

Explore More—Who Says?

Directions: Listen to your teacher talk about different historical points of view. You will learn how to ask the right questions to understand the context for historical statements. Refer to the maps in your Explore Geography Picture Dictionary to locate the places your teacher mentions and to see the topography of the continent. Circle any words you don't understand. Underline or highlight important ideas in the text. Write notes in the margins to help you understand key points. Then answer the questions in your own words.

Historical Points of View

Historians are very interested in detecting the “point of view” of both primary and secondary sources. What is a point of view? Simply put, it is the position from which a person observes or considers something. On one level, your point of view from the window in your classroom might be a parking lot. However, point of view carries another meaning. It also refers to a person’s manner of viewing things or a person’s attitude. For example, your school may get extra funding if a bond issue passes. Suppose you know that this extra money is for a project that will benefit you. It is likely that your point of view of this bond issue is favorable. That is, you think people should vote “yes” on this issue. You might encourage your parents or other adults to vote for this bond issue. You might even help post signs in support of it. Your point of view influences your words and actions.

Those who lived in earlier times also had points of view about people and events. One person might have liked the king of her country because the ruler was generous and kind to her. However, another person might have disliked the king because he took away her property or put her in prison. These two people might have very different points of view on the same person.

The All-Important Context

The circumstances in which a particular event or situation occurs is referred to as the context. For example, if you heard that someone was shouting and jumping for joy, you would want to know why. What was the context for this person’s joy? Did the person just get an “A” on an important test? Was she just elected to a school office or make a sports team? What if the person was crying? What was the context for that person’s sorrow? You would want to know why the person was crying.

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The issue of context is very important to historians. They want to know the context in which statements were made or ideas were written down. This helps them figure out how to evaluate these statements and ideas.

Historians today want to know this information about the statements and ideas that past historians and other writers made. For example, the ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, wrote about a war—called the Peloponnesian War—between Athens and Sparta.

Point to Greece on the map.

These were two of the most important city-states of ancient Greece. Modern historians want to know what sources Thucydides used in writing about this war. Did he only talk to Athenians? Thucydides was an Athenian citizen—did this affect his point of view? In other words, did he write more favorably about his own city-state? What was his perspective? What questions did he ask? What topics did he write about? Why didn't he write about certain topics? Answers to these questions help historians write about the past in a more balanced way.

Here's another example. When Columbus landed on the shores of the "New World," he encountered a group of Taino Indians. Suppose historians only looked at the statements and ideas from the point of view of the Spaniards. It's not that the writings of the Spaniards were necessarily untrue, but they reflected a particular point of view. In order to get a more complete understanding of the encounter, historians know that it is important to look at the encounter from the perspective of the Taino Indians. Some earlier histories ignored this point of view.

Only by asking and answering questions such as the ones we have been discussing and carefully analyzing the evidence can historians come to strong conclusions about the past. Their goal is to tell the full story of human history. ❖

YOUR TURN!

Write your answers to the following questions.

1. What is a historical point of view? Give an example.

2. Why is knowing the context for a historical point of view important?

3. How can an author's questions, sources, and perspectives provide clues to the author's historical point of view?

In the space below, draw a picture to show the first meeting of Spaniards and the Taino Indians from the perspective of either the Spaniards or the Taino Indians.



Questions for further discussion:

- How can interpretations of history change when new information is uncovered? Give examples.
- How can you tell the difference between fact and opinion in historical points of view? Give examples.
- What roles do chance, oversight, and error play in history?