

Doing History

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Historical Significance

How do historians determine significance?

"...in trying to make sense of history, 'one cannot escape from the idea of significance. History, to be meaningful, depends on selection and this, in turn, depends on establishing criteria of significance to select the more relevant and to dismiss the less relevant.'" ~ Tim Lomas, *Teaching and Assessing Historical Understanding* (1990, p. 41)¹

What a historian views as significant is inherently manifest in her topic selection. Stéphane Lévesque, who researches how Canadian history is taught writes, "Historical significance is thus a quality determine by historians (or other investigators) in response to the past. An event, to paraphrase [Peter] Seixas, becomes significant when contemporary people see its relevance to other events and ultimately to the present."

Until the mid-twentieth century, most professional historians were interested in war, political history, and the history of great men. Subsequently, their stories dominated the pages of history textbooks and monographs. During the 1950s and 1960s, historical studies became more diversified making room for an ever widening range of topics: feminist-women-gender Histories; Black Studies and African-American History; Latino Studies and Hispanic History; Popular Culture History; History of Memory; History of Everyday Life; Psycho-History; Sports History; Media History; and the list goes on....

For students who have learned history in grades K-12; you may have the impression that history is a series of facts to be memorized. Textbooks encourage this belief presenting a story clearly organized around chronological or thematic narratives that leave the impression that every event of the past was significant. But is every event significant? What choices do historians make when writing specialized studies of the past, and not massive textbooks that suck the life right out of us as we read!

No Scientific Rule

As Stéphane Lévesque notes, there are no scientific rules about what make something significant, but several factors shape historians' choices.²

1. Importance
 - a. Was it important to those who lived it?
 - b. Did it influence their behaviors?
2. Profundity
 - a. How deeply were people affected?
3. Quantity
 - a. How many people were affected?
 - b. Be careful not to allow the need for large number to shape analysis
4. Durability

¹ Quoted by Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008),

² Lévesque, *Thinking Historically*, 46-52.

- a. Should an event last a long time to be significant? What would that length of time be?
 - b. How does one determine durability if the beginning and end are unclear?
 - c. Be careful not to assume that only long-lasting events be significant.
 - d. How does the before and after picture compare?
5. Relevance
- a. Does the event have to be relevant to the historian?
 - b. Does the event have to be relevant to present-day developments?
 - c. Be careful to avoid presentism; what is relevant changes with time and each person.

Additional (More Troubling) Factors?

In judging relevance, we must acknowledge that “where we stand determines what we see.” However, we must also abide by the standards of the historical profession. Stéphane Lévesque elaborates and suggests three additional factors that might shape how we determine significance.³ These pose more challenges to meeting the standards of history (see American Historical Association Statement of Standards). What is more, if these factors dictate our judgment, do we risk violating the standards of history?

1. Intimate Interests
 - a. Is the event more personal or intimately of interest, e.g. family history, ancestry?
 - b. Be careful, because our personal investment may lead us to dismiss what is relevant if it does not jibe with personal interests.
2. Symbolic significance
 - a. “Is the event emblematically important? Does it represent something significant in the collective consciousness?”
 - b. Be careful, because this approach may lead to binary thinking if we create labels of us vs. them. What is more, it might lead us to exaggerate a turning point. For example, World War I (1914-1918) is often interpreted as a major turning point in European cultural history, even though evidence of these changes were present before 1914.
3. Contemporary Lessons
 - a. Are we drawn to a past event to explain or make analogies to current events?
 - b. Be careful, when we engage in this approach, we risk failing to understand the past on its own terms, in its own context.

Being aware of factors influencing historians (and you) as they pour through documents from the past and read historical interpretations can improve your critical reading skills.

Reading Primary Sources (i.e. Documents from the Past)

For each author (document), you should make notes in the following way:

1. Sourcing
 - a. Note the document name, title, author, date
2. Demonstrate Understanding
 - a. Paraphrase or summarize the major ideas.
 - b. Mark the text (e.g. circle dates; use question marks when you are confused or doubt the interpretation, exclamation points; underline)
3. Make note of context and subtext

³ Lévesque, *Thinking Historically*, 56-59.

- a. Facts known about the author, the document, era;
 - b. Author's intentions and motives (sometimes/oftentimes must be inferred)
 - c. What rhetorical devices are being used by the author in terms of word choice, punctuation, organization of ideas, etc?
 - d. Who is the intended audience (public, private, widespread, limited)?
4. Review the calendar of our syllabus to determine why the reading has been assigned. How might the reading be used in an assignment or exam?

Remember: "...knowing how to read something results almost automatically from knowing why we are reading, and without some purpose, reading is an aimless activity."

Reading Secondary Sources (i.e. Monographs)

You will encounter two predominant types of writing style in monographs and journal articles: narrative and analytical.

Narrative Style: The narrative style relies upon describing what happened; the facts speak for themselves so that they can tell a story. Narratives may appear value neutral, but are not. The authors' intent, motives, working assumptions or potential biases are sometimes evident in the following ways: word choice that hint at tone or judgment, selection, omission, and arrangement of facts, prefatory or introductory passages, a conclusion that elaborates on the importance of the work, author's explanation for why the s/he believes the topic should be discussed, and the sources consulted. Paragraph structures in the narrative style are worded and organized to tell a story in a logical progression from beginning, middle, and end.

Consider this mini-case study offered by Peter Lee, a contributor to *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*.⁴ Note that this volume examines how students in grades K-12 learn history, but I have often found that college students also read historical accounts uncritically (though I doubt they would be gullible enough to believe this account).

The concept of a historical *account* is related to that of evidence. Whereas with evidence the focus tends to be on the establishment of particular facts, with accounts we are more concerned with how students view historical narratives or representations of whole passages of the past.

Many younger [and college] students appear to work with the idea that what makes a "true story" true is that all the component singular factual statements within it are true. As a first move in distinguishing between true stories and fiction, this idea is reasonable enough, but as a characterization of a true story, it will not stand up even in everyday life. All the component singular factual statements in an account may be true, but the meaning of the account may still be highly contestable. The meaning of a story is more than the sum of its

⁴ Peter J. Lee, "Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History," in *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*, eds. M. Suzanne Donovan and John D. Bransford (Washington, DC: National Academic Press, 2005), 58-60.

parts. In history this point is of great importance, as the following account demonstrates.

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 Adolf Hitler

*In 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. IN elections held soon after he became chancellor, he won a massive majority of the votes. Pictures taken during his chancellorship suggest his popularity with the German people. He presided over an increasingly prosperous nation. A treaty signed with France in 1940 enabled Hitler to organize defenses for Germany along the Channel coast, and for a time Germany was the most militarily secure power in Europe. Hitler expressed on many occasions his desire to live peacefully with the rest of Europe, but in 1944 Germany was invaded from all sides by Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Unable to defeat this invasion of his homeland by superior numbers, Hitler took his own life as the invading Russian armies devastated Berlin. He is still regarded as one of the most important and significant figures of the twentieth century.*

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Every component statement in this account is true, but the story would not be accepted by most people as a "true story," and no historian would regard it as a valid account. Given that its title indicates a general survey of what is important about Hitler and his political career, the most obvious defect is the omission of clearly germane material that would give a different implicit meaning to the story. Moreover, what is said carries implications that would normally be specifically ruled out if they did not hold. IF we are told that a politician won a massive majority, this normally means that voters had choices and were not under duress. The point of saying, without qualification, that someone has expressed a desire to live at peace is that it shows what he or she wants, and Hitler did not – in any straightforward sense – want peace. The account puts matters in ways that would normally suggest certain relationships, but in this case the relationships are highly questionable.

If you encounter narrative accounts, which are sometimes found within analytical accounts, be aware that the author's arrangement of facts are intentional and what is omitted can be equally important to note but more difficult to detect.

Novice readers have difficulty recognizing the difference between fact and interpretation in a narrative style for three reasons. First, they get drawn into the story telling without thinking critically. Second, they need to acquire more knowledge about the topic to realize that even facts can be manipulated to advance interpretations that may or may not be plausible. Third, they assume that a story does not have a thesis. However, if they realize that a story is a pattern that was shaped from the facts and evidence, the pattern is the thesis; the thesis may be simplistic, but it exists. The thesis could be as simple as Franklin Roosevelt was the greatest president of the twentieth century, and that the author unveils the reasons why by simply describing the president's accomplishments. Although we tend to associate narrative styles with amateurs, professional historians will also write in this style.

Analytical Style: The analytical style will include narrative, but the author explicitly puts forth an argument. The author's intent, motives, working assumptions, potential biases can be manifest in the same way as in the narrative style. Their theses are more easily recognizable: located in prefaces, introductions, conclusions of their articles, chapters within the monographs, or the monograph itself. They are more likely to mention alternative

interpretations within the text of their work, in a preface or introduction, or in explanatory footnotes. In fact, paragraph structures are worded and organized to advance the arguments, not tell a story *per se*. The analytical style is more frequently found in works produced by university-trained historians who are expected to meet the standards of the profession. During the course of the twentieth century, narrative accounts became less popular in academia.

Authors are not required to put forth their theses in an introduction whether writing in either the narrative or analytical style, but it makes the readers' task easier if they do. Knowing that theses can be hidden in concluding paragraphs or individual chapters, you might jump ahead to these portions if you struggle with locating a thesis.

Before reading a book, study the front matter (i.e. preface, introduction, even acknowledgements), introductory and concluding chapter. If written according to the standards of the profession, the author will explain his/her thesis, what is original about his/her scholarship, and compare themselves to other historical interpretations in one or all of these portions of the book. Look for biographical information and publication record that provides insight on the author's expertise, working assumptions, perspective, etc.

If you are reading a journal article, read the abstract that frequently accompanies the citation or comes at the beginning of the article. If the author has written the article according to the standards of the profession, then s/he will explain his/her thesis in the first section or paragraph of the essay. Historiographical notes are sometimes buried in footnotes. Look for biographical information and publication record that provides insight on the author's expertise, working assumptions, perspective, etc.

Making notes when reading monographs and articles:

Determine each Author's Point of View (or perspective):

- Who is the author (education, expertise, gender, ethnicity, political affiliation, when s/he lived, where s/he lived)? What else has the author published? What type of history does the author prefer (e.g. intellectual, political, social, etc)? Does the author make use of prominent historical theories (e.g. Marxist, progressive, etc)? What are the author's working assumptions, methodologies, potential biases, expertise?
- What larger events were occurring around the time the author published his/her work?

Determine Goals and Thesis (plural: Theses):

- What are the authors' stated goals, questions, problems, topics, that s/he plans to address?
- A thesis can mean many different things but in the field of history, the thesis is the answer(s) to the historical question(s) raised by the author. What is the author's answers to his/her historical question(s)? In short, what are his/her interpretations?
- Is the author's thesis convincing?
- If the author has largely written a narrative history, i.e. telling a story, you may struggle with locating the thesis anticipating that it should appear in the form of an argument. Even when writing narrative histories, the historian's selection and arrangement of detail involves choices, judgment and reveals goals and theses.
- Your notes should primarily focus on the parts of the journal article or monograph that are most relevant to our reading goals

Analyze Evidence:

- What type of evidence or examples did the author provide to support his/her thesis? Is this evidence convincing or plausible?

- Note what kinds of primary or secondary sources the author cites in footnotes or in the text of the work. If examples are used to illustrate the argument or facts are offered, summarize the information in your own words. Note what does or does not convince you and why.
- Sometimes an author is convincing for reasons that go beyond evidence or examples. Rhetorical skills and clarity of argument can be equally persuasive. For example, historians who show that they understand counter arguments are using a rhetorical device to gain the readers trust.

Remember: "...knowing how to read something results almost automatically from knowing why we are reading, and without some purpose, reading is an aimless activity."

Convincing Historical Interpretations: Standards of the Historical Profession

Just as we cannot identify any scientific rules for determining significance, the same can be said about making convincing historical interpretations. Why are some historians more convincing than others?

The historical profession, in the United States, it is primarily represented by the American Historical Association, has a statement of standards that guides practice. Given the always incomplete nature of evidence from the past, we are not seeking truth so much as offering a plausible, reliable or convincing interpretation of the past. What makes a historical interpretation plausible?

1. Do not arrive at conclusions until we have access to enough reliable information.
2. Ask sound historical questions that cannot be easily answered, but can be answered given the available evidence.
3. Do not ignore evidence that could contradict our interpretations.
4. Do not fabricate evidence.
5. Be consistent in our methodology and reasoning.
6. Utilize the greatest variety and diversity of evidence.
7. Always accurately cite sources so that your work can be retraced.
8. Always acknowledge how other historians' have influenced your work.
9. Anticipate counter-arguments without misrepresenting other historians' interpretations.
10. Corroborate with a variety of independent accounts or pieces of evidence.
11. Interpret the evidence in the context of its times.
12. Avoid presentism.
13. Use common sense as a guide.
14. Be aware, as you research, how your research may be shaped by beliefs, values, biases, and working assumptions.