

**American Council of Learned Societies**  
ADVANCING THE HUMANITIES

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[p](#)
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## Frequently Asked Questions

- What are the humanities?**
- What is a learned society?**
- What is peer review?**

### What are the humanities?

The humanities comprise those fields of knowledge and learning concerned with human thought, experience, and creativity. By exploring the foundations of aesthetic, ethical, and cultural values and the ways in which they may endure, be challenged, or transformed, humanists help us appreciate and understand what distinguishes us as human beings as well as what unites us. Humanists study many different subjects, such as history, languages and literatures, philosophy, art history, and religion. The list of [learned societies](#) that ACLS represents indicates the great reach and variety of humanistic scholarship. As this roster of 71 societies suggests, humanistic inquiry is not limited to particular departments or fields but encompasses all areas of research and learning that ask fundamental questions about the way individuals and societies live, think, interact, and express themselves. Accordingly, the humanities may include work in such fields as sociology, psychology, and anthropology. The humanities, like the sciences, involve the analysis and interpretation of evidence, but their subject matter concerns those aspects of the human condition that are not necessarily quantifiable or open to experiment. The results of humanists' scholarship may be as esoteric as a highly theoretical, scholarly book or article or as practical as a dictionary, thesaurus, website, or encyclopedia.

The humanities and humanistic social sciences are fundamentally acts of investigation and reflection about different cultures, texts, and artifacts across space and time. Humanists study the diverse means by which human beings in every age and culture explore,

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understand, and change their world. The humanities enable us to think about and think through the issues that confront us as global citizens of the twenty-first century. As ACLS President Pauline Yu notes, the humanities “provide the means for understanding and appreciating other cultures through studying the language, arts, religion, philosophy, history, and social life of peoples . . . in actual conditions of extensive interaction and mutual change. . . . The humanist’s insistence on local knowledge plays a crucial role in concentrating the vision of an otherwise monocular globalizing lens.”

Almost fifty years ago, Howard Mumford Jones, a scholar of English and American literature and chair of the board of ACLS, affirmed the importance of the humanities in this way: “Perhaps nobody knows how to make any human being better, happier, and more capable, but at the very least the humanities, humane learning, and humanistic scholarship help to sustain a universe of thought in which these questions have meaning and in which adults may have the opportunity to work out such problems for themselves.” Today, these questions still have meaning, and the humanities continue to help us with them. Indeed, the record of the humanities is the record of the human capacity not only to survive but also to overcome obstacles to obtaining a deeply rich and satisfying life.

[Back to Top](#)

### **What is a learned society?**

Most learned societies are independent, not-for-profit organizations that function as the professional organization for their members, serving as a forum to discuss issues of interest to their constituents and setting professional and scholarly standards. Accordingly, many societies are deeply involved in such issues as employment, professional ethics, and scholarly communication as well as intellectual concerns relevant to the disciplines or areas of the fields of study they represent. Most scholarly societies have open membership, including all who are interested and engaged in their mission and subject. Learned societies have been vitally important in setting standards of excellence in research, writing, and education. For more information, visit [The Work of the Societies](#) and [ACLS member society profiles](#).

[Back to Top](#)

### **What is peer review?**

Peer review is a process by which experts in a given discipline or group of disciplines confirm the value of another scholar’s research and attest to its having met the field’s standards. Through peer review, scholars collectively help establish a reliable body of knowledge. ACLS fellows and grantees are selected through this process. In this way, ACLS contributes to academic self-governance and establishes standards of excellence in scholarship, two goals that help define our endeavors and those of our societies.