Lesson 4 How Historians Study the Past

BEFORE YOU READ
In this lesson, you will learn what methods historians use to study the past.

AS YOU READ
Use this web diagram to record the three main jobs of historians.

Understanding the Past
(pages 39–40)

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

We study world history because what happened to a society affects what will happen today and in the future. History is more than just studying what happened in the past. When you study a historical event, you also study a society’s culture, religion, politics, and economics.

Historians look for causes and effects that help to explain how and why events happened. They try to see the past through the eyes of the people who lived it.

When they study the past, historians ask themselves questions. The answers to the questions help historians draw conclusions about the past. For example, historians ask questions such as how societies are similar and different. They also ask how leaders governed societies.

1. What do historians do when they study the past?

   _____________________________________________

   _____________________________________________

   _____________________________________________

TERMS & NAMES

• primary source something written or created by a person who witnessed a historical event

• secondary source something written after a historical event by a person who did not witness the event

• oral history all the unwritten verbal accounts of events
The Historian’s Tools
(pages 40–41)
What methods do historians use to help them answer questions about what happened in the past?
Historians use tools to help them do their job. Some of these tools are primary sources. A primary source is something written or created by a person who saw a historical event. Letters, diaries, speeches, and photographs are examples of primary sources. Artifacts such as tools are also primary sources.

Other tools that historians use are secondary sources. They are written after a historical event by people who did not see the event. Books and paintings that are based on primary sources and appear after an event are examples of secondary sources.

Yet another tool that historians use is oral history. This is made up of all the unwritten verbal accounts of events. Historians depend on oral history when studying cultures that have no written records. Oral histories include the stories, customs, and songs that people in a culture have passed down from generation to generation.

How Knowledge of the Past Changes
(pages 42–43)
What steps do historians take as they answer historical questions?
Historians use evidence from primary and secondary sources and oral histories to answer their questions. They have to choose what information is most important and trustworthy as evidence.

Historical evidence is not always simple. Sometimes what historians thought to be true turns out to be false. Sometimes historians come to different conclusions using the same evidence.

2. What is the difference between primary and secondary sources?

3. What do historians have to do with the evidence they find?

Chapter 1 Lesson 4