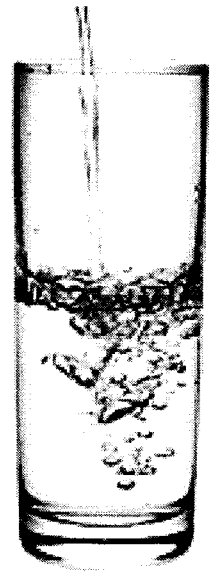


Methods of Historical Inquiry

What is a Frame of Reference?

Imagine two glasses that have equal amounts of water in them. Some observers would call them half full, while others would say they are half empty. The difference is in the observer. Everyone brings different perspectives to the same fact and therefore interprets that fact differently. This is called our **frame of reference**.



Our Frame of Reference depends on many factors:

- upbringing
- age
- gender
- religion
- nationality
- culture
- education
- prior knowledge
- time period in which we live

In other words, when people observe or read information they do this through the lens of their own experience. Understanding and interpretation are informed or influenced by what people have come to know and value from living in a particular time and place.

Historians select, reject, organize, prioritize, emphasize, and draw conclusions about information based on their frame of reference. Even historians writing in the same time period about the same event have different interpretations based on their knowledge and values, which stem from their upbringing, religion, age, gender, nationality, etc.

What is a fact?

A fact is an event or occurrence that actually happened. It is a fact that Aboriginal Peoples were in Canada before European discovery and settlement. It is a fact that skeletal remains have been uncovered and analysed by archeologists. How and when the Aboriginal People got here and how they lived is based on interpretations of those facts.

Distinguishing Facts from Interpretations

People can be confident that an event or occurrence is a fact when there is general agreement that it actually happened. For example, it is a fact that you are reading this handout – it is actually happening. When historians agree that an event or situation actually happened, it is a fact. For example, all historians agree that stone tools were used in the Palaeolithic Era.

Can Facts Speak for Themselves?

No. Two people, or ten historians, can look at an identical event or fact and make radically different interpretations based on their frame of reference. Therefore, **facts can never speak for themselves**. The same fact can be used to support a variety of interpretations, much like our two glasses of water. Historians interpret facts and events very differently based on their frames of reference. It is important to examine a variety of sources to distinguish what is a fact and how different historians interpret events and evidence. Then people can develop their own understanding and interpretation of past events.