

## Perspectives, Beliefs, and Point of view History Standard 3

History Standard Three uses three concepts that are often confusing to non-historians - beliefs, perspectives, and point-of-view. All of them ask for information describing the historian who argues an interpretation. At the higher grades a student is expected to differentiate between two interpretations and to come to some conclusion as to why they differ. Someone once said that any relationship is really five relationships. There is how you look at it, how I look at it, how I think you look at it, how you think I look at it, and then how it really is. What lies behind differing interpretations is complicated.

A **point-of-view** is not just any person's way of looking at something. A point-of-view, as used in the study of history by professional historians, asks this question: where is this historian coming from? What are the historian's nationality, race, gender, age, and personal background? Could any of these factors have played a role influencing that historian's conclusions or the questions that guided that historian's research strategy? Is the historian a young African-American female writing about the role of women in the civil rights movement? Or is that historian an elderly white male Southerner with deep family roots in the antebellum South writing about the role of women in the civil rights movement? You would reasonably expect that these factors - race, age, gender, and personal background - would influence a person as they grow to intellectual maturity and therefore would influence their research interests, methods, and strategies. It makes a difference.

Or does it? Sometimes a person's **beliefs** simply do not seem to fit into the mold they supposedly came out of. A wealthy capitalist of the late nineteenth century would reasonably be expected to enthusiastically support the drive for markets and raw materials associated with the acquisition of colonies, such as the Philippines after the Spanish American War. Andrew Carnegie opposed it. We can never know for certain what is inside a person's head. What ideas and understandings are floating around in there? A person's beliefs usually are philosophically consistent, but, not always. We all know people whose political beliefs are consistently liberal or conservative, except on one issue. What does that historian believe? And why do they believe it? And how does it impact their research and writing?

**Perspective** is the platform upon which a historian stands. Is the historian a Southerner writing about slavery? Or, a former slave, such as Frederick Douglass, writing about slavery? A few years ago Japanese and American historians formed a committee to write a joint history of the coming of the Second World War. After a while they gave up. Nationalism overrode professional devotion to objectivity. Many Americans who lived through the 1960s were permanently affected by those turbulent times. Some now hold important corporate, academic, and political positions while retaining vestiges of the radical ideas (for the 1960s) they personally experienced and lived through. When a person lives and writes matters. Germans use an untranslatable word to describe this: *Zeitgeist*. The closest we can get is "time-ghost." What was in the air at that time? What was the climate of opinion? What were people thinking? A book attacking big businessmen as mean, nasty thieves or "Robber Barons" became immensely popular when it was published in 1934, in the middle of our worst depression. A similar reception would not have happened if it had been published during the Second World War, when we needed all of our big business muscle to win the war. Perspective asks students to recognize and confront the possibility that the times could have influenced the writing of history. It does.