

# Lesson 4 How Historians Study the Past

## MAIN IDEAS

**Culture** Historians often ask questions about the past in order to understand the present.

**Culture** Historians use a variety of methods to help them answer questions about what happened in the past.

**Culture** Historians examine evidence and draw conclusions as they answer historical questions.

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## Understanding the Past

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What questions do historians ask to help them understand the past?

### Why Study History?

- Studying history involves culture, religion, politics, economics
- Historians seek patterns, explanations, causes and effects
  - they seek insight into human nature, answer historical questions
  - questions help them compare societies, draw conclusions about past

### Asking Historical Questions

- How have groups, societies interacted? What were the results?
- How have leaders governed societies?
- How have belief systems developed, changed?
- How have societies dealt with differences among their people?
- How have societies tried to protect people's security?
- How are societies similar and different?

### REVIEW QUESTION

Why do we study history?

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# The Historian's Tools

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What methods do historians use to help them answer questions about what happened in the past?

## Primary Sources

- **Primary source**—something created by person who witnessed event
  - letters, diaries, eyewitness articles, videos, speeches, artifacts

## Secondary Sources

- **Secondary source**—created after event by person who didn't witness it
  - books, paintings, media reports based on primary sources
  - appear after event and can provide more balanced view of event

## Oral History

- Some cultures have no written records
- **Oral history**—unwritten verbal accounts of events
  - stories, customs, songs, histories, traditions
  - passed from generation to generation

## REVIEW QUESTION

What tools do historians use to learn about the past?

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# How Knowledge of the Past Changes

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What steps do historians take as they answer historical questions?

## Fact or Fiction?

- Historians use evidence from sources to answer questions
  - must sort through evidence, choose important, trustworthy evidence
- Some information turns out to be false, like the “mummy’s curse”
  - many thought it killed archaeologists entering “King Tut’s” tomb
  - records proved the archaeologists lived to average age of 70 years

## Drawing Conclusions

- Some historians arrive at different conclusions using same facts
- For example, the building of Stonehenge around 3000 B.C.
  - early theories claimed temple was built for priests
  - later experts realized was finished before priests lived in area
  - today some historians think builders were sun worshipers
  - others think we’ll never know its true purpose

## REVIEW QUESTION

How are historians like detectives?

## Lesson Summary

- Asking historical questions can help solve mysteries about the past.
- A historian’s most important tools are primary sources, secondary sources, and oral histories.
- Examining evidence can lead to a new answer to a question or deepen a mystery.

## Why It Matters Now...

The answers to historical questions can help people as they respond to today’s events and challenges.