



# Historical Thinking *Skill*

## Separating Fact from Opinion

An essential historical thinking skill is the ability to distinguish between facts and opinions. Too often, you might depend on personal beliefs as the only support for a historical event. You might mistakenly accept your opinion as a self-evident truth that is indisputable and accurate. As you learn the differences between facts and opinions, however, you become more open-minded to alternative points of view and a better evaluator of what you read, hear, or write. Ultimately, as you use facts rather than opinions in arguments, you strengthen your verbal and written abilities.

When you recognize and use factual information in your answers to discussion questions and essay prompts, you employ specific, verifiable evidence for your positions. This specificity adds credibility to your work. Thus, recognizing what is fact and what is opinion helps you become better a thinker and writer.

A fact is something that is known with certainty. In other words, it is true or really happened and can be proven or documented. It conveys information that may be interpreted, but it can always be authenticated. An opinion, on the other hand, is something that someone thinks is true. It is often a point of view or bias held by a person, but it cannot be documented. If it could be proven, it would be a fact. Opinions are always debatable and may contain judgmental words such as *bad*, *good*, *great*, *beautiful*, *most*, *least*, and so on.

There are several sections in this book that deal with differentiating between facts and opinions and utilizing specific, provable information in discussions and written responses. In this chapter, you will work on identifying facts to answer several questions from the “Ideas for Discussion” section. Later in Chapters 10 and 15, you will practice using facts, rather than generalizations and opinions, to support written arguments.

## Practicing the Skill

Look at the question below about the Atlantic world and determine which of the three answers that follow are factual and verifiable. Then review the statements that say why the answers are opinions or points of view. Discuss all three answers and the statements with your class or study group.

“What role did religion play in shaping the Atlantic world?”

**Answer 1** Religion played an important role in the Atlantic world because native religions were superstitious rather than spiritual and had to be changed.

Is this a **FACT** or **OPINION**? Why?

Opinion. Native American religions were spiritual in nature.

**Answer 2** Religion played an important role in the Atlantic world as priests and missionaries converted one million Indians to Catholicism.

Is this a **FACT** or **OPINION**? Why?

Fact. This statement can be verified.

**Answer 3** Religion played an important role in the Atlantic world when Pope Alexander VI gave his blessing to Spanish and Portuguese exploration and conquest.

**Is this a FACT or OPINION? Why?**

Opinion. The pope's blessing had no effect on Dutch, French, or British exploration and conquest.

Study the two questions that follow. Determine which of the answers given are factual and verifiable, and which of the answers are opinions or points of view. Explain your reasoning for labeling each answer as either fact or opinion. Write your explanations in your notebook.

## Applying the Skill

1. "Why were the Inca and Aztec unable to defend their civilization from conquest by the conquistadors?"

**Answer 1** The Inca and the Aztec faced internal divisions that kept them from defeating the Spanish.

**Is this a FACT or OPINION? Why?**

**Answer 2** The Inca and the Aztec were unable to defend their way of life because the Spanish superior culture appealed to many of their subjects.

**Is this a FACT or OPINION? Why?**

**Answer 3** The Inca and the Aztec were outsmarted by the Spanish and manipulated into surrender.

**Is this a FACT or OPINION? Why?**

2. "Why did the Europeans have an interest in Africa in the late fifteenth century?"

**Answer 1** Africans were backward people unable to defend their valuable natural resources.

**Is this a FACT or OPINION? Why?**

**Answer 2** Africans did not care about their fellow Africans and allowed them to be easily enslaved by the Europeans.

**Is this a FACT or OPINION? Why?**

**Answer 3** Africa was an attractive source of trade goods, including slave labor, which Europeans wanted to have.

**Is this a FACT or OPINION? Why?**