

Unit 1: Video 3 Transcript

Q4: How do historians do their jobs?

A: How historians go about doing history, I think, is important in any history course. And certainly, I would hope that any student in a first-year history course takes an interest in the kinds of materials that historians use. Very often, students will look at a page of history text and say, “My God, there’s all of these footnotes at the bottom of the page. They just get in the way.” Actually, they’re kind of fun if you know what to look for. They’ll tell you where the historian has gone to find the facts. And again, historians – it sometimes seems, I think, to a casual reader that historians are simply telling a story about the past. They’re not. Academic historians are argumentative. They argue. They’re trying to make a point. This happened because of this. Or this document can demonstrate that so-and-so wasn’t involved in that or was; that values were changing and here’s what that looks like. This document gives us insight. So it’s always evidence that’s being presented in support of a particular case. And sometimes academic history can be a little bit – historical writing can be a bit intimidating, but I think everybody can evaluate, to some measure, whether or not they’re convinced by evidence. So if we think of it as a lawyer presenting a case in court, well, if you’re on the jury, you may not know an awful lot about the law. You might not know a lot about forensics, but you know whether or not you’re convinced by the evidence that’s been presented to you. You have to. That’s your job on the jury. And that, in the same way, is the job of the undergraduate, to be able to develop that skill, to look at the resources and say, “Okay. That sample size is just too small.” Or, “That’s great. You’ve got a lot of information there about the experience of women in the fur trade, but none of it comes directly from women in the fur trade. It comes from men. It’s filtered.” Well, maybe that’s okay. How do we address that? How do we get around that? A lot of my own research has to do with population history. And so I spend a fair bit of time looking at census records and documents that are generated on a regular basis, whether it’s baptismal records or burial records, that sort of thing. And they may seem fairly clear cut, but they’re always open to interpretation. And sometimes the things that they reveal are not the things that they were

designed to reveal. So I think it's important for students to take in interest in where the historian gets their information, how they use it and how they go about interpreting it.