

AP United States History

Summer Task: "Doing History"

1. How the Historian Classifies Information

Writing history requires that information be collected from a variety of sources and that information be organized in a way that makes sense to the reader. Most historical writing tries to answer a question. The more complicated the question, the longer the written work. In any case, to effectively transmit his findings, the historian must arrange the facts in a way that answers the question. What determines the evidence the historian takes down in the first place? Will all historians doing research on the same subject take the same notes?

Historians often select and arrange facts on the basis of categories. Suppose a historian had uncovered two facts: first, that King John signed the Magna Carta in 1215 and second, the Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793. He might classify each fact according to historical periods, placing King John in the Middle Ages and Eli Whitney in the modern period. Or, the historian might categorize them according to aspects of human life, classifying the Magna Carta as a political event and the cotton gin as a contribution to economic development. [Bartlett, et.al.]

Okay. Let's do an exercise that demonstrates the many possible ways that information can be classified. Please note that there is really no "wrong" way. In this exercise, the data list has been chosen intentionally to allow you to practice without dealing with a list of historical facts about which you may not be familiar.

Instructions:

1. Determine categories under which this list could be divided.
2. Arrange the terms into the categories.
3. How many other classifications could you have used?
4. What implications does this activity have for studying history?
5. Come to class in August prepared to discuss your classifications, any conclusions you made as a result of this exercise and the implications of this classification reality for the study of history.

shark
turkey
rabbit
cat
grouse
rainbow trout

tuna
condor
ostrich
lion
black bass
elephant

pike
eagle
sheep
pheasant
dachshund
barracuda

Modified from:

Bartlett, I., Fenton, E., Fowler, D., & Mandelbaum, S. (1969). An introduction to the study of history. In *A new history of the United States* (pp. 1 - 16) [Introduction]. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.