



Frame Concept Introduction

The past is vast. How can we organize the massive amount of events and sources in a way that makes it understandable and usable? Frames are a tool that historians use to sort through, group, and think about long-term historical trends. In this course, we use three frames—communities, networks, and production and distribution. These frames help us connect events, people, and trends across eras and enable us to create frame stories that make the past meaningful.



00:01

*What are frames and how do we use them?
Bob Bain, PhD, University of Michigan
Image bubbles depicting students using maps on their phones; a map shows the location of the Eiffel Tower in Paris
Moving timeline*

A good map, on paper or on your phone, is critical when traveling in unfamiliar territory. Maps help you navigate a trip, locating your place on the Earth, showing you where you are, where you've been, and where you're heading. And good maps provide just enough detail—and no more—to get you where you're going.

But what if you're traveling through time? What tool can help locate you in time, help you to “see” where you are, where you've been, and where you're going? Are there tools we could use, like maps, that might help you as you start your journey through the familiar and unfamiliar territories of world history?

In this course, we think Big Story Frames, or simply frames, will help as you travel through history, mapping the trip our species has taken over hundreds of thousands of years.

01:04

Timeline highlights historical milestones: American Revolution, French Revolution, Haitian Revolution, Bolivian War of Independence

Like maps, the frames highlight important milestones or turning points on a trip. But unlike maps, these historical milestones or turning points are snapshots in time, showing changes in how our ancestors lived, worked, organized themselves, and connected to others. The frames in this course provide a way to get meaningful pictures or answers out of a huge amount of information.

A larger timeline fills up with historical milestones and events

A world history course cannot possibly tell you everything that happened to everyone for the entire history of the world, but sometimes it seems like your teacher and your class materials are trying to do just that. Lots of places, lots of dates, lots of people, lots of events, and lots of ideas will come your way. And there's a risk that you'll get lost in the details, losing your place in time, until it seems like history is just one thing after another after another.

02:03

The timeline returns, this time color-coded, representing the connections that frames will help to define

You need a way to connect what you're learning, to find answers to questions or ways to understand what it all means. The frames should help you to do this kind of work.

Now, what kind of tool is a frame? By viewing the past through a frame, it should help you make sense of the wild diversity of history. It should help you use what you learn about the past to understand our present and to anticipate the future.

02:29

*World History Project Frames
Bob Bain*

The three frames we use in this course are: Communities; Production and Distribution; and Networks. The Communities frame looks at how we've structured the societies around us, including the state and religion. The Production and Distribution frame explores how we have made and moved the stuff we use every day. Finally, the Networks frame looks at how humans have been connected to and interact with one another.

Now, these are only three of the many possible ways you could frame the past and the present. But we think using these three will help you make sense of the details you'll encounter. They will offer insight into important questions about how the events of the past have led us to the lives we live today. This, in turn, should help you to think about and prepare for the future.

03:23

Protests throughout the world; People fighting for voting rights; climate action; and democracy

Early agriculture; more modern farm equipment

A spoken word meeting, a black-and-white photo of a letter being delivered; President Obama taking a selfie with some supporters.

How might the frames do this? For example, in looking at how humans changed the communities in which they lived, the Communities frame might help you to understand the promise and limitations of democracy—yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

In seeing all the changes we made in the ways we produced and distributed goods and services, the Production and Distribution frame might help you to think about how work has been changing and what jobs might be available in the future. And using the Networks frame might help you to think carefully about the ways new forms of communication—from spoken words to letters to telephones to the internet—historically changed society and to prepare you for the changes to come.

04:07

Using Frames

(music playing) Each frame enables us to connect particular events and trends in the past to those that came before and will come after. However, depending on which frame we use, we can get different but complementary answers.

For example, the transition to farming in the distant past and the Cold War in the recent past assume very different meaning if we consider them as changes in community identities, or economic systems of production and distribution, or the networks of people and ideas. Of course, these elements of human life all overlap, and so the frames also all overlap. But that's okay. The past is messy and complicated, and so are the tools we must use to study it.

04:56

Topographic map, voting map, road map

Frankly, that's why using multiple frames is so useful—each frame reveals important information that other frames may not. After all, you need different maps to help you see different territories, right? One map may be great for one purpose but not so good for another. So it is with the frames.

The important thing to remember about frames is that they let you connect events and people and trends across multiple eras. They create big stories over grand sweeps of time, all the way to the present. Now, even though it might appear that we're studying each era separately, it's very important to help you see bigger patterns of change, patterns sweeping through all the eras, all the way to the present. For example, consider—as we do in the Communities frame—that some humans began living in cities thousands of years ago, but it was only in 2007—just over a decade ago—when more than half of all humans were living in cities for the first time.

05:59

Drawing of a first, ancient city, next to a photo of modern-day city public transport

Clearly, the history of cities isn't confined to one era, nor is any other history. Frames, then, are useful tools for understanding big changes in human history.

However, because they focus on big changes, they are not perfect tools. They leave out more than they include. Indeed, frames look at events, trends, and long histories through particular filters. None of them tells the whole story. It's really impossible to tell the whole of human history through any single story.

06:32

Questions:

*“How have we structured
the way that we live?”*

*“How did we make and
move stuff?”*

“How are we connected?”

07:01

Our three frames:

Communities,

Production and

Distribution, and Networks

Even as we use the frames, we’ll evaluate and modify them. We will test their claims by asking critical questions about how well they guide us in thinking about events of the past and the present.

By both using and evaluating the frames, we hope to improve our skills in analyzing the stories we get from the past. This includes the frames that others give us. We’ll test their claims using evidence and logic, considering the impact of using one frame over another.

So there you have it. Frames allow you to construct histories that are usable for interpreting the past, orienting yourself to the present, and preparing for the future. They enable you to study a complex event from a particular perspective. They allow you to generate big questions and to test them using evidence. They help you to perceive patterns that cross different periods. They can be modified through your own experience.

This is why we have designed this course for you to use frames, test frames, and eventually construct your own frames for understanding and using world history.