

## The History Boys - Knowledge Organiser

### Act One

[Hector](#), a beloved teacher in his 60s, congratulates the boys on their recent exam results, and says that now that their exams are over, their real education can resume.

Hector tells the boys that they should forget about trying to get into Oxford and Cambridge, because there's a whole world outside of these places.

The [Headmaster](#) wants the boys to attend prestigious universities in order to raise the profile of the school. He hires [Irwin](#), a young Oxford graduate, to teach history and give the students extra "polish."

The boys meet Irwin during a funny scene in Hector's class. The Headmaster walks in as they are improvising a skit, in French, about a brothel (Hector is using this method to teach the subjunctive verb tense).

After this episode, Hector asks if anyone needs a ride on his [motorcycle](#). We soon learn that Hector gropes the boys while they ride behind him on their way home from school. They discuss this matter-of-factly.

Irwin encourages the boys to explore unconventional positions in their essays, even if they don't fully believe them. He says that this will make them more competitive university applicants.

Irwin begins to realize that the boys have a lot of literary knowledge from Hector's classes, but that they don't want to use it on an exam. He becomes more and more curious about what goes on in Hector's classes, especially when he finds that Hector conducts class behind a [locked door](#).

Irwin tells [Mrs. Lintott](#) another history teacher, that [Posner](#), one of the boys, came to see him recently. We have already learned that Posner has a crush on his fellow student [Dakin](#), but that Dakin is sleeping with the Headmaster's secretary, [Fiona](#).

Posner tells Irwin that he thinks he might be gay. In a narrative aside, Scripps (another student) says that Posner goes to Irwin because he has senses that they both have a crush on Dakin, and he "wanted company."

Soon after this, Irwin asks Hector to encourage the boys to use their General Studies knowledge on the exam. Hector says that some knowledge is not meant to be "useful." Irwin argues that education is for the present, not just for comfort in the boys' old age.

Near the end of Act One, the Headmaster calls Hector to his office. He tells him that he has learned of Hector's groping on the motorcycle. He asks Hector to retire at the end of the term.

In the last scene of the act, Posner and Hector discuss a poem about a young soldier who died in war. They both seem to relate to the poem, which has themes of being an outsider.

### Act Two

A few years in the future: Irwin is now a historian on TV. A man comes to visit him on set, and we later find out that it is Posner. He asks Irwin about his relationship with Dakin, and seems to be writing a piece of journalism on the subject. Irwin gets angry, and Posner leaves.

The narrative returns to years earlier, back in Hector's classroom. The boys are joking around, and Hector becomes overwhelmed with discouragement. He puts his head on his desk, saying that he feels he has wasted his life. The boys are nonplussed, and Posner is the only one who moves to comfort Hector.

The Headmaster tells [Mrs. Lintott](#) about Hector's groping, and says that he's almost glad it happened. He's been wanting to fire Hector anyway, because Hector's results are so hard to quantify. He exits, and Mrs. Lintott tells Irwin that the Headmaster is a "twat."

In their first shared lesson, Hector and Irwin discuss the Holocaust. Hector and Posner argue that one shouldn't try to make a good point about the Holocaust on an exam, because this demeans the suffering of those involved. Dakin and Irwin argue that the Holocaust is an historical event, too, and can be discussed as such.

A few scenes later, Mrs. Lintott, Hector, and Irwin giving the boys mock admissions interviews. Mrs. Lintott delivers a monologue about the way that women are marginalized in history while men get to make all the moves. Afterwards, Dakin asks Irwin about his time at Oxford. Their conversation becomes flirtatious.

We then hear from the boys, in narrative asides, about their exams and admissions visits. They have all received places at Oxford or Cambridge—even [Rudge](#), who got in partly because his father was once a janitor at the university. Then Dakin confronts Irwin. While at Oxford, he learned that Irwin lied about being a student there. Irwin admits that this is true. Dakin seduces him, convincing him to come out for "a drink." He teases Irwin for being rebellious in the classroom, but cautious in life.

Dakin tells Scripps that the Headmaster often makes passes at Fiona, and that he has used this information to get Hector a reprieve. He says that he's going to ride home with Hector today, for old-times sake. When the Headmaster sees Dakin in a helmet, however, he forbids this. Instead he tells Hector to take Irwin.

We hear from Scripps, in a narrative aside, that the motorcycle crashed on the way home that day. No one knows exactly what happened, but Irwin was left crippled, and Hector is dead. The boys gather and share their memories of Hector. Then Mrs. Lintott tells us about their lives. Most of the boys end up successful in some profession, but Timms gets into drugs, and Posner ends up leading a lonely life, though he always remembers Hector's teachings.

The play ends when Hector says that the lesson he really wanted to teach the boys was this: "Pass the parcel. That's sometimes all you can do. Take it, feel it, and pass it on."

### Historical context

- *The History Boys* takes place in 1980s Britain, when Margaret Thatcher was in power.
- The play does not directly reference the political context of the time, but some of Thatcher's policies affected Britain's educational climate.
- She cut funding significantly for British universities.
- After her 1988 Education Reform Act, schools had to follow a national curriculum and submit to periodic inspections.
- Such measures may have contributed to the Headmaster's insistence on quantifiable results from his teachers, thus creating a backdrop for the play.

<p><b>Key characters</b></p> <p><b>Hector:</b> aging teacher, secretly gay, idealistic.  <b>Irwin:</b> younger teacher, pragmatic  <b>Posner:</b> student, sensitive, gay  <b>Dakin:</b> student, cocky, confident  <b>Rudge:</b> student, sporty  <b>Scripps:</b> student, religious  <b>Timms:</b> student, 'the fat one'  <b>Akhtar:</b> student, Asian  <b>Headmaster:</b> caricature, snob  <b>Mrs Lintott:</b> teacher, dependable, reliable  <b>Fiona:</b> Headteacher's secretary; Dakin's 'squeeze'</p>	<p><b>Key themes</b></p> <p><b>History:</b> what is it; why study it?  <b>Education:</b> - the play presents a conflict between Hector's idealistic view and Irwin's pragmatic view.  <b>Sexuality:</b> the characters' attitudes to sexuality present problematic discussion of the nature of truth.  <b>The value of art:</b> what ultimately remains of us after we have gone.  <b>Class:</b> the boys attend a grammar school, but are constantly reminded they are competing against more privileged boys.</p>
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<p><b>Stylistic features and symbols</b></p> <p><b>Humour:</b> the play is broadly tragic, although there is humour throughout. Act One is broadly comedic; Act Two is broadly tragic.  <b>Foul language:</b> emphasises the boys' immaturity, but also the rebelliousness of the group, led by Hector  <b>Hector's motorcycle:</b> it is where Hector gropes the boys, so represents his homosexuality. Usually a symbol of machismo and heterosexuality, here it symbolises Hector's non-conformity and rebelliousness.  <b>The locked door:</b> Hector's classroom door is locked, giving it the appearance of being a separate, sacred place. But it is also a place where rules are broken, including Hector's flouting of rules of acceptable relationships between staff and students. Also symbolises Hector's hidden life as a closeted homosexual.  <b>References to art and history:</b> the play forces us to question the place of art in history and in popular culture; what is the value of art. For Hector, studying art and history are intrinsically worthwhile; for Irwin, they are valuable insofar as they enable us to "show off" on examinations  <b>Use of analepsis:</b> flashbacks and flashforwards support the play's theme of the contingency of history.  <b>Subjunctive mood:</b> in grammar, a way of expressing conditionality. Use of could, might, may, if, should. Supports the play's contention that although history seeks to impose order on past events, at the time they were happening there was nothing ordered or predictable about them.</p>
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<p><b>Key Quotations</b></p>				
<p><b>Hector</b>  "Mr Hector's stuff is not meant for the exam..." <b>p38</b>  "I count examinations...as the enemy of education..." <b>p48</b>  Hector is "trying to be the kind of teacher pupils will remember..."<b>p50</b>  "This is a school and it isn't normal." <b>p53</b>  "Saddish life, though not unappreciated..." <b>p55</b>  "Pass the parcel." <b>P109</b></p>	<p><b>Irwin</b>  "Dull...!" <b>p18</b>  "Think bored examiners..." <b>p19</b>  "I'll put you a different case..." <b>p25</b>  "You want us to find an angle.." <b>p35</b></p>	<p><b>Felix, the Headteacher</b>  "...I am thinking league tables..."<b>p8</b>  French lesson <b>p14-16</b>  "There is no time for poetry..." <b>p52</b>  "Mr Irwin. F*** the historian..."<b>p78</b>  "Splendid news..." <b>p97</b></p>	<p><b>Mrs Lintott</b>  "Their A levels are very good. And that is thanks to you, Dorothy..." <b>p8</b>  "You force-fed us the facts..." <b>p33</b>  "...they're a size seven court shoe, broad fitting." <b>p96</b>  Eulogy scene <b>p108</b></p>	<p><b>History</b>  Rudge: "History is one fucking thing after another"—events are random; no rhyme or reason why they occur <b>p85</b>  "If Felix's wife did not change her shift pattern and the road was not busy that Wednesday..." <b>p51 and p92</b>  "There is a vacancy in history" <b>p11</b></p>
<p><b>Sexuality</b>  Dorothy: " A grope is a grope. It is not the Annunciation." <b>p95</b>  "...of all Hector's boys, there is only one who took everything to heart..." <b>p108</b>  Condemned by society: "This is a school and it isn't normal" <b>p53</b>  "... She is my Western front..." <b>p28</b></p>	<p><b>Gender</b>  "...one of the dons who interviews you may be a woman..." <b>p83</b>  Mrs Lintott: "...my gender some sort of safeguard..." <b>p68</b>  Mrs Lintott: "History is women following behind with the bucket...they never get round the conference table..." <b>p85</b>  "I asked him what the difference was between Hector touching us up on the bike and him trying to feel up Fiona?" <b>p102</b></p>			