

Introduction to Historical Methods

What is Historical Methodology?

Historical methodology refers to the systematic approaches historians use to investigate, interpret, and present the past. Unlike the natural sciences, history cannot conduct controlled experiments—events cannot be repeated or isolated. Instead, historians work with traces: documents, artifacts, oral testimonies, and other remnants that survive across time.

Primary vs. Secondary Sources

Primary sources are materials created during the period under study:

- Letters, diaries, and personal correspondence
- Government records and legal documents
- Photographs and film footage
- Newspaper articles from the era
- Physical artifacts and archaeological remains

Secondary sources interpret and analyze primary sources:

- Academic monographs and journal articles
- Textbooks and encyclopedias
- Documentary films (when made after the fact)
- Biographies written by later authors

The Historian's Craft

Marc Bloch described history as the “science of men in time.” This definition emphasizes:

1. **Human agency** - History focuses on people making choices within constraints
2. **Temporal context** - Events must be understood within their specific moment
3. **Change over time** - Historians trace transformations and continuities

Questions Every Historian Should Ask

When examining any source, consider:

- **Who created this?** What was their position, perspective, biases?
- **When was it created?** How close to the events described?
- **Why was it created?** Official record, personal reflection, propaganda?
- **Who was the intended audience?** Public or private?
- **What is missing?** Whose voices are absent?

Avoiding Anachronism

One of the greatest pitfalls in historical analysis is **presentism**—judging the past by contemporary standards without understanding historical context. This doesn’t mean historians cannot make moral judgments, but those judgments

should acknowledge what people in the past could reasonably have known or believed.

Key Takeaways

- History is an interpretive discipline, not merely a collection of facts
- Sources must be critically evaluated, not taken at face value
- Context shapes meaning—always situate evidence in its time and place
- Multiple perspectives enrich understanding; single narratives often mislead