

WHO TELLS YOUR STORY Handout 1: Who Writes History?

History is not a static story, but a complex experience of the present and the past. Think about how the meaning and significance of a modern event is interpreted in different ways by different television newscasts or from one newspaper to another. Our understanding of the history we are living today is also shaped by debates on social media, citizen journalists writing blogs, streaming videos of live events, and in movies and TV shows that reflect or reinterpret our society. We are living in our history, but we do not always agree with our peers about what is happening, why it matters, and if it is important.

In the same way, our understanding of an era or event from the past is influenced by many factors: the priorities and values of the people who witnessed and shaped the history at the time; the quality and availability of artifacts and evidence from that era; and the biases, preconceptions, and goals of modern interpreters of that history. For that reason the events, institutions, ideas, objects, and individuals who shape our past continue to be revisited and debated by each new generation.

Although historians are documenting and relating history as objectively as possible, we can see that each historian processes information through her/his own experiences, interests, values, and perspectives. Historians create narratives, including the narratives in textbooks, based on their interpretations of the evidence available to them. As readers, we need to be active and critical audiences of their work.

The study of historians and the way history is written is called historiography. Historiography studies the way historians remember, write about, interpret, and teach historical eras and events. “When one studies the historiography of a particular era, one especially focuses on the way that the memories and interpretations of that era have changed.” (1)

1. Facing History and Ourselves <https://www.facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/lessons/contested-history> (Hyperlink URL)