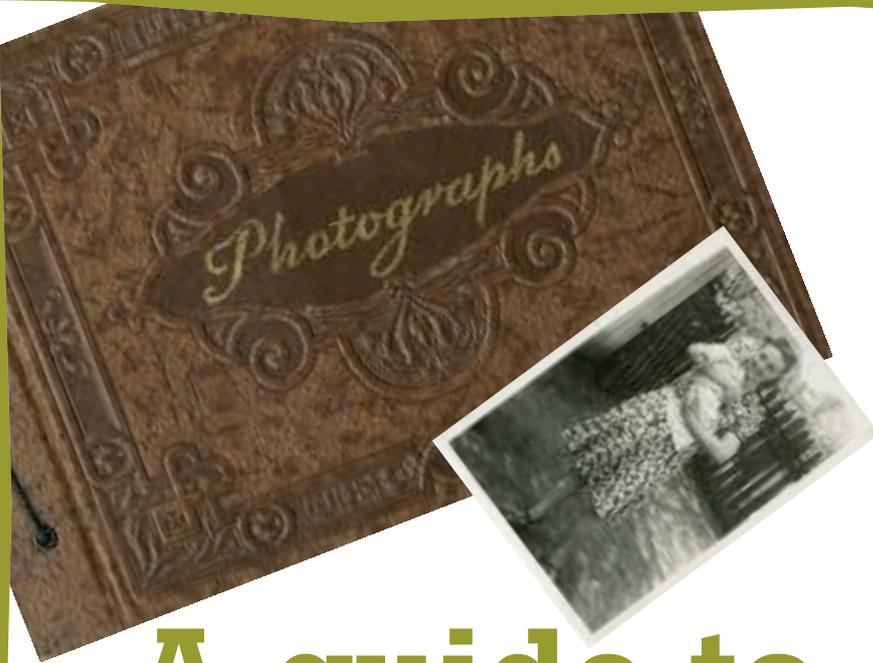


The BBC logo, consisting of the letters 'B', 'B', and 'C' each inside a black square, arranged horizontally.

HANDS ON HISTORY



A guide to interpreting historical evidence

Every image, object, building, written source and landscape is a piece of evidence that can help us understand the past. Analysing this kind of evidence is called 'interpreting'.

Beginning to interpret historical evidence may feel a little daunting, but interpreting simply involves asking questions that we ask every day to help us look at the evidence in a new way.

You can use five simple questions as a starting point to interpret all sorts of historical evidence: **What? Where? When? Who? Why?**

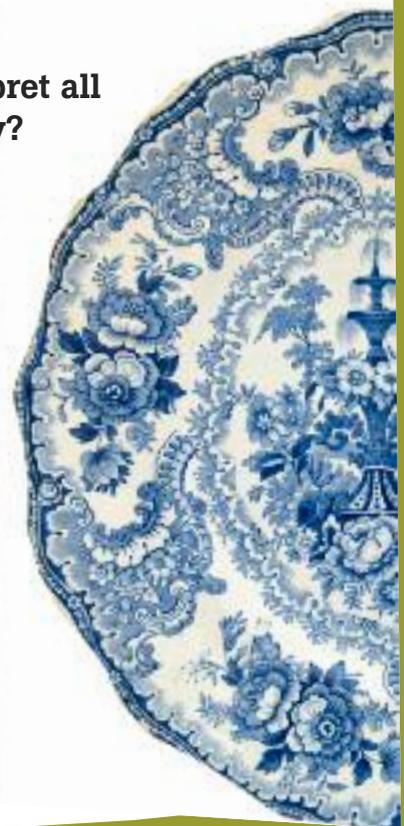
Get started

First you need to find a piece of historical evidence that interests you. It may be a photo from an old family album, a piece of pottery found in your garden, or a family heirloom.

Whatever your evidence, before you begin it's very important to do some careful background research using trusted sources.

You'll find lots more tips to help you do your own research, including where to go and what to look for in the 'Researching History' guide on the Hands on History website.

When you've gathered your research materials, start asking your questions.



A guide to interpreting historical evidence



Question one – What?

It may sound obvious, but when beginning to examine your evidence it's best to start from scratch and simply ask yourself – 'What am I looking at?'

This will help you do an initial visual examination of your evidence and give you a good starting point for further questioning.

Question two – Where?

'Where?' may mean something different depending on the evidence you are interpreting. For example if it is an old family photo, you may ask 'Where was this taken?' or if it's an old piece of pottery, you may ask 'Where was this found?'

Knowing where a piece of evidence came from will help us build up a picture of its history.

Question three – When?

For historical interpretation 'When?' is a very important question to answer. You will want to know 'When is my evidence from?'

Some artefacts, including paintings or pottery, may actually have a date on them. If you are looking at something from more recent times, for example a family photo, you may be able to find out the date by speaking to relatives or other people who were alive at the time.

If you can't work out a date from looking at your evidence you will need to do some more research using books or going online to try to work it out.

Once you have a date for your evidence it's useful to place it into a timeline in your mind. This will help put it in the context of wider history. Think about what happened before and after the date of your evidence.

Question four – Who?

By thinking about the 'Who', we can begin to see historical evidence not simply as objects to display or research, but as things used by real people just like us.

If you are looking at an image for example, this may mean 'Who is depicted?' Which is particularly interesting if you have a family photo. If you have an object from the past a good 'Who' question would be 'Who used this?'

You can often gain a better understanding of an object by putting yourself into the position of the 'Who' that you identify. Imagine what it must have been like to be alive at that time and what sort of person they may have been.

Question five – Why?

This question will change depending on the type of evidence you are interpreting – for example it may mean 'Why was the photo taken?' or 'Why has this artefact survived?'

If you are struggling for a 'Why?' a good question to ask is simply – 'Why was this created?'

By thinking about why a photo was taken, why an object was made or why a letter was written, for example, we can consider the importance of the evidence to our understanding of the wider past.

A guide to interpreting historical evidence

Approach all evidence with caution

Remember to always approach your evidence, sources and even your own opinions with caution.

It is very difficult for anyone to be completely objective, as everyone sees the world from their own point of view. When interpreting evidence or studying sources it's important to use objective questions, keep an open mind and attempt to look at all information in a fair and balanced way.

In summary:

- Ask five simple questions to get you started:
What? Where? When? Who? Why?
- Use research from trusted sources to help you understand what you find
- Approach your sources with caution

Useful websites

A History of the World in 100 Objects

Put your interpreting skills to the test and view important historical objects from across the world

www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld

BBC History

Explore history from the Egyptians to the present day, including an interactive timeline

www.bbc.co.uk/history

BBC History Trails

Find information on the role of the historian, including more tips to help you interpret history

www.bbc.co.uk/history/trail/htd_history

For useful places to go to undertake historical research, including libraries and archives, download the Hands on History 'Researching History' guide from the website.

www.bbc.co.uk/handsonhistory

