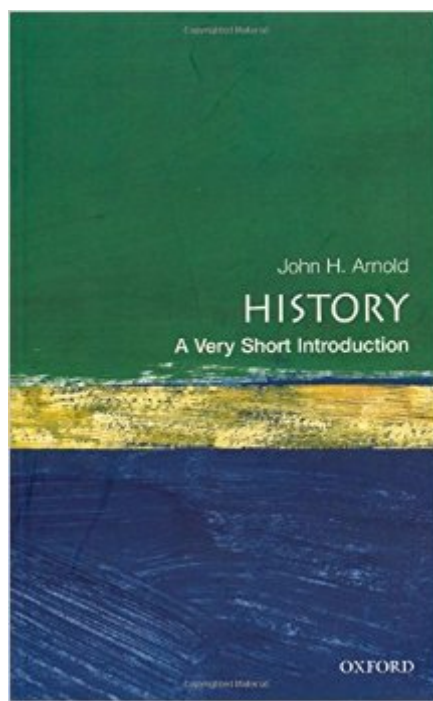


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# History: A Very Short Introduction



## Synopsis

There are many stories we can tell about the past, and we are not, perhaps, as free as we might imagine in our choice of which stories to tell, or where those stories end. John Arnold's addition to Oxford's popular Very Short Introductions series is a stimulating essay about how people study and understand history. The book begins by inviting us to think about various questions provoked by our investigation of history, and then explores the ways in which these questions have been answered in the past. Such key concepts as causation, interpretation, and periodization are introduced by way of concrete examples of how historians work, thus giving the reader a sense of the excitement implicit in discovering the past--and ourselves. The aim throughout *History: A Very Short Introduction* is to discuss theories of history in a general, pithy, and accessible manner, rather than delve into specific periods. This is a book that will appeal to all students and general readers with an interest in history or historiography. About the Series: Oxford's Very Short Introductions series offers concise and original introductions to a wide range of subjects--from Islam to Sociology, Politics to Classics, Literary Theory to History, and Archaeology to the Bible. Not simply a textbook of definitions, each volume in this series provides trenchant and provocative--yet always balanced and complete--discussions of the central issues in a given discipline or field. Every Very Short Introduction gives a readable evolution of the subject in question, demonstrating how the subject has developed and how it has influenced society. Eventually, the series will encompass every major academic discipline, offering all students an accessible and abundant reference library. Whatever the area of study that one deems important or appealing, whatever the topic that fascinates the general reader, the Very Short Introductions series has a handy and affordable guide that will likely prove indispensable.

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## Customer Reviews

What is contained in the pages of this text far surpasses its size, and its worth cannot be adequately represented by its low cost. I found that, using this book as part of my preparations for school, as a required reading, that it surprised me. Although I had read other books in the series before, and both enjoyed and profited from the time spent engaged in such, I must admit that I felt a certain amount of disdain for the idea of reading a book with the title -A Very Short Introduction-. After all, had I not just recently graduated with a degree in history? Did I need to be told what history was? Apparently I did, because the "history of history" contained in its few pages enlightened me as to where what I do came from. It breaks down the most fascinating evolution of theory from Thucydides to today, from each fracture and faction formed along the way, to the theories that resulted in the eventual outcome. Today, history is broken into many smaller disciplines, and if you are thinking about pursuing history in college, or just like to study it from the armchair, this book will open your eyes and entertain your mind...for two to three hours...but leave you with information that will give you an idea of just how deep the rabbit hole truly goes into the depths of time. The examples the author uses to illustrate his points are interesting (although they tended to focus on his own research area of Medieval history), and, altogether the prose was neat and the style fluid and conversational - a combination I very much enjoy!

Arnold takes 'historiography' to be the process of writing history, and 'history' to be the result of that process, i.e. to be a set of true stories about the past. If you enjoy reading history, then you should read at least something about historiography, to help you evaluate and interpret what you read. This short introduction to the subject is probably as good a place as any to start and for many readers will be as much historiography as they think they need. Major figures such as Thucydides and von Ranke are discussed and central issues in the philosophy of history, such as the extent to which people of other times were essentially different from us, are introduced. Arnold presents a wide range of opinions on these various topics, but has a bias toward the politically correct. His style is readable, if sometimes clumsy. The British spellings and usages may annoy some American readers. But overall this little book succeeds admirably in its task and contains a wealth of information and opinion. It is recommended for anyone wanting to get beyond the 'true stories' to what history really is.

Arnold's lucid and slender book is worthy of praise for its concision and accessible writing style. The clear writing enables non-specialists to entertain some of the central questions in Historiography and Philosophy of History. His use of historical examples to illustrate important points is skillful and engaging. Some of these examples include a religiously motivated medieval murder at the time of the inquisition; the story of one man who lived through both the English Civil War and the religious conflicts in the early Massachusetts Colony then governed by John Winthrop; a case of cat-killing in 17C France with an accompanying discussion of the history of attitudes towards cats; and the case of Sojourner Truth's famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech-- which survives in 2 very different records--neither of which is the same as what she said in the speech. Despite the relatively jargon-free writing, the author manages to articulate many of the central questions, problems and challenges facing contemporary historians who try to make sense of their craft. If he offers more questions than definitive answers, that is in keeping with his tendency to debunk those historians and philosophers who have claimed to have final answers to extremely complex questions. If the book has a thesis at all, it is probably that one should be extremely cautious about the use of historical constructs, generalizations and abstractions that are too often confused with the past itself. An obvious example is periodization. Students often learn about the Renaissance, Middle Ages and Enlightenment periods as though these are realities that existed in the past. But no one in, say, the year 900 CE thought that they lived in "the middle ages" while those who claimed to be part of "the" Enlightenment" often had very different conceptions of just what constituted Enlightenment. Though it is pretty clear that periods and epochs are historical constructs often made by historians long after the events in question, it is far from clear that there is "never" a single cause for a historical event, that "most if not all" history consists in unintended consequences of past actions, that historians cannot ever claim to have an objectively true understanding of the past as it "really" was, that there is no basic human nature shared by all, that standards of right and wrong (as when historians say that a political leader made the "right" or "wrong" decision) are relative to time and place, and that there is no Truth in history but only partly accurate interpretations molded into what Arnold calls "True Stories." These are some of the main claims he makes in a soft-selling and thought provoking way. He doesn't seem dogmatic about his views, often stating them in the 1st person as his own preferences. While I do not agree with some of the claims Arnold makes, I nevertheless found much food for thought throughout. Perhaps the only exception is the last chapter on truth and meaning in history. There Arnold observes a clear distinction between accurate and inaccurate records of past events while denying the corollary that accurate records of events imply

truth, while inaccurate records cannot be historically true in any conventional sense of the term. He writes, "dispensing with 'Truth' does not mean dispensing with accuracy." But to know that an account is accurate requires that you know it is true. I don't see how one can decouple the interrelated ideas of accuracy and truth. Simply put, if a record of the "Ain't I a Woman?" speech is grossly inaccurate, then it is false and not true historically. The author tries, I think vainly, to wiggle around this logic when he maintains that a poetically reworked version of the speech is just as true as an earlier and more faithful recording of it since the embellished version "may capture something very different about the woman [who made the speech], how she acted and was perceived by those who knew her." That impressionistic notion of truth is impossible to ascertain, and leaves us on a slippery slope conflating artful descriptions with truths. But my disagreements are less important than the fact that this quick read got me to sift through some of my own beliefs and views on a variety of other matters, and I am not at all new to the philosophy of history. Despite some less than convincing arguments, the book as a whole stimulates independent, critical thinking, and its tone respects the readers' judgments rather than preaching any particular gospel. Recommended.

John Arnold has written an excellent book about history and what history is really all about. History is an argument and Arnold points out some of the issues throughout history (was history created by a great person or did a great event make a person seem great?). It's an easy and very informative read for history majors and non-history majors. It will make you think about history in a new way and provides great information about how and why history is so very important to all of us.

Arnold tells us the difference between "history and "the past." Very interesting! There are different ways to interpret the same thing, and people see things that others do not. While this is obvious, Arnold tells us how this changes history, and how the story and effects are changed as well. I have read it about five times, and am looking over it again as I write my Thesis.

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