

Winston Churchill said, “the farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see.” Learning about how perspective influences analysis of historical artifacts and information allows historians to use that information about the past to help shape the future. That is the focus of this unit.

Think about a time when you tried to share a story with an adult, like a parent or teacher, and they looked at you funny or didn’t understand what you were trying to say with your story. If you have the time, you start to add details, you set up the context and subtext, and most importantly, you give them the perspective they need to understand what you are trying to convey. Your takeaway is that you have to provide the listener with more information.

Another way of thinking about this, another perspective if you will, is that you are an interviewer of history. Much like an interviewer, you will have questions prepared before you start the interview process. You may even have an idea of how that interview will go or what some of the answers are, but because you are interviewing someone else, you do not have all of the information yet. You also do not always have the perspective of the interviewee. In this unit we will use the overarching topic of minorities in the American West between 1850 and 1950. You may or may not know much about these groups or why they are influential, but you can still come up with questions to ask. Using the Prown method we will be discussing in a few minutes, you will explore artifacts. You may use any and all materials and resources that are appropriate to your topic and will help you complete your interview. Once you have the information, you can start to understand and analyze the perspective of the minority group you are researching, and with that perspective you can understand their story. By looking at their past, where they came from and what they did, you may be able to understand where they are now and where they may be in the future.

But Ms. Christianson, why should we care about historical perspective? Well class, you should want to know how the U.S. was shaped, how decisions about certain situations were made, and how that affects us now. This is historical empathy and it is important because often when we learn about something in history we cannot relate to it; we do not have perspective on it. Not all decisions made in the past would be made the same way today because we have learned things through math and science, through the study of human nature and thinking, and we have historians who analyze history using perspective and empathy. We cannot look at the decisions of the past through the lens of thinking today, so we should study the past to understand where a decision came from, why it was made.

With this in mind, Ms. Slaughter will now explain the Prown method and show you some examples of how to use it, then we will review the activities we will engage in as well as how to access and use resources for this process.