



Overview: History Stories

By Trevor Getz

We learn history stories because they are meaningful. But to use them effectively, we need to explore how they are made and interpreted. That's what Unit 1 is all about.



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In 1348 CE (Common Era), people in the Italian town of Pistoia started to get sick. First, they got fevers, as high as 105°F. Sores began to appear on their bodies, some the size of an egg. After a few days, they began to convulse, and then to vomit, repeatedly, until they died. Within the year, two-thirds of that town's population were dead, and travelers reported that nothing was being made or grown in the entire region.

Pistoia was only one of thousands of communities across Europe, Asia, and North Africa to suffer from the Black Death plague in the fourteenth century—more than six hundred years ago. It seems like it happened in a different world, where disease spread by sailing ships and caravans, with no knowledge of viruses and bacteria and the role they played in illness. Although we now live in a world of germ theory and jet planes, we still learn about these past events in history classes today. Did you ever wonder why? I mean, admittedly the Black Death is a more fun lesson than some others in class because it's gross, plus those plague doctors wore awesome masks. But really, who cares? We don't live in Pistoia in 1348 – it's the twenty-first century!

2020

Oh, wait. In 2020, we all suddenly started caring about this history. For more than half a century, the United States had avoided a major epidemic of communicable disease. Our grandparents' and great-grandparents' generation lived through a polio epidemic, when the swimming pools were closed every summer and everyone had at least one friend who had to have a machine help them to breathe. But we hadn't experienced anything like that until COVID-19 spread across the world. And it spread even faster than the Black Death had spread because jet planes move disease just as they move people—faster than sailing ships do.

Suddenly, everybody wanted to understand the history of diseases like the Black Death. Where did it start? How did it spread? Why did it make people sick? What could people do to avoid getting sick? How did the disease change society? And what lessons might we learn from it to help us to understand our own situation?

The year 2020 also saw another historical story come to the fore. It was a year of protests, many of them led by the Black Lives Matter movement, which began in reaction to the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans. As a result of this protest movement, longstanding questions about the history of racism as an American and global experience were brought to the front of a national conversation. People began to debate the history of police forces as well as statues of Confederate soldiers and leaders. Important people wrote and spoke about whether or not we as a society had made any progress in combating racism in the century and a half since the abolition of slavery (1865 in the United States), and the half century since the Voting Rights Act that capped the Civil Rights Movement (1965). Around the world, people began to pull down statues themselves, mostly of men from the past believed to have been slave traders (in Britain), colonizers (in South Africa), and racists (in the United States).



Plague doctors' mask from Italy. This type of mask is actually from a later outbreak of the plague that swept through Europe in the seventeenth century. By Gerhart Altzenbach, public domain.



A primary care nurse in modern protective gear during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020. By Whispyhistory, CC BY-SA 4.0.

History matters

What does all of this “now” stuff have to do with the world history course you are starting? History is the past, right?

Sure, history is often taught as a bunch of information—data about the past that you are supposed to remember. What was the Columbian Exchange? What caused the Industrial Revolution? What was the impact of the Cold War? Dates, places, people. This is important information.

Sometimes, it’s also taught as a set of skills, like how to read a primary source, or how to determine what changes and what stays the same over time, or how to determine the causes of an event. These are useful skills to have.

But neither skills nor information are enough to justify spending your time on a world history class.

This course will help you to gain those skills and pick up a lot of that information. But there’s more. We’re going to focus on helping you to use those skills and that information to make meaning of the world you’re living in. We want to help you to determine for yourselves what lessons you can learn from the Black Death. We hope to help you to decide for yourself what the global history of race is, and how it shaped your country and community, and how you want to act today.

Making history stories usable

You may have already watched two videos that help to introduce this course—Bob Bain’s *What Makes History Usable?* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Danger of a Single Story*. You may have also made your own history—by drawing it! Together, these activities covered some of the key points of this course. Let’s review:

- People tell stories about the past—whether in videos, or written in articles, or even drawn as comics or other kinds of art. In this course, you’re going to encounter lots of these history stories. You also encounter them in your everyday life, online, in the classroom, in statues and museums, in newspaper stories, and even in your family’s stories about the past.
- These stories can be useful to you! But they’re not all usable in the same way. For you to make use of history stories, you have to be able to determine if they’re accurate accounts of the past based on evidence, and then you have to be able to determine why they are meaningful in today’s situation.
- Different people might view the same events in the past but tell different stories about them. It’s important to be able to appreciate these different stories, even while you evaluate them.

Here’s a good example, I think. Imagine you and one of your friends have a fight. Afterward, you both get on Instagram or Snapchat or just start texting your version of the fight to all of your friends. That means there are two different stories about the fight.

Now imagine that a historian, years or even centuries in the future, wants to know all about that fight. Maybe you became the President of the World and they are writing your biography. Or maybe they are just studying what teenagers in the early twenty-first century fought about. Maybe they’re hoping they’ll learn something that is useful for their own time—like how to help teenagers resolve their fights before they get too bad!

Claim testing

Whatever their goal, the historians of the future are fortunate to have several history stories to work with if they want to know what really happened in this fight. Now imagine if they only had the social media of your friend—the one you had the fight with—to work with. The result would be an account that wasn’t accurate, right? That probably

seems unfair. Fortunately, they have two stories of the fight to examine. The presence of two stories will let them understand the fight from both sides, which will give them a richer comprehension of the issues in the eyes of both participants. Also, they will need to evaluate the two stories in order to try to determine which is a better account. But how will they know what to believe?

Throughout this course, you will learn about the skills that help historians determine which stories of the past make the most sense and are the most likely to be accurate. Together, we call these skills “claim testing.” Here’s what claim testing means:

- Each history story makes one or more “claims” about what happened. In our example, what caused the fight?
- Historians “test” these claims by seeing if the evidence matches that story.

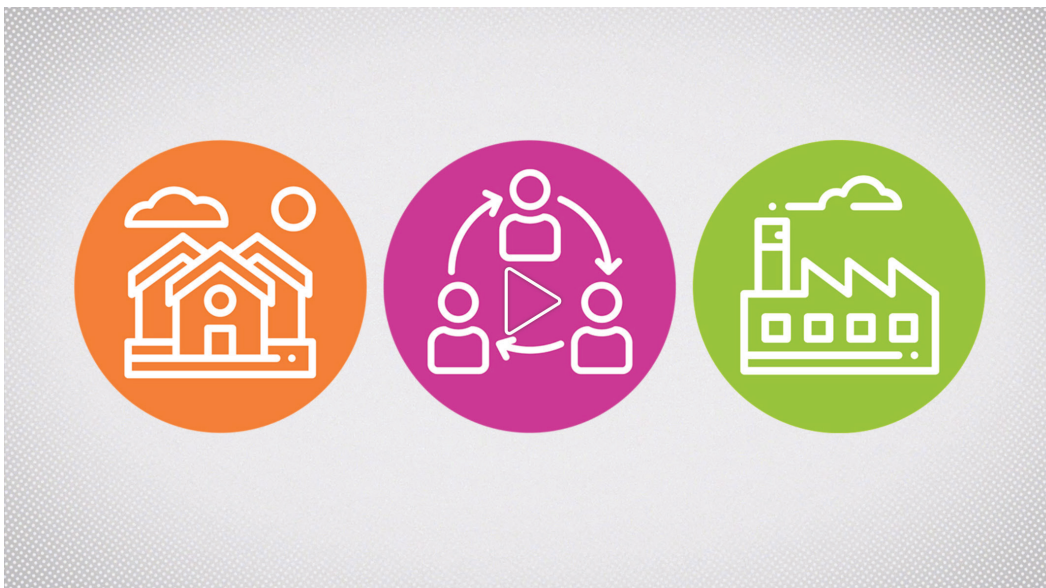
In this case, the historians may try to determine why you and your friend are telling different stories about the fight. What are your motives? Who is your audience? They may also go searching for additional evidence. Were there any witnesses? What do other people say about this fight?

Introducing this skill of claim testing is another important activity within this unit, something to start learning before you even begin to look at world historical events and trends we introduce in later units.

Framing history

The same skills needed to understand a teenage fight also apply to world history, even if it’s on a larger scale. In this course, you’re going to be covering many hundreds of years. You’ll learn about thousands of people and events spread across time and around the world. How can you make sense of it all so that it’s usable to you today?

The last lesson in this first unit offers you one last set of tools for making meaning from all of this history. These are history frames, specifically the communities, networks, and production and distribution frames.



[The three frames for this course: communities, networks, and production and distribution.](#) By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

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So, what is a frame? Well, a frame is a particular way of looking at a complex event from just one angle. Take the Black Death story that we started with. It's a story about disease, sure. But it's also a story about how diseases move from one society or one person to another (networks), and about how a disease affects a town (communities), and how it causes farming and trade to dry up (production and distribution). All of these stories are important, but it's a lot. As you'll see, by viewing the story through each of these frames in turn, it becomes easier to understand.

By the end of this unit, you'll know how to use frames, claim testing, and history stories to make sense of the past. These exercises will prepare you for the next unit, when we let you loose on the evidence of what happened in the global past beginning around 1200 CE and what it means to you today!!

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Image credits

Cover image: Jean de Mielot, secretary to Philippe de Bourgogne, sits on a folding chair and works on an illuminated manuscript in a 15th century scriptorium, France, mid 1400s. The engraving is taken from 'Miracles de Notre Dame,' by Sir F Warne. © Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

Plague doctors' mask from Italy. This type of mask is actually from a later outbreak of the plague that swept through Europe in the seventeenth century. By Gerhart Altzenbach, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plague_doctors%27_beak_shaped_mask.png

A primary care nurse in modern protective gear during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020. By Whispyhistory, CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Primary_care_nurse_in_PPE.jpg

The three frames for this course: communities, networks, and production and distribution. OER Project. <https://www.oerproject.com/Origins-to-the-Present/Era-1/History-Frames#guidff101c24-a28b-4d39-8cf8-b4b71b941374>