

## History Misconceptions

‘Surface impressions can often mask considerable gaps in real understanding, something only remedied by close and worthwhile questioning [...] focusing not just on misconceptions but on perceptions and lack of awareness.’ (Tim Lomas, 2016)

	Chronology	Historical Understanding	Interpretations of History	Historical Enquiry	Organisation and Communication
<b>Potential Misconceptions</b>	<p><b>Confused chronology/ anachronism and no sense of duration:</b> <i>What you might see...</i></p> <p>Children drawing images including modern technology in scenes of ancient times</p> <p>Mixing artefacts from different periods</p> <p>Little idea really of whether something was a long time ago or more recent (e.g. If Cleopatra had not been bitten by the asp, would she still be alive today?)</p> <p>No grasp that some things lasted a long time (e.g. the huge length of time occupied by the Stone and Bronze Ages)</p> <p>Unable to make links between the different history they have covered (episodic understanding)</p> <p>Problems with the mathematical dimension of time (e.g. surface understanding of BC/BCE and AD/CE)</p>	<p><b>Confusion and simplicity with why things happened, the results, and why people in the past acted as they did:</b> <i>What you might see...</i></p> <p>Believing things were bound to happen in the way they did – i.e. the result was inevitable and could not have turned out differently</p> <p>A judgemental and simple way of looking at why people did things</p> <p>Lacking a grasp of what makes humans tick (pupils have a limited chronological experience of life so their grasp of the human situation can be very restricted. It is hard to understand people not just because they lived a long time ago but also because their lifestyles were so different and they were adults. Pupils often see people in the past as amusing, brutal and inferior, as well as two dimensional)</p> <p>Stereotypical views of people in the past and historical situations (this can apply to groups such as: old people, black people, women and various countries)</p>	<p><b>Over simplifying historical narratives and lacking critically:</b> <i>What you might see...</i></p> <p>Being content with a single reason, cause or consequence for an event</p> <p>The reasons for an event are just a list of unconnected factors</p> <p>Not being able to see that some reasons for things and results may have been more important than others</p> <p>Not seeing that sources can show there are different valid ways of looking at things (e.g. many pupils believe that only one can be right and the others must be wrong)</p> <p>Implies history is a coherent narrative, doesn't show an appreciation that there is often more than one interpretation of events, there are 'missing' parts in our understanding</p> <p>Over-reliance on one source, or type of source, when forming opinions, little notion of reliability</p> <p>Lack of understanding that a person's worldview will affect their interpretation of significant events and individuals</p>	<p><b>Misunderstanding sources and finding difficulty with historical investigations:</b> <i>What you might see...</i></p> <p>Seeing sources just as a way of gathering information – accepting them at face value</p> <p>Dismissing sources altogether and not seeing how they can be used to answer history questions</p> <p>A simplified view of what sources are – pupils do not see a source in its original context, pupils may not realise that sources were often long, convoluted and with many irrelevancies to their particular enquiry</p> <p>Difficulty carrying out a useful historical investigation – resorting to copying and uncritical description, not showing higher order skills</p> <p>Confusing a real source with a reconstruction, even one that reconstructs a different event</p>	<p><b>Recounting knowledge without criticality or nuance:</b> <i>What you might see...</i></p> <p><b><i>Children communicating their understanding will demonstrate gaps in learning, as well as any misconceptions, skewed or inaccurate perceptions, and general awareness of historical context</i></b></p> <p>Listing knowledge of key facts or dates without explaining significance or drawing links between them</p> <p>Demonstrates confusion between fact, fiction and opinion</p> <p>Unable to use skills from other subjects in a historical context</p> <p>Unable to justify opinions coherently, either written or verbally, using appropriate historical knowledge</p> <p>Unaware of audience when writing</p>

## Strategies

**Sufficient time for the subject:** Pupils need access to a wide range of historical material about themes, individuals and situations. Without adequate historical knowledge pupils will always find it difficult to assess importance of things as they have too few reference points.

**Encourage to see links and connections between what they are doing and have previously learnt:** Tasks that ask children to make links, to compare and detect similarities and differences can also prove effective – helping them to decide whether an event was unusual or typical.

**Content needs to be chosen carefully so that it invites contrasts and provides interest:** Build in enough interesting and varied content so that the children can establish a chronology, identify the key events, people, changes and developments and how and why things turned out as they did.

**General knowledge:** Adding general knowledge benefits all subjects, not just History, as it builds contextual understanding. E.g. the human situation through reading, a sense of place through geography, historical inventions through science and DT. Teachers cannot cover everything so it is important to foster curiosity and stimulate children's interest.

**Key historical concepts:** Teachers need to be fully aware of key concepts, this should be reflected in the planning so they are developed and revisited. The National Curriculum includes: cause and consequence, change and continuity, significance, the use of evidence and interpretations. It is vital these are developed in a progressive way by focused tasks and questions.

Pupils understand, for example, that various causes often contribute to an event or historical situation, that sources need to be used carefully when answering a historical question, that ideally sources should be checked against other sources, that people, events and countries can be represented and seen in a range of valid ways. Targeted questions are vital rather than general tasks such as 'investigate what life was like in Roman Britain' or 'imagine the local town 100 years ago'. Such general tasks can mask confusion and invite copying.

**Teacher awareness of 'what it means to get better at History':** An awareness of progression, in terms of historical knowledge and understanding. Ascertaining that pupils have good content knowledge, this includes (but is not limited to) retrieval practice. Regularly returning to previous learning enables the wider picture to be established, and pupils develop the ability to use the same concepts in a range of contexts.

**Historical vocabulary:** Introducing some historical vocabulary with different meanings over time to show that there is no one stereotypical view, e.g. family, home, transport, princess, king, weapon, village life, religion.

**Focus on higher order thinking:** Don't be content with surface and limited answers, children need to understand and demonstrate that the best history answers are not simple ones such as one cause and one effect, or one view about a person. We need them to recognise the uncertainty of their answers.

**Do pupils understand what they have to do?** Good history uses many different command words in its questions, pupils need to grasp the meaning of words such as: *compare and contrast, compose, comment on, have a debate, define, describe, discuss, explain, establish, give an account, how, how far, how reliable, how difference, how similar, how useful, interpret, investigate, list, outline, prove, recall, review, state, summarise, to what extent, what.*

**Formative assessment:** checking regularly to see if children have fully grasped something, that it is embedded and secure. Specifically assessing some of the common areas of misunderstanding and then re-checking with different content.

*For further information see:*

<https://www.history.org.uk/primary/resource/9376/what-confuses-primary-pupils-in-history-part-1>

<https://www.history.org.uk/primary/resource/9424/what-confuses-primary-pupils-in-history-part-2>