

1200 UNIT 1:

Narratives and Frames

Introduction



Unit 1 Overview

The stories we choose to tell about the past and how we choose to frame them can change our understanding of history. Historians make lots of these choices as they build narratives of the past. But they don't just make stuff up. Historians utilize tools like causation and claim testing to build evidence to support their interpretation of past events. Yet, different people remember—and interpret—past events in some very different ways.



0:01

*Video footage of fireworks;
Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett in conversation
over video chat*

(music playing) Three, two, one. Happy New Year! Happy New Year! Colby, I'm so excited to see you later this year to film the overview videos for World History.

Me too! I've never been to Australia.

It'll be great. I'll show you around Sydney and introduce you to Australia's best historical sites.

Hey Kim, what do you call it when you get fooled by an animal in Australia?

Hmmm, what?

A kanga-ruse.

Bring jokes like that and you won't make it through customs. Anyway, I can't wait to see you this August. Same. (music playing)

0:42

*Screen reads "Eight
Months Later..."*

Hi, I'm Kim Lochner and along with Colby Burnett we're introducing Unit 1: Narratives and Frames. In this unit we're going to ask the critical question "Why does it matter what stories we tell about the past, and how we tell them"?

Like the narrative you told your friend Kim when you said you were going to come to Australia to film these videos?

Exactly!... Wait, what?

I was just remembering how you bailed on me instead of coming to Australia to film these videos like we agreed. And now we're stuck doing them over video chat. I even bought a tourist guide book Colby.

Kim, I'm sorry, that was months ago. I think tickets were just too expensive.

Maybe, but is that the whole story? Because you cancelled right around the time you found out that when it's summer in Illinois, it's winter in Australia. And then you kept posting pictures of yourself doing outdoorsy things in sunny Chicago.

It had nothing to do with that...

I told all my friends you were coming. I just have a lot going on... I booked a tour of the Opera House... Tom Hanks gave Australia 1 star.

*Bennett Sherry, OER
Project historian*

Have you ever had a disagreement with a friend or family member about something that later on neither of you could quite agree on what started the disagreement or how the argument escalated? If only you had a time machine so you could go back in time to prove you were right. Colby and Kim might be wishing the same thing right now. They don't have a time machine, but what they do have is me, a professional historian.

2:14

*Contrasting images: two
soldiers crouch on top of
a tank; a young girl holds
a small child in front of
another tank.*

Hi, I'm Bennett Sherry. I'm one of the WHP historians and I'm one of several historians you're going to meet in this course. In this unit you're going to be introduced to some of the most important tools that historians use to create narratives of the past.

A montage of artworks depicting various scenes from history from different viewpoints, for example, a drawing of an Indigenous American suffering from disease spread by colonizers, contrasted with a painting that depicts European colonizers as generously serving food to seated Indigenous people

2:57

Throughout the course you're going to encounter a lot of different history stories. But remember, different people like Kim and Colby often remember the same historical events in some very different ways. Historical narratives can prove to be quite useful in your own life as you seek to understand the present and prepare for the future. But some, as you'll see, are more useful than others. It's critical that we test the claims made in these narratives to determine whether they're based on any actual evidence.

Let's examine all sides of Kim and Colby's argument and see if we can figure out what really happened. This is a skill we call claim testing, which you are going to practice a lot more in the coming months. So who's right? Why did Colby not travel to Australia that summer? Colby claims the flights were just too expensive but Kim claims that Colby just wanted to stay in the hemisphere with the warmest weather. Let's put their claims to the test.

One way to test claims is with numerical data. Of course, there's no "Kim and Colby travel database". But we can combine some other pieces of evidence to get a bigger picture of why Colby's plans changed.

Chart shows average air fares decreasing throughout the year of 2020.

This chart represents the average change in the cost of domestic and international airfare from the United States. Colby claimed the tickets were too expensive for him to travel to Australia as he had planned. But here we can see that even though the cost of international travel didn't increase quite as much as domestic travel, it still wasn't expensive relative to 2019 and even decreased for a little while. So things aren't looking too great for Colby's claim.

4:00

Two charts show average temperatures in Sydney and Chicago

But let's look at all sides of this argument and examine Kim's claim about the weather. These two charts show us the average monthly temperatures in Sydney and Chicago. If we look at the month of August we see that, yeah, Colby could have guessed it would have been warmer in Chicago than in Sydney, but August is the end of winter in Australia and it's usually in the high 60s fahrenheit. So it's not like he couldn't enjoy the outdoors. So it looks like neither expensive flights nor a nature-loving Colby are to blame. So what's a historian to do now?

We can also explore the causes of Colby's missed travel plans by doing something called scale switching. We switch scales when we zoom in to explore smaller stories or zoom out to gain a broader perspective. We've been focusing on the very personal story behind Kim and Colby's argument, but now let's shift scales and zoom out to see if any other big events were going on when they were planning this visit that might have impacted their narratives.

4:55

A world map zooms in on the city of Wuhan, China.

On New Year's Eve 2019, just as Colby and Kim were getting ready to celebrate the start of 2020 on two different continents, a new virus was spreading in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Though the World Health Organization declared an emergency in January, the Chinese government and many international leaders were slow to take action to halt the spread of the virus.

Photographs of people, sick with Covid-19, in hospital beds in a separated ward; photographs of groups of people wearing masks in 2020

5:42

Images of an empty airport with social-distancing guidelines, people waiting in a long line, a movie theater that has been closed for safety

Kim Lochner and Colby Burnett, on video chat.

They are both wearing masks: Colby is wearing a fabric face mask, and Kim is wearing one that might have been used during the Plague – it is large and shaped like a bird's head with a long beak

6:23

By March 11th, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic as cases of Covid-19 skyrocketed, particularly in Italy and Iran. By the end of March, the United States had the highest number of cases in the world. In August of 2020 the pandemic had reached nearly 25 million cases confirmed globally and over 800,000 deaths. And tragically, those numbers continued to climb through the following months.

The economic fallout of the pandemic is significant and in many places, people have quarantined, businesses have closed, and people have lost jobs. In addition, domestic and international travel has been restricted. So now that we've zoomed out, we can see that this other narrative is much more significant than their claims about weather or travel prices.

Oh right. I totally forgot. This whole year was a blur, but uh...I guess this is the start of a new school year?

So, I guess it's time to start imparting historical knowledge to World History students.

And don't forget historical thinking skills like claim testing.

7:22

Graphics represent the three frames: communities, networks, and production and distribution.

We've just introduced you to Unit 1: Narratives and Frames. In this unit we'll cover the importance of historical narratives and highlight some of the key skills like claim testing and causation that historians use to evaluate these narratives. This unit begins with a couple of videos that introduce important concepts. Professor Bob Bain will expand on the idea of usable histories. Chimamanda Adichie will give you a guide to the importance of multiple perspectives on a global past. In all of the units that follow you'll watch an overview video like this one where Colby and I will welcome you to a new time period and theme. We'll introduce the central question of the unit and look for answers by examining data and switching scales, by zooming in and out like in the example you just saw.

In these overviews, Kim and I will also make connections to our frame narratives for each unit. You'll learn more about our three course frames from Professor Bob Bain in four videos at the end of this unit.

But for now just know that our three frames—communities, networks, and production and distribution—are like different picture frames you can place around any historical narrative in order to develop a richer understanding of past events.

As you progress through this course remember there are a lot of different narratives out there. It's your job to evaluate each story you encounter. That's the key to identifying what usable history means to you.

A modern-day photo of teens in an argument; painted depictions of revolutionary battles.

Whether it's a disagreement between two friends or a violent conflict between two great empires, the narratives we choose to tell about the past and how we tell them have real consequences for how we understand our present and prepare for the future.

So Kim, since we're using data and scale switching in the rest of these videos, that means we'll never have another disagreement, right?

That's not what Bennett said at all.

Yes it is, I took notes. Here, let me read back to you.

Well, I took notes too... I watched the same video you did... (Colby and Kim talking over each other) (static)