

Resource 1: How We Learn About the Past

There are two main ways to learn about what happened in the past.

How Do We Learn by “Getting History?”

The first and most common way to learn history involves reading, watching, or listening to what historians have already learned. For example, you might listen to a teacher tell you something about the past, or read a history book, or watch videos about things that happened long ago. Can you think of any history books or videos that describe events or people who lived in the past?

Getting history can be a great way to learn about the past. Many historians have done excellent research and found out what happened in the past, and other historians have checked their conclusions to make sure that they are credible or believable. It can save us a lot of time to read about what historians have already learned. For example, if a historian has already found that George Washington was our first President, or that Delaware became the “First State” in 1787, it saves us a lot of time to accept that and make better use of our time researching things that we do not know about

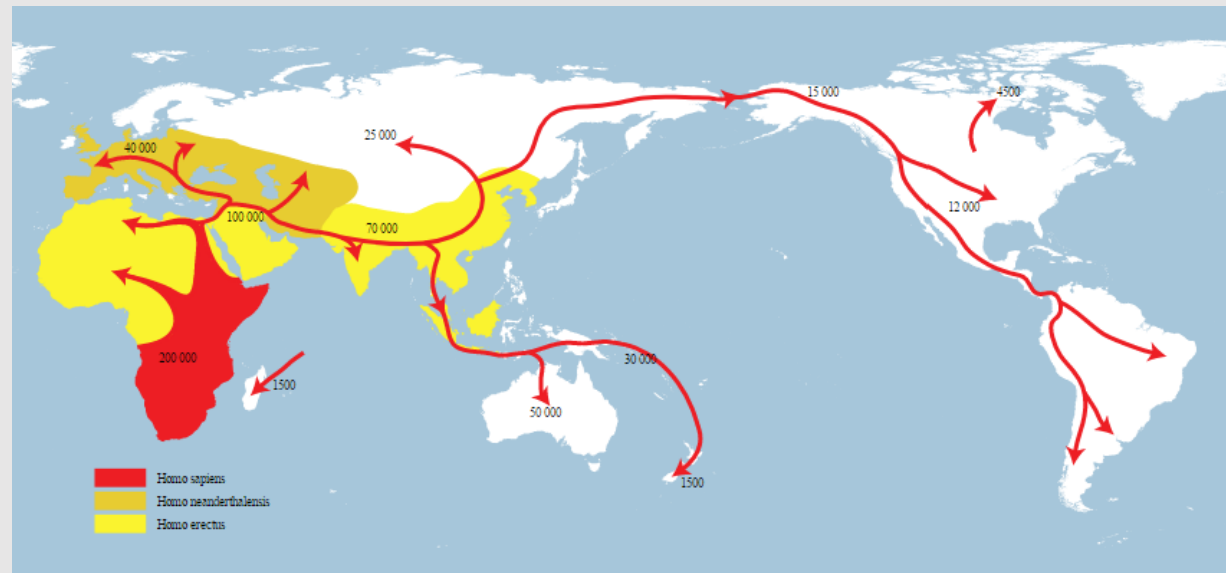
Still, there can be a problem with the “getting history” approach. The problem is that some people assume that everything that they read or hear about in history books or films are all facts. But that is not true. For example, the same book that states that “George Washington was our first President” might also state that “George Washington was our greatest President.” The first statement is a fact; the second statement is an interpretation or opinion.

Why is this important? Because we recognize that something we read or hear is an interpretation, it is good to do some checking to see if there might be evidence to prove that the interpretation is wrong or that there might be a better interpretation.

Remember when you did the History Bag activity? You looked at things in your partner’s bag to come up with an interpretation about your partner. But your partner was able to tell you which parts of your interpretation were correct and which ones were not. If some of history is interpretation, you should have opportunities to see if you can come up with better interpretations that are supported by stronger evidence.

So, let’s see what an example of “getting history” looks like. Read the information in the block.

America's First People



Many historians and scientists now think that people did not always live on the continent of America. Rather, they believe that they traveled here from another continent. Why do they believe in this interpretation? Because they have found fossils or bones that are much older in places like Africa. They have not found bones this old anywhere else. This evidence suggests that human life began in Africa. Then people moved around the world and settled in places like America.

The red arrows on the map show the routes that the earliest humans followed out of Africa

What did you learn about the past from your reading?

How Do We Learn About the Past by “Doing History?”

The other way to learn about the past is by “doing history.” In other words, by doing what historians do. Historians gather artifacts, documents, and other evidence to create interpretations that are believable. When you did your History Bag activity, you were “doing history.” You used the facts and evidence that you were given and created interpretations about your partner’s past. This is “doing history.”

A danger with the “doing history” approach is that you are more likely to believe your interpretation without checking to see if it should be believed. Historians call this process of checking their work and the work of others “corroborating.” How do they check? There are two main ways.

One way to corroborate is to see if other people who have studied the same thing have arrived at the same conclusions. If others have arrived at the same conclusions, we can have more confidence that the interpretation can be believed.

Another good way to check interpretations is to present them to other historians and invite them to check and see if you have made any mistakes. Historians do this all the time. They present their work to other historians who then try to find mistakes. This process is good because it also makes us more confident that an interpretation can be believed.

Remember when you presented your history bag interpretation to your partners and they explained what you got right and what you got wrong? You were corroborating your conclusions. This is what smart people do.

To summarize, there are two main ways to learn about the past. You can either “get history” or “do history.” Historians value both approaches and so should you. The important thing is that you corroborate what you read, hear, and conclude. Otherwise, you may end up believing things that are not true.