

Building a Solid Historical Argument

Because the past is gone, we cannot simply point to it and say “That is the way it was.” Instead, we have to collect information about the past and present it in an organized way. This is commonly called “making an argument.” A good argument about the past will bring together:

1. Stuff from the past (called primary sources)

- private letters and diaries
- public business and political records
- secret memos and plots
- abstract social institutions and problems



The stuff that was in Abraham Lincoln's pockets when he was shot in 1865 ([Library of Congress](#))

2. Things said by others (called secondary sources)

- Contemporary analysts
- Public image shapers
- Historians
- Other students of the human condition, such as philosophers, theorists, or scientists

3. Our present conditions (which make our work relevant and significant)

- Newly discovered sources
- New social problems
- New values and ways of thinking
- New goals and aspirations
- New class assignments

Typically, a historian will begin with a question about the past and try to make one major claim (a main point, or thesis) that may be composed of several supporting claims. From all of the available information, an author selects specific evidence to support each claim, much the way that the stones of an Egyptian pyramid hold the highest point (the thesis) aloft for all to see. An author connects the parts of the argument with logic and creativity.

