

12.8 SkillBuilder

Recognising different perspectives

What is perspective in history?

Perspective means a particular point of view. When studying a historical event, it is important to recognise and consider different perspectives. Imagine there has been a disagreement between students at your school and a teacher must find out what happened. It is likely that all the people involved will have a different opinion about what actually happened. This means they have different perspectives on the event.

Why is it important to recognise different perspectives?

It is almost impossible for anybody to write about history without a particular perspective. The beliefs, experiences and background of a person will affect the way they interpret and record an event. This is true of both primary and secondary sources. But by knowing something about the author of a historical source, we are able to decide how their particular perspective might have affected the way they interpreted the event. We can then take this into account and will be able to gain a more balanced and accurate view of the past.

How to recognise different perspectives

Recognising different perspectives is a useful but difficult skill to master. Here are a few questions that you should ask about the authors of historical sources to help you recognise particular perspectives. You may not be able to answer all questions for all authors.

- *Where is the author from?*
- *Who is the author writing for?* For example, is the source a diary entry written for only themselves or a newspaper publication with a political agenda?
- *What do you know of the background of the author?* Consider whether there may be notable aspects of their character — for example, were they ambitious, selfish or patriotic? Think about whether the author was directly involved with what they were portraying.
- *Would the author have anything to gain from exaggerating the truth?* This is often hard to answer with certainty, but is made easier when there is much information in the previous questions.

Note: The term 'author' can refer to anybody who has produced a historical source. Questions of perspective can be applied not only to text but to paintings, statues and other types of sources as well.

An example of how to recognise different perspectives

Source 1, an extract from a letter written by Cortes to King Charles V of Spain, is used here as an example of how the questions outlined previously could be answered.

Source 1 One of Cortes' letters to King Charles V of Spain, written in 1520. In this letter, he reveals his attitude to Aztec religious beliefs.

Three halls are in this grand temple, and in these are the images of idols ... the principal ones, in which the people have greatest faith and confidence, I have cast down the steps of the temple, purifying the chapels in which they had stood. In the place of these I put images of Our Lady and the Saints.

- *Where is the author from?* Hernan Cortes was from Spain.
- *Who is the author writing for?* Hernan Cortes wrote the letter for the king of Spain.
- *What do you know of the background of the author?* Hernan Cortes was ambitious and was a conquistador. He was a key figure in the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs.
- *Would the author have anything to gain from exaggerating the truth?* Because he was ambitious, it is reasonable to suggest that Cortes might have wanted to impress his king and so he may have tried to portray the actions of himself and the other Spaniards in a positive way.

By answering these questions, we are now able to study the source more effectively. It is a very important source for historians studying the Spanish conquest, and we can make better judgements about the validity of the information in it when we can recognise the perspective, or point of view, of the author.

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Source 2 An excerpt from the writings of Bartolome de las Casas, a Spanish priest who was appalled by how the indigenous populations were treated

The Spaniards first assaulted the innocent after their first landing. In this Isle, the bloody slaughter and destruction first began: for they violently forced away women and children to make them slaves, and ill-treated them.

Source 3 An illustration of the battle for Tenochtitlan created in the sixteenth century after the Spanish conquest



Developing my skills

Examine **Source 2**, part of the writings of Bartolome de las Casas, and answer the questions about author perspective for yourself. You may like to refer to spread 12.1 to find some information about the author.

- *Where is the author from?*
- *Who is the author writing for?*
- *What do you know of the background of the author?*
- *Would the author have anything to gain from exaggerating the truth?*

Now try answering the questions about author perspective in relation to an Aztec source. **Source 3** is an illustration of the battle for Tenochtitlan. Although we do not know who the actual author of the source was, we do know they were Aztec.