

Exercise 9

Read the article. Do the statements agree with the views of the writer of the article? Choose Yes, No or Not Given.

Choose

Yes if the statement agrees with the views of the writer

No if the statement contradicts the views of the writer

Not Given if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this.

Why study history?

by Professor Percy Adams, head of history at Hardwick University

I am often asked, 'What's the use of history?' As a professional historian, I can think of a number of uses. I sometimes reply by asking what the use of studying French is for someone who isn't about to go to France. A wide-ranging list of uses usually follows, ranging from the intellectual to the more practical, such as familiarity with phrases like *de rigueur* that have entered the English language from French. Many of these reasons have a parallel with history – both in the purely intellectual and the more practical sense.

It is undeniable that historians don't perform life-saving medical operations, fly planes or design labour-saving software. These tasks are clearly crucial to the general population, and it is not my opinion that the work of a historian is in the same category. But one of the more practical applications of history has been articulated by Peter Stearns, for whom history provides us with a way of making sense of events. How do you interpret a recession if the country is enjoying a boom, other than by using historical references? He argues that to comprehend the events we experience, we must look to factors that took shape earlier, whether it is a fall in crime statistics or a political protest in a far-off country. Whether a day earlier or a century ago, previous events hold the key.

Back in 1906, the historian John Acton identified one central role of the study of history. Its role was not to promote the accumulation of knowledge, but to train people to investigate history, to separate truth from dishonesty and certainty from doubt. Acton saw the historian's role as being to carefully analyse any statement before drawing conclusions as to its validity. And this viewpoint is just as appropriate nowadays as it was over a century ago.

However, there are still those who remain doubtful. Many hold the opinion credited to Henry Ford, that 'history is bunk'. In actual fact, Ford's original

comment was not so succinct, and it was a journalist who came up with the three-word phrase that is so well recognised today and often used by those who are critical of the value of history. For a man like Ford, the technological progress he was to become famous for depended on the development of the new technologies of the future, and not looking back at the past.

A century on, this way of thinking is still common and is underpinned by the government's highly controversial decision to remove history from the compulsory curriculum for schoolchildren over the age of 14. Some distinguished historians, such as Niall Ferguson, have supported the government, accusing critics of the policy, such as Oxford historian David Priestland, of pursuing an inward-looking and heavily politicised agenda, questioning when they last stepped into an actual school to discuss the curriculum with teachers and students. And yet, it must be said that little thought appears to have been given to the consequences of this and the potential limitations it places on youngsters progressing through the school system.

Admittedly, the study of history was justified in the past for reasons that can no longer be considered valid, such as differentiating between an educated and an uneducated person when there was a job vacancy to be filled – the applicant who could recite the dates of kings' and queens' reigns was deemed to be a stronger candidate than the one who couldn't. Fortunately, times have moved on.

1. The general public have little respect for the views of historians.
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not Given
2. The teaching and learning of history play an essential role in society.
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not Given
3. The words of John Acton are relevant today.
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not Given
4. Henry Ford's views on history have been misrepresented.
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not Given

5. The decision of the government to make history an optional subject was a mistake.
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not Given
6. A good knowledge of history is an appropriate indicator of a person's suitability for a job.
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not Given