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# The Humanities

## What are the humanities?

The humanities are often defined as a group of academic disciplines. According to this definition, which was used by the U.S. Congress when the National Endowment for the Humanities was established in 1964, the humanities include, but are not limited to, history; literature; philosophy and ethics; foreign languages and cultures; linguistics; jurisprudence or philosophy of law; archaeology; comparative religion; the history, theory, and criticism of the arts; and those aspects of the social sciences (anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, government, and economics) that use historical and interpretive rather than quantitative methods.

Mass Humanities finds it more useful to define the humanities as a way of thinking about and responding to the world—as tools we use to examine and make sense of the human experience in general and our individual experiences in particular. The humanities enable us to reflect upon our lives and ask fundamental questions of value, purpose, and meaning in a rigorous and systematic way.

## Why are the humanities important?

The humanities enrich and ennoble us, and their pursuit would be worthwhile even if they were not socially useful. But in fact, the humanities are socially useful. They fulfill vitally important needs for

- critical and imaginative thinking about the issues that confront us as citizens and as human beings;
- reasoned and open-minded discussion of the basic values that are at stake in the various policies and practices that are proposed to address these issues;
- understanding and appreciating the experiences of others, and the ways in which the issues that confront us now have been understood in other times, places, and cultures.

The humanities concern themselves with the complete record of human experience—exploring, assessing, interpreting, and refining it, while at the same time adding to it.

We need the humanities. Without them we cannot possibly govern ourselves wisely or well.