



What is History?

Homework activities for after your first A Level History lesson

COMPLETE THE THREE HOMEWORK TASKS IN THE GREEN TABLE

"**History**... is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, **an unending dialogue between the present and the past.**" That is how the historian E. H. Carr described history in his famous 1961 book, **What is History?** (Carr, 1961). It is a more complicated idea than it first sounds, but it captures something important. **History** is not simply a list of facts. It is also about how those facts are chosen, understood and explained.

You have just finished your first **History** lesson. This short reading will help you understand what history actually means as a subject, and introduce a few key words you will keep using throughout the course. Once you have read it, complete the questions and activities at the end.

What Does History Mean?

Ask different people what history is and you will get different answers. Some think of history as a set of facts and dates to learn. Others think history is really about interpretation: why things happened, and how we explain them.

Both ideas matter. Historians build their explanations from evidence, but they also make choices about which evidence matters and how to interpret it. Before looking at two different views of history, here are some key words to know.

Key terms
History: the study of the past, based on evidence, and the explanations historians build from that evidence.
Source: any piece of evidence from or about the past that historians use to build a picture of what happened.
Evidence: information taken from sources that historians use to support a claim about the past.
Interpretation: a historian's explanation of events, which can differ even when historians look at the same evidence.

Two Different Views of History

The German historian Leopold von Ranke argued that historians should aim to show the past "**wie es eigentlich gewesen**", or "how it actually happened" (Ranke, 1824). On this **objective view**, the historian's job is to uncover facts as accurately as possible, letting the evidence speak for itself.

Other historians disagree. E. H. Carr argued that history is never simply objective, because historians choose which facts matter and interpret them through the outlook of their own time (Carr, 1961). On this **interpretive view**, history is shaped as much by the historian as by the evidence itself.

View	What it says
Objective view (Ranke)	Historians should show the past as accurately and neutrally as possible, letting the evidence speak for itself.
Interpretive view (Carr)	History is shaped by the historian's own choices and outlook, so different historians can reach different conclusions from the same evidence.

Table 1: Two different views of how history should be written.

- Most A Level **History** work expects you to use both ideas: working carefully from evidence, while also recognising that historians can interpret it differently.
- You will meet this debate again whenever you compare different historians' interpretations of the same event.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Historians also sort evidence into two broad types. A **primary source** is evidence created at the time of the event being studied, such as a letter, a photograph or an official record. A **secondary source** is a later work in which a historian interprets or comments on the past, such as a textbook or an academic article.

Neither type of source can simply be trusted at face value. **Primary sources** need to be checked carefully: who created them, why, and how reliable they are likely to be. **Secondary sources** are useful for interpretation and context, but should also be questioned, since historians disagree with one another.

- A diary written during a war is a **primary source** for that war.
- A book written fifty years later explaining the causes of that war is a **secondary source**.

Back to Carr

Carr's phrase, "**an unending dialogue between the present and the past**", is a good way to remember what history is about. Every topic on this course, whichever period you study, is really a version of this same question: what happened, and how do we know?

HOMEWORK TASKS – MUST BE HAND-WRITTEN

1. What does E. H. Carr mean by history being "an unending dialogue between the present and the past"?
2. What is the difference between the objective view (Ranke) and the interpretive view (Carr) of history?
3. What is the difference between a primary source and a secondary source?

OPTIONAL EXTENSION Activities

The activities below all check that you have understood the reading above. Those of you aiming for high A Level grades – A*/A – should always consider completing extension/check your understanding tasks in your own time. Hand them in, and get extra feedback.

Activity 1: Match the Key Words

List the four terms from the Key terms box (history, source, evidence, interpretation) in one column, and the four definitions in a jumbled, different order in a second column. Match each term to its correct definition from memory, then check your answers against the reading and correct any mistakes.

Activity 2: Complete the Comparison Table

Using the reading, complete the blank grid below. Fill in what each view (the objective view and the interpretive view) says about how history should be written, and note which historian is linked to each one.

View	Who says this	What it says

Activity 3: True or False?

Mark each statement below true or false, then correct every false statement so that it becomes true. All six can be answered directly from the reading.

1. E. H. Carr's book was called What is History? and was published in 1961.
2. Ranke's objective view says that history is always shaped by the historian's own outlook.
3. The phrase "wie es eigentlich gewesen" is German for "how it actually happened".
4. According to the reading, a primary source is a later work in which a historian interprets the past.
5. A photograph taken at the time of an event is an example of a primary source.
6. Secondary sources should never be questioned, since they are written by historians.

Activity 4: Sort the Examples

The six examples below do not appear in the reading. For each one, decide whether it is a primary source, a secondary source, or could be either depending on how it is used, and explain your answer in one sentence.

- A soldier's diary written during the First World War.
- A history textbook chapter about the First World War, published in 2020.
- A newspaper report published on the day of an event.
- A documentary made fifty years after the event it describes, using historians' interviews.
- An official government record of population numbers from the time.
- A biography of a historical figure, written decades after their death.

Activity 5: Objective or Interpretive?

For each statement below, decide whether it fits the objective view (Ranke), the interpretive view (Carr), or both, and explain your answer in one sentence using the definitions from the reading.

- A historian insists that only verified facts, not opinions, belong in a history book.
- Two historians studying the same battle reach different conclusions about who was really responsible.
- A historian argues that all history reflects the values and concerns of the time it was written in.
- A historian carefully cross-checks three eyewitness accounts before writing a narrative of an event.
- A historian claims their account simply shows the past exactly as it happened, without any bias.

Sources

Carr, E. H. (1961) *What is History?* London: Macmillan.

Ranke, L. von (1824) *Preface to Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations from 1494 to 1514*.