**Approaching Historiography[[1]](#footnote-1)**

John H. Arnold has defined history as “true stories historians tell about the past.” This points us towards the idea that “history” is not the same thing as “the past.” Historians – whether they're skilled and honest or the opposite – necessarily select, omit, and interpret the past.

To have a sophisticated understanding of history (and to get higher marks on the IB Exam) we need to step back and study the practice of history; that's called historiography. Merriam-Webster defines historiography as “the principles, theory, and history of historical writing.” That seems like a good starting place for us.

The principles and theories behind the stories can differ greatly from one place, or time, or historian, to another. Our interpretations of the past change in response to new evidence, new questions asked of the evidence, new perspectives gained by the passage of time. There is no single, eternal, and immutable "truth" about past events and their meaning. The unending quest of historians for understanding the past – and revising our previous understandings – is what makes history vital and meaningful. Without revisionism, we might be stuck with the understanding of Reconstruction we saw in D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and read in William Dunning's works.

The term “School of History” generally refers to groups of scholars who use similar methods or come to similar conclusions. The school could be literal (the Dunning School of Reconstruction History was centered around Columbia University), but it's mostly used metaphorically. “Philosophy of History” means pretty much the same thing. So does “School of Historiography,” even if that term is a bit redundant.

There is a lot of overlap between some of these schools, and plenty of historians could be called members of multiple schools. Some historians will be hard to pigeonhole, and that's okay. The goal of learning about historiography isn't to definitively place each historian in a school; the goal is to help us analyze and contextualize their claims.

Here are some schools (or philosophies) of history. Some of these are familiar to you already:

* Structuralist historians believe that large economic, political, cultural, etc. structures in society will determine the path of history.
* Determinists are a more extreme version of Structuralists, and both groups overlap with Marxists. Determinists believe that there are laws of history determining how events will unfold. Their approach treats history almost like a natural science. If you heat water it will boil; if you have an educated population starving in the cities you will have a revolution.
* Marxists emphasize social class and economic patterns in determining historical outcomes. Marxist historians are generally deterministic; they tend to argue that history is a process in which new economic classes take political power from older classes and we'll eventually end up in a classless human society.
* Liberals (not in the sense of people on the American political Left) think that individual actions and decisions play a major part in history.
* Intentionalist historians are more or less the same as Liberals.
* The “Great Man” theory of history, related to the two schools just above, emphasizes the ability of individuals with great intelligence, charisma, or wisdom to shape history. As its founder said, “The history of the world is but the biography of great men.”
* Social Darwinists view history as an ongoing experiment in the evolution of societies. History progresses through the process of survival of the fittest. Strong, vibrant, and militaristic countries and cultures defeat and replace weaker or decadent ones.
* Whig historians present the past as an inevitable progression towards ever greater liberty and enlightenment, culminating in modern forms of liberal democracy and constitutional monarchy.

Another distinction to make, maybe the most important one, is between Mainstream historiansandRevisionist historians. The familiar quotation tells us that history is written by the victors. That means that the first versions or interpretations of some events will come from whatever group or country is is a position of power, and often their true stories about the past will attempt to justify or entrench that power. This type of mainstream version of history has also been called the Status Quo, or Orthodox, or Traditionalist School of History.

Revisionist historians come later, and they proceed from the assumption that the mainstream, accepted version of history is inaccurate. Revisionist historians might challenge the traditional view due to:

* Access to new data, like unsealed government archives
* New sources translated from other languages
* Scientific progress, like the DNA analysis that confirmed Jefferson fathered multiple children with his enslaved maid, Sally Hemings
* Changing cultural values or national identities
* The rise and fall of ideologies like fascism and Stalinism.

Revisionist history is often practiced by those who are in some kind of minority, such as feminist historians, African-Americans, those working outside of mainstream academia in smaller and less known universities, or the youngest scholars who have the most to gain and the least to lose in challenging the status quo.

Disputes between mainstream beliefs and revisionist claims can change, solidify, or clarify our beliefs about historical events. Sometimes revisionist ideas become so widely accepted that they become the new status quo. And Revisionist Schools of history may be associated with different eras, depending on the subject being studied. The Revisionist School of Civil War history peaked in the 1930s and 1940s, while the Revisionist School of the Vietnam War obviously came later. This can be a bit confusing, so we'll keep an eye out for it.

But we can associate certain American Schools of history with particular eras, keeping in mind that we're generalizing and eras are fuzzy around the edges[[2]](#footnote-2). Here are some important American Schools of History, along with the decades that probably represented their times of greatest influence and vitality.

* The Traditional School (pre-1900): Tends to focus on political, diplomatic, and military decision-making. Uses qualitative rather than quantitative data. Often beholden to the Great Man Theory of history. Influenced by 19th century European writing about Napoleon.
* The Progressive School (1900-1940’s): Concerned with industrialization and urbanization. Influenced by the rise of the social sciences – economics, sociology, psychology, etc. – as separate fields of study that could be applied back to history. De-emphasizes political history. Stresses the differences and competition between various groups, sections, and classes. Clearly defined turning points are the rise of one group and the defeat of the other. Emphasize rich vs. poor, special interests vs. people, aristocracy vs. democracy, liberalism vs. conservatism, agrarianism vs. capitalism.
* The Consensus School (1940’s-1960’s): The shared ideas of Americans are more important than conflicts among between them. A throwback to the traditional school, but also reflects the emergence of the United States as a global superpower. Celebrates the accomplishments, scientific achievements, durable institutions, founding documents, cultural unity, and special role in world affairs, of American democratic capitalism.
* The New Left School (1960’s-1980’s): Reflects decades of conflict and polarization over civil rights, the Vietnam War, feminism, gay rights, and poverty. Suspicious of American intentions in world affairs. Focuses on the masses and their experiences, history from the bottom up, and oral history. Emphasizes pluralism and the violent, racist, repressive aspects of society.
* The Neo-Conservative School (1980’s-Present): A reaction to the New Left social movements, and to some extent a re-assertion of consensus historiography. Stresses traditional American values, cultural unity, the exceptional role and status of the U.S. as a world leader. Downplays social conflicts and considers New Left historians to be politically correct ideologues. Suspicious of the use of Federal power, except to support the free market or traditional values.

So, how do we apply these ideas to our IB essays? For starters, when you use historiography, you should try and be specific about the debates and what schools of thought individuals belong to. Use historiography to support or develop arguments, not in place of them. And how to do that is the subject of our next salmon-colored handout...

1. Cobbled together from various Internet and book sources, the best of which are John H. Arnold's “History” and John Lewis Gaddis' “The Landscape of History,” and the worst of which is an internet encyclopedia that will not be named. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ask Leon Bridges when the Soul Era ended. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)