in, allowing slave families to develop. But then the white owners, strapped for cash as Virginia lost its markets for tobacco, began selling off children of slaves to the booming cotton economy of the deep South. Her statistics provide yet another window into the nature of a slave system where, as Stevenson concludes, “Virginia slave families, after all, essentially were not nuclear and did not derive from long-term monogamous marriages.”<sup>7</sup>

As these two studies make clear, the near worship of statistics by modern bureaucratic societies makes the task of historians both easier and harder today. The task is easier because statistical information is now often available in precise, accessible, and usable forms, although sometimes the quantity of statistical information available may seem daunting. Anyone may feel

overwhelmed by a project that can involve seemingly endless tables of numbers, charts, and graphs. The interpretation of such statistical data requires a high level of skill, and this can make the task even harder than it seems at first. Statistics as a discipline is substantial and complex, involving a rigorous introduction to the methods of interpreting statistics to make sense. Even with such instruction, errors in interpretation are not uncommon. Numbers may provide a comforting appearance of exactitude, but the appearance may not match the reality.

Some questions are beyond the power of statistics to measure. Many critics of quantitative methods in writing history protest that its practitioners claim to know more about the past than they really do. Nothing takes the place, say the critics, of understanding history through the lively words of those who participated in it. To these more humanistically inclined historians, statistics are skeletons without muscle and breath. Quantitative historians reply that the humanistic historians often argue about the same old things and that if statistics are often inexact, they often “tell a truth that would not otherwise be evident.”<sup>8</sup> No doubt statistics can help unlock some historical puzzles. Thus our advice is the same as that offered more than three decades ago by David Hackett Fischer: “every historian should count everything he can, by the best available statistical method.”<sup>9</sup>

Doing so requires that you understand the limits of statistical analysis and operate within those limits. If you write an essay based on quantitative research, be sure that you have enough data and that you know enough about interpreting statistics to avoid obvious errors. Learn the correct terminology for statistical analysis. (You must know the difference between the median and the average, the significance of the bell curve, and how a random sample is collected.) And be cautious in the inferences you draw from your evidence. Even if you have some knowledge of basic statistics, be sure you understand how such methods are used in historical writing.<sup>10</sup> And

do not be afraid to ask an expert. You probably have several faculty members at your university or college who teach statistics in one form or another and who understand the pitfalls of statistical research. Go talk to one of them about your essay. He or she will probably be delighted with your interest.

When using statistical data—or any other evidence—to make an inference important to your study of the sources, you become an active questioner. You don't read, or analyze, your sources passively. You read them actively, trying to fill in the gaps you always find in them and making inferences as you do so. In the process, you should also be assessing their value in helping to tell the story about the past that you want to write.

## **EVALUATING MATERIALS**

Such an evaluation process is, of course, essential to historical writing. All historians, in one way or another, engage in making assessments of the materials they use in crafting their histories. These practices constitute the “critical method” of history, a key part of historians' special way of thinking. For many years they separated this critical method into two parts, frequently called “external criticism” and “internal criticism.” Taken together they constitute nothing so much as a healthy historical skepticism in evaluating historical sources.

External criticism was originally an effort to determine if historical documents were, in fact, genuine, that they were what they purported to be. At one time this was extremely important, as in the case of a medieval document known as the Donation of Constantine. According to the document, the Emperor Constantine was cured of leprosy by a pope, and in gratitude moved from Rome to Constantinople, writing out this document which gave political control of western Europe to the pope and his successors. The document was cited to prove the superiority of popes over kings in Europe for many years.

In the fifteenth century, an Italian named Lorenzo Valla began to ask some questions about the Donation. Why did none of the people around Constantine who wrote about him and his reign mention his attack of leprosy or the Donation? Why did the document use words that were not coined until centuries later? Why was it not quoted by anyone until about the ninth century? Why did it make many historical errors? Valla inferred the work could not be about an actual historical event and that it could not have been written in the time of Constantine. Therefore he concluded that the work was a forgery, and his judgment has been widely accepted ever since.

But the record of counterfeit historical documents is not limited to those created centuries ago. There are a number of well-known and more recent examples of primary sources which were not what they seemed to be. One involves the fascinating story of Sir Edmund Backhouse, an eccentric English orientalist, described by historian Hugh Trevor-Roper as *The Hermit of Peking*. Backhouse had long been considered a leading scholar of early twentieth-century Chinese history. His reputation rested on his command of the Chinese language and the good fortune to have discovered a number of important documents that served as the basis of his writings. He was also a benefactor of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, donating some of those manuscripts—and a large number of others—to its China collections. He also penned a long memoir, which almost thirty years after his death in 1944 also found its way to the Bodleian. But because his biographical reflections were considered by many who saw them to be—even by the quietly permissive English upper class standards of his own time—somewhat obscene, it fell to Trevor-Roper, Regis Professor of Modern History at Oxford, to analyze them. In doing so, he produced a sort of literary biography concluding that Backhouse was not an extraordinarily gifted figure—unless it was as a forger! Trevor-Roper exposed the key documents Backhouse used in his most well known works as the result of an elaborate hoax and

the Chinese texts themselves as forgeries.

Trevor-Roper asked the obvious historian's question: Why would Backhouse perpetrate, and through his also invented memoir, try to perpetuate such a hoax? His conclusion about Backhouse's motives is revealing: "History was to him not a discipline, a means of understanding the world, but a compensation, a means of escape from it."<sup>11</sup> Not only does this suggest much about the man who did so; it also suggests something about why such a hoax might be attractive to other would-be historical pranksters. But in this case there is also an instructive sequel, one we believe offers an incentive for caution to any writer of history.

Six years after the appearance of his book on Backhouse, Professor Trevor-Roper was drawn into another case of a disputed historical document. In April 1983, the German magazine *Stern* published excerpts from the extensive, newly discovered diaries of Adolf Hitler. As you might imagine, this caused a sensation. Were these the genuine handiwork of the Führer himself? Many important historians were asked for their evaluation of the diaries. Drawing on his considerable experience, Trevor-Roper offered this opinion on the Hitler diaries:

Whereas signatures, single documents, or even groups of documents can be skillfully forged, a whole coherent archive covering 35 years is far less easily manufactured.

Such a disproportionate and indeed extravagant effort offers too large and vulnerable a flank to the critics who will undoubtedly assail it....The archive, in fact, is not only a collection of documents which can be individually tested: it coheres as a whole and the diaries are an integral part of it.

That is the internal evidence of authenticity.<sup>12</sup>

But Professor Trevor-Roper, it transpired, was actually duped by yet another clever forgery! And he was not the only one taken in by the forger, who capitalized on the widespread fascination with Hitler and the Nazis to create not just the diaries but other phony Hitler memorabilia as well. While financial gain probably was the forger's major motivation, certainly

he had a similar disrespect for history as a disciplined inquiry as did Edmund Backhouse. And at least for a time, the hoax convinced even as distinguished, and skeptical, a historian as Trevor-Roper.

While his experiences should suggest that you would be well-served by a healthy historical skepticism, it is unlikely you will have to make many such judgments about the authenticity of the primary sources that you use in writing your history papers. Perhaps if your sources were found in a discarded trunk or an abandoned attic, you will need to make an effort to determine if they are authentic. But many of the primary sources you are likely to employ will be found in published collections. You may reasonably expect the editors will have undertaken a careful external criticism of the documents prior to their publication. You may actually find other, unpublished primary sources in nearby archives or libraries, where the custodians of the original documents will have made such determinations. Lest these assurances give a false sense of security, remember you will still need to engage further in the historians' critical method, retaining the same sense of skepticism as you apply the historians' questions—*who, what, when, where, and why*—to all of your sources.

In doing so you can use those questions, along with the answers you find and the careful inferences you make, to help establish first if your sources are *plausible* and *trustworthy*, and then if they are *accurate* and can be *corroborated*. Those four standards of evaluation will serve you well as you read, and ask questions about, a wide variety of both secondary as well as primary sources, including those you find on the Internet and in other electronic media, where there are no librarians or archivists, and usually no editors who have made preliminary evaluations of materials. Instead, with all sources you find on the World Wide Web, *you* must assume the role of primary evaluator of the information you find. Your readers, and especially

your instructors, will expect you to do so carefully.

Certainly the common sense test is one of the best you have at your disposal to begin your evaluations. Historians do have to trust their own insights. They need to make reasonable judgments based on their own sense of what is possible. Does your common sense tell you that what you have read is truly plausible? Could it really have happened as your sources would have it? If your sources suggest that the Egyptian pyramids or the great stone statues on Easter Island were created by alien visitors from outer space, you have good reason to doubt them. The more fantastic the explanations offered, the more likely they will be little more than simple fantasy. One application of this common sense rule is the philosophical and scientific principle known as *Ockham's razor*, after the ideas of the fourteenth-century English philosopher William of Ockham. Simply put, the concept suggests that simpler explanations are usually to be preferred over complex ones, especially when known information can be used to reach those simpler conclusions.

Yet even when you apply your mind in this way to determine if your source is plausible, what leads you to trust your sources? Were those doing the reporting in a position to know what they reported? For example, were American veterans of the Korean War who reported Korean civilians were indiscriminately shot by U.S. soldiers actually serving in military units present at No Gun Ri, where other Korean civilians claimed the attacks took place? Did any of the soldiers have special knowledge of the situation that would lend credibility to their testimony? Perhaps some of them served as medical corpsmen and treated the wounded. That might make their statements more trustworthy in your eyes. And in the case of secondary accounts, do they come from authors whose works have generally been considered reliable? You may have to check reviews of some historical books to help determine this, although depending on any single



review would likely not be the wisest course. The widespread availability of databases such as JSTOR and Project Muse make such efforts much easier, and you should use them in making evaluations of your sources.

You can also make your own determination by reading carefully to see if all the details fit together. Are the descriptions of times and places accurate? Do the details match what is known and what can reasonably be inferred? In many British colonial territories, annual census figures remained the same year after year with no variation. District colonial administrators, it seems, did little more than make estimates and repeat them when new figures were required a year later, disregarding the improbability that births and deaths would exactly balance year after year. While few supervising officials in the British Colonial Office questioned such reporting, no historian would today consider such statistics to be an accurate reflection of a region's actual population.

But for some other details it might be possible for you to seek corroborating evidence. Good historians generally try to do this, just as *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein always sought other sources to confirm the details which their famous informant, Deep Throat, passed on to them concerning what has come to be known as the Watergate affair of the 1970s. For over thirty years the reporters did not disclose that top FBI official Mark Felt was their source; yet the great care they used in corroborating his information stood up to years of scrutiny, both before and after the revelation of Felt's identity in 2005. Keep in mind, though, your corroborating sources must be independent of each other if you wish to have real confidence in the accuracy of what you write. This does not mean that a single source must always be rejected. But without corroboration, you must establish through other applications of your critical methodology that your sources are accurate.

While it is true that good historians do not implicitly trust their sources, neither do they trust their own first impressions. Nor do they merely pose random questions regarding what they read, what they hear, or what they see. The exercise of the historian's critical method demands a much more systematic application of the injunctions to ask questions and make inferences. Only in doing so can you really claim to have evaluated your source materials and to have written an essay presenting a story about the past which makes any claim to being true. Nothing is quite so destructive to historians' reputations as presenting conclusions that do more to prove their own gullibility, laziness, or unwillingness to ask questions than to provide real insight into the meaning of the past. You can make a start at avoiding such appearances by keeping in mind the following checklist as you begin researching and thinking about sources for a new writing project:

### **Writer's Checklist**

- 4 Can I be certain this source is genuine?
- 4 What questions do I need to ask about this source?
- 4 Is the information truly *plausible*?
- 4 Am I confident the source is *trustworthy*?
- 4 Are the details in the source *accurate*?
- 4 Do I have any *corroborating evidence*?

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*Questioning Sources*

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1 David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), xvii.

*Historical Fallacies*

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2 Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 212–213. We have omitted Crosby's citation of his considerable evidence.

*Making Inferences*

3 Priya Joshi, "Quantitative Method, Literary History," *Book History*, 5 (2002): 273.

4 Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974). The authors describe Volume 1 as "the primary volume" of their work, containing a general discussion of the issues and their conclusions; Volume 2 was reserved for evidence and detailed "technological, methodological, and theoretical bases" of the study; vol. 1, p. v.

5 Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 211.

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6 Handlin, pp. 210–226. Although Handlin does acknowledge that "after publication Fogel and Engerman qualified the conclusion" (p. 210), this is only part of the lengthy criticism he directs against the use of statistical data in *Time on the Cross*.

7 Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 325.

*Making Inferences*

8 Joshi, 264.

9 Fischer, 90.

10 As a starting point, we recommend Charles H. Feinstein and Mark Thomas, *Making History Count: A Primer in Quantitative Methods for Historians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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11 Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Hermit of Peking* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 294.

12 Quoted in Dave Gross, "The Hitler Diaries" (n.d.) Culture-Jammer's Encyclopedia, <http://www.sniggle.net/kujau.php> (accessed 13 April 2006).

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