

# Studying history is a waste of time

[History](#)



Studying history is a waste of time because it prevents us from focusing on the challenges of the present. People live in this present. They plan for and worry about the future. History, however, is the study of the past. Given all the demands that press in from living in the present and anticipating what is yet to come, the speaker concludes that studying history is a waste of time because it distracts us from current challenges.

However, I do not agree with this opinion because history is essential to individuals and our society. In the first place, history helps us understand people and societies. It offers a storehouse of information about how people and societies behave. Understanding the operations of people and societies is difficult, though a number of disciplines make the attempt. An exclusive reliance on current data would needlessly handicap our efforts. How can we evaluate war if the nation is at peace—unless we use historical materials?

How can we understand genius, the influence of technological innovation, or the role that beliefs play in shaping family life, if we don't use what we know about experiences in the past? Some social scientists attempt to formulate laws or theories about human behavior. But even these resources depend on historical information, except for limited, often artificial cases in which experiments can be devised to determine how people act. Major aspects of a society's operation, like mass election, missionary activities, or military alliance, cannot be set up as precise experiments.

Consequently, history must serve, however imperfectly, as our laboratory, and data from the past must be served as our most vital evidence in the unavoidable quest to figure out why our complex species behave as it does

in societal settings. This fundamentally, is why we cannot stay away from history: it offers the only extensive evidential base for the contemplation and analysis of how societies function, and people need to have some sense of how societies function simply to run their lives. The second reason history is inescapable as a subject of serious study follows closely on the first. The past causes the present, and so the future.

Any time we try to know why something happened—whether a shift in political party dominance in the American Congress, a major change in the teenagesuiciderate, or a war in Iraq – we have to look for factors that took shape earlier. Sometimes, fairly recent history will suffice to explain a major development, but often we need to look further back to identify the causes of change. Only through studying history can we grasp how things change; only through history can we begin to comprehend the factors that cause change; and only through history can we understand what elements of an institution or a society persist despite change.