

7.2

INTRODUCTION TO HISTORY

0:14–0:59

**EIGHT-POUND
TEXBOOKS**

Hi, there, I'm Bob Bain. I'm a historian, a history educator, former high school history and social studies teacher and now a professor at the University of Michigan in history and history education.

Now, I got to tell you, if my high school history teachers knew that I had become an historian, they would be just freaking out, to be honest with you. I was a horrible high school history student, horrible. And the reason is, is because I hated history. Why? I thought history was only about memorizing names, dates, events that I didn't care about, that happened long before I was born and didn't seem to have any importance in my own life and usually came delivered in textbooks that weighed about eight pounds.

It wasn't until I got to college and I actually had to take a history course. I was a science and math major and I needed the history and humanities. So I signed up for a course that I thought would be easy. It was a large class. There were 400 people in it. I thought the guy would never call on me, I wouldn't necessarily have to be engaged. And then a stunning thing happened. He came in and he started class and he asked all of us a question. But it was a question that was different than any question I'd been asked in a history classroom before. It wasn't like, "When did this happen?" He asked a question about me, about my identity, about the world that I was living in, and was asking us about the ways in which the past had shaped the opportunities that I had, the experiences that I had. He was situating me, by his question, in time.

And he began to show me that things that my ancestors—not only my ancestors but my ancestors in my community—had done, choices they had made that actually helped define and shape who I was. He began to help me see that the context that I'd lived in was an invention by other people, that I was a product, and I lived in a product, of the past. He began to show me that studying the past—asking important questions, questions that I care about, not just questions that someone gave me because I had it spit back information on a test—is actually what a historian does.

They pose questions about the past and the present because they're driving of interest to them. And so I began to take up the study of history and what I learned was that history is actually a lot different than the way it was presented to me as stuff to be memo-

0:59–1:49

ASKING QUESTIONS

1:49–3:00

**IMPORTANT
QUESTIONS**

rized. History is all about questions, all about answers and all about evidence. History is like being a detective and trying to understand the mystery that happened and trying to figure out how it happened, because like good mysteries, history is about events that happen in the present and then they disappear.

3:00–4:16

IMAGINATION

And that's a pretty stunning thing and it's much different than some sciences that can study events that happened over and over and over again. In fact, they can create an experiment to replicate, to repeat something that happened. Historians really can't do that. I mean, I can't repeat World War I and actually repeat it. In order for us to study an event, it has to leave some kind of residue in the present. It has to leave something behind. Now, what does it leave behind? You could say it almost leaves behind garbage or residue. It could leave behind an object, it could leave behind a document, it could leave behind some record of the past event.

And it's those things that the historian studies. And they study it by asking a question of it, and by posing a question to it, it turns it from residue, garbage, junk into historical evidence or historical sources. And just like a detective, the detective has to pose questions to the source.

Now, in some ways that's the best historian's tool. The best historical tool is the historian's imagination, the historian's questions. They're posing questions about the context. Now, posing questions to an object is what a historian does.

So for example, look around the classroom. Take an object that you've probably not thought much about. Like let's take the clock that's up there on the wall.

4:16–5:01

AN EXAMPLE

Now, you've probably asked some question like, "What time is it?" Or if you were like me, "When does this class end?" But a historian might pose some other questions about that clock, like, "Who made it?" "Where was it made?" "How did it get to be here?" "What kind of transportation system created it?" "How many people were involved in the construction of that clock?" Or "Does it make a difference as to whether that clock's running on time?" "When did the invention of the time system that you and I use come?" And "How did that change our lives?" And "How much of our life is driven by a clock?" And "What happened before people had mechanical clocks?" "How were they judging time?" "How were they living?"

So historians study objects and events in the past by studying the evidence that they leave behind. Of course, studying it is not just what historians do. They analyze it, they compare it, they contrast it, they corroborate it.

In other words, they look for one source and look for other sources that either support this source, extend this source or actually challenge it. And that helps historians begin to understand what happened in the past. But then what they do is they produce some understanding. They write about it, they create a story about it.

Sometimes it's a picture, sometimes it's a movie,

5:01–6:04

SEEING SOURCES

sometimes it's a lecture. Now, they do that because they want people to understand the most or the best accurate picture that they can get of the past. And that's very important, because you and I, whether you know it or not, we use history. We use our understanding of the past. And not just memorizing names and dates, but you and I live in a world that was shaped by the past.

6:04–6:14

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Soren Kierkegaard, a great Danish philosopher, had a line that he once used when he said, "You and I live our lives forward. "We live our lives into the future. "But we understand our lives using the past. We understand our lives backwards." Think about that. We live our lives forward, but we understand them backwards. So by understanding your past, you make sense of your present.

By the way, you also make sense of the future, because by understanding the trends of the past, you can begin to make some accurate predictions about the future or close to accurate predictions. True of weather. That if you look at the past patterns in weather you can begin to understand, you know, the likelihood of whether or not you should put on a heavier coat in the next couple of weeks. Or think about sports teams. We can understand the past patterns in sports teams to get a little bit more accurate in our predictions about what might happen in the future.

6:14–7:26

MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Now, historians ask different kinds of questions. So if I were to ask questions about the environment, I might be doing environmental history, and so then what would be the evidence I would be looking at? I'd be

looking at temperature, I'd be looking at wind patterns. I would be using the evidence that might actually come from other people like meteorologists, that I would be using to understand environmental history.

Or if I was looking at social history, interested in how people play games, how they listen to music, how that changed over time. I might be drawing on a whole different set of evidence, and that question would put me in a different field of history.

Of course, in this course we're asking big questions and hence we end up being big historians. But history is about using evidence wherever we can find it, because whatever gets left in the present is what historians can study.

So next time you think about someone talking about history, understand that it's really about using the past to make sense of the present and the future. And it's not just about memorizing names, dates and places.

7:26–8:04

BIG QUESTIONS