Lesson

4

MAIN IDEAS

1. **Culture** Historians ask questions about the past to focus their research.

2. **Culture** Historians interpret the past on the basis of a study of evidence.

3. **Culture** New discoveries can cause historians to change their interpretations of the past.

TAKING

**Reading Skill: Finding Main Ideas**

Finding main ideas will help you organize the information in Lesson 4. Use a chart like the one below to list each main idea and details about it.

- Main Idea
  - Detail
  - Detail
  - Detail

**Great Chronicles of France**

Historians use many types of documents in their research, such as the illuminated manuscript page shown here. It comes from the *Great Chronicles of France*, a record of French kings up to the 1300s.

**California Standards**

**REP 1** Students frame questions that can be answered by historical study and research.

**REP 4** Students assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources and draw sound conclusions from them.

**HI 5** Students recognize that interpretations of history are subject to change as new information is uncovered.
Interpreting the Past

Build on What You Know  You have read about how archaeology can help us learn about history. In Lesson 4, you will read about what history is and how people study history. To begin, think about your own history and the ways someone in the future might go about researching you.

The Story of the Past

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  Why do historians ask questions about the past?

Throughout the ages, people have been interested in history. They want to know why the world is the way it is. Studying history helps them do that. Simply put, **history** is the study of past events. A **historian** is a person who studies and interprets, or explains the importance of, the past.

**Why Is History Important?**  History is important because it can help us learn about today and our future. Studying the past is more than knowing when and where a particular battle was fought. Investigating a historical event involves investigating

- who was involved
- what the issues were
- why the event happened the way it did
- how the event affected what happened next

In other words, much of historical study is about asking questions.
Historical Questions  Historians begin their study of the past by asking questions—historical questions. These questions help historians investigate the past in a meaningful way. Questions can also focus a historian’s research. Below is a list of some historical questions. As you read them, try to apply them to a history you are familiar with.

- In what order did events happen?
- How have belief systems developed and changed?
- How have societies dealt with differences among their people?
- How are societies similar and different?
- Why did things happen the way they did?
- How have groups or societies interacted, and what have been the results?

Asking the right questions is central to historical research. Clear historical questions are the foundation for historians’ work.

How Historians Work

ESSENTIAL QUESTION  How do historians answer their questions?

Once a historian has a question, he or she looks for possible answers. Like detectives, historians examine evidence. Then they interpret the evidence. You have already read about how historians use evidence from archaeologists and anthropologists. Here you will read about other forms of evidence that historians use.

Primary Sources  A **primary source** is a document or artifact created during a particular historical period. Primary source documents can include military records, marriage certificates, diaries, and private letters.

Not all primary sources are written, however. Artifacts, such as those discovered by archaeologists, can also be primary sources. Buildings, artworks, pottery, and tools are all examples of artifacts that can be primary sources.

Some primary sources are spoken.

**Oral history** includes the stories a culture has passed from generation to generation. For example, West African storytellers...
can recite local histories going back hundreds of years. Many cultures around the world have forms of oral tradition. Primary sources of all kinds help historians answer their questions.

Secondary Sources Another type of evidence is a secondary source, a work produced about a historical event by someone who was not actually there. Newspapers, books, and paintings are often secondary sources. Oral histories can also sometimes be secondary sources. A secondary source might contain an insight about a historical event that the primary sources do not reflect. For example, a secondary source about Columbus might note that he had not sailed to Asia, something that Columbus himself never realized.

Examining Written Records Historians must carefully examine all of the evidence they use. Part of this examination involves learning the details of sources’ creations and evaluating their points of view. This involves asking questions such as the following:

- Why was the source written or recorded?
- Whom was the source written for?
- What was the author’s point of view?

By answering these types of questions, historians can learn more about sources and their usefulness as evidence.

Background: The text to the right is part of a letter Christopher Columbus wrote. It is an example of why primary sources need to be carefully examined. Columbus recorded what he believed to be true—that he had reached Asia. But he was mistaken.

**Primary Source**

*Concerning the Islands Recently Discovered in the Indian Sea*

By Christopher Columbus

Translated by the Trustees of the Lenox Library

On the thirty-third day after I departed Cadiz, I came to the Indian Sea, where I found many islands . . .

As soon as we had arrived at that island which I have just now said was called Juana, I proceeded along its coast towards the west for some distance; I found it so large and without perceptible end, that I believed it to be not an island, but the continental country of Cathay.

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2. Indian Sea: He was actually in what is known today as the Caribbean Sea.
4. Cathay: This is what Europeans in Columbus’ time called China.
Interpreting History

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What do historians do with their evidence?

Historians take evidence from their primary and secondary sources and interpret it. The interpretation can take different forms, including articles, books, and museum displays. Often, historians have conflicting interpretations, as shown below.

In Lesson 3, you learned how new archaeological finds changed theories about the Maya. The same thing can happen with historians. For example, in 1900 a sealed cave was discovered in China. It contained centuries-old documents that described everyday life in Tang China (A.D. 618–907). The documents showed that farmers, not the government, often regulated farm operations. Some documents also showed that government control of local education was limited. From the evidence, historians concluded that the Tang government did not control as much of Chinese society as they previously thought.

Different Interpretations of History

The Roman Empire was a great power that ruled the Mediterranean world and beyond. Eventually, it split into two empires. One question that historians have debated for centuries is, Why did the Western Roman Empire fall?

**This historian believes that the growing weakness of the army caused the empire to fall.**

**This historian believes that peace and wealth made the rich stop worrying about the future. Also, the poor grew jealous of the rich. As a result, neither group could be motivated to defend the empire.**

**from The Fall of the Roman Empire (1986), Arther Ferrill**

At the opening of the fifth century a massive army, perhaps more than 200,000 strong, stood at the service of the Western emperor and his generals. In 476 it was gone. The destruction of Roman military power in the fifth century was the obvious cause of the collapse of government in the west.

**from Rome (1960), Michael Ivanovitch Rostovtzeff**

In the calm atmosphere of peace, order, and prosperity, . . . The development of . . . apathy [lack of interest] in the rich and discontent among the poor . . . was at first slow and secret. But suddenly it became acute [very serious] when the empire was forced, after nearly two centuries of peace and tranquility, to defend itself against enemies from without. The time called for a great display of enthusiasm. But the rich could not be roused from their indifference; and the poor . . . were filled with hatred and envy.
In this book, you will read about the histories of different societies around the world. As you read, remember to ask historical questions about the societies you are studying. Evaluate and think critically about the evidence you find. Look for similarities and differences between the different societies. Think about how what is happening today will be interpreted by future historians. Finally, have fun. History is full of exciting stories and interesting people that can teach us about the world as it is today.

**Lesson Summary**

- Historians begin their work by asking questions about the past.
- Historians find, evaluate, and interpret evidence to gain knowledge about the past.
- By studying new evidence, historians can change or expand their knowledge of the past.

**Why It Matters Now . . .**

Studying history teaches us how the past has influenced the present. It also teaches us that what we do today affects the future.

**Terms & Names**

1. Explain the importance of history primary source secondary source historian oral history

**Using Your Notes**

**Finding Main Ideas** Use your completed chart to answer the following question:

2. What are two types of evidence that historians use? (REP 4)

**Main Ideas**

3. How does asking questions help historians? (REP 1)
4. How are historians similar to detectives? (REP 4)
5. What factors can change a historical interpretation? (HI 5)

**Critical Thinking**

6. **Comparing** How might using an artifact as a primary source compare with using a written primary source? (REP 4)

7. **Assessing Credibility of Sources** How believable would a general’s diary entry about a battle be? Explain. (REP 4)

**Activity**

**Asking Historical Questions** Review the information about asking historical questions. Then write 3 historical questions that interest you and explain how you might research them. (REP 1)