

Why do we study History?

This question crops up in various forms in many scholarships. Sometimes it comes in the form of a quotation eg. "History is bunk (Henry Ford), sometimes in the form above, and it can also appear as a question examining the place of History teaching in schools eg. "Why should History feature as part of the school curriculum?"

Firstly you must remember that the person marking your answer is a history teacher, and so an answer should tend towards defending history, rather than attacking it! That said, there are points to consider against it, and a well-argued answer should give due consideration to both sides of the debate. Whatever your personal views, the points tend to come out strongly in favour of retaining a study of history.

What exactly is history? At which point do current affairs become historical events? Does the Gulf War qualify, the Falklands War, the Vietnam War or do you have to go back further? Whatever you take as a starting point, history determines how we live our lives today. A typical evening's news, or daily paper, might cover stories on an IRA bomb attack, political upheaval in Russia, civil war in Bosnia and peace talks between Arab and Israelis in the Middle East. All of these problems have a historical basis, and it would not be possible to understand them without taking into account background events; what do the IRA hope to achieve and why, what causes the hatred between Arab and Jew, how can a country such as Bosnia contain so many warring groups? We cannot avoid the fact that people are motivated by the past; many so-called religious problems are in fact historical ones, stemming from past acts by religious groups eg. Moslem against Christian (crusades), Catholic versus Protestant (Ireland).

Yet all this may seem to be a different subject to the study of the Norman Conquest, the Agricultural Revolution or the Civil War. However, in order to understand how the world is today, we must look back to see how events such as the Magna Carta in 1215, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 helped to create our system of government and legal system. Events in the Middle East, Asia, Eastern Europe !Did Ireland date from this time .

This leads to another reason for the study of history; it can provide answers to the infinite number of questions concerning how places, events and people came to be as they are today. What is the origin of the name of this village, or what is my family background? People are interested in the past, hence the popularity of historic sites and buildings: History can be interesting!

History can create and reinforce the heritage of a country, recording key events eg Hastings, Magna Carta, Trafalgar etc, creating a national identity and sense of union and pride in one's country. All of these points revolve around a knowledge of actual events. However the usefulness of the subject is that it brings together a number of important skills, that are usable far beyond the topics on the course. These include the collection of data and factual information, looking at evidence and picking out bias and motivation, judging accuracy, handling this and processing it in order to produce a balanced conclusion. These skills are useful in many subjects, and in many areas of life; lawyers, business, education etc. Hence studying History achieves much more than just a knowledge of the topics on the course.

Despite this, the arguments against History are there; surely it is not relevant in the modern world, when technical skills, and science and technology are a fundamental part of our lives (hence the Henry Ford quote)? Should not more time be devoted to these areas?

Added to this is the fact that people would visit historic sites anyway, whether or not they had studied it at school, and it may well not be connected to the periods that they have studied.

An opening paragraph:

1. People are defined by who they are by other people. The same can be said about the study of history. A nation and its past can only be defined by its history and how people interpret it. An example would be how the Normans (the victors) define their role in the Norman Conquest which would be radically different from that of the Saxons (the defeated). Hence the study of History is all about the understanding of past events and how they define the way in which a nation conducts itself. This essay will attempt to show how historians study the past and the problems that are associated with this task.