

Historical Bias

SAME PAST. DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The past isn't just what happened, it's also how it was told

Historical bias is the tendency for a historical source to present the past from a particular **perspective** rather than giving a completely neutral account.

Why Does Bias Exist?

Every source is created by a person or group with their own:

Perspective- how they see the world

Experiences- what they have lived through

Values- what they believe is important

Interests- what matters to them or benefits them

Purpose- why they created the source

Position in society- their race, class, gender, occupation, political beliefs, religion, etc.

Two People. Same Event. Different Stories.

When two people experience the same event, they can describe it very differently. That doesn't automatically mean one person is lying. They may have:

- seen **different** parts of the event
- had **different** experiences
- wanted **different** outcomes
- remembered things **differently**
- believed **different** things
- chosen **different** details to emphasize



Bias ≠ Lying

BIAS NOT NOT MEAN:

- ✗ "This source is fake."
- ✗ "Everything in this source is wrong."
- ✗ "We can't use this source."

BIAS MEANS:

- ✓ "This source has a particular perspective"
- ✓ "I should consider who created it and why."
- ✓ "I should compare it with other evidence."

Types of Historical Bias

Political Bias



A source favors a particular political position, party, or government.

Cultural Bias



A source reflects the beliefs, traditions or assumptions of a particular culture.

Economic Bias



A person's wealth, occupation or financial interests influence their perspective.

Social Bias



A source reflects assumptions about groups based on class, gender, race or social status.

Regional Bias



A source favors the interests or perspective of a particular country, region or community.

Personal Bias



An individual's own experiences, relationships, beliefs or feelings influence their account.

How Historical Bias Shows Up in Different Eras

Colonial America

1600s-1700s

European vs. Indigenous Perspectives

Colonists often described Indigenous peoples as "savages" or "uncivilized," while Indigenous accounts emphasized survival, land and treaty violations.

Example: A colonist's diary vs. a Native oral history.

Revolutionary Era

1770s-1780s

Patriots vs. Loyalists

Patriots celebrated liberty and freedom, while Loyalists focused on order, stability, and the risk of rebellion.

Example: Thomas Paine's Common Sense vs. a Loyalist newspaper.

Antebellum & Slavery

1800s

Enslaved People vs. Slaveholders

Enslaved people's narratives highlighted the brutality of slavery and the desire for freedom, while slaveholders defended it as a necessary institution.

Example: An enslaved person's narrative vs. a plantation owner's account.

Industrialization

1800s-1900s

Workers vs. Business Owners

Workers often described harsh conditions and low pay, while business owners emphasized progress, innovation, and economic growth.

A labor union pamphlet vs. a company report.

Whenever you encounter a historical source, think: **WHO** created it? **WHAT** perspective do they have? **WHY** did they create it? **HOW** might their perspective shape what they tell us?