Why do the humanities matter? Stanford University

Insights Into Everything

Through exploration of the humanities we learn how to think creatively and critically, to reason, and to ask questions. Because these skills allow us to gain new insights into everything from poetry and paintings to business models and politics, humanistic subjects have been at the heart of a liberal arts education since the ancient Greeks first used them to educate their citizens.

Understanding Our World

Research into the human experience adds to our knowledge about our world. Through the work of humanities scholars, we learn about the values of different cultures, about what goes into making a work of art, about how history is made. Their efforts preserve the great accomplishments of the past, help us understand the world we live in, and give us tools to imagine the future.

Bringing Clarity to the Future

Today, humanistic knowledge continues to provide the ideal foundation for exploring and understanding the human experience. Investigating a branch of philosophy might get you thinking about ethical questions. Learning another language might help you gain an appreciation for the similarities in different cultures. Contemplating a sculpture might make you think about how an artist's life affected her creative decisions. Reading a book from another region of the world, might help you think about the meaning of democracy. Listening to a history course might help you better understand the past, while at the same time offer you a clearer picture of the future.

How is humanities research conducted?

Examining the Past to Understand the Future

Humanities research often involves an individual professor researching in a library in order to write a book. The books that result from this study are part of an ongoing dialogue about the meaning and possibilities of human existence that reaches back to ancient times and looks forward to our common future.

Scholar Collaboration

However, humanities research also draws from other sources and often requires alternative methods of investigation. A research project may involve several professors from different universities sharing information in an on-line forum. A professor may collaborate with a colleague in another area of study to gain alternative perspectives on a topic.

A scholar might publish research in-progress in an on-line journal to solicit feedback from others in her field. Some professors develop projects with the classroom in mind and engage their students in research projects. Other projects require the gathering of original information by doing fieldwork which could entail interviewing people, unearthing artifacts or documenting the history behind an archive of photographs.

An Interpretive Approach to Research

A hallmark of humanistic study is that research is approached differently than in the natural and social sciences, where data and hard evidence are required to draw conclusions. Because the human experience cannot be adequately captured by facts and figures alone, humanities research employs methods that are historical, interpretive and analytical in nature.

Professors who engage in humanities research are often posing questions about common assumptions, uncovering new meanings in artistic works, or finding new ways to understand cultural interactions. This type of inquiry can produce clearer pictures of the past, uncover the many insights that we can draw from our forebears, and in turn, help us better to prepare for the future.

Humanities Research - Raising Questions

Professors in the humanities are often associated with their teaching, which is an important part of their work; but they also conduct research and publish their findings in academic journals and books.

Whether written for a small academic community or for a broad public audience, humanities research maintains the common purpose of contributing to an on-going dialogue in an area of study. Unlike scientists, humanists are interested in raising questions, rather than providing absolute answers.