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# Humanities

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Salt Lake Community College | General Education

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## Humanities (HU) at SLCC:

- Literature
- Writing
- History
- Philosophy
- Languages
- Religious Studies
- Art History
- Anthropology

## What Do We Study in the Humanities?

- The human experience
- Common themes across time and space
- The good life
- The sacred
- Values and ethical dilemmas
- Responsibilities to ourselves and others
- Differences and our common humanity



Shirin Kona, Creative Commons—Rohingya Refugee

## Inquiry in the Humanities

Scholars in the humanities explore a topic to which everyone can relate: what it means to be human. This exploration ranges across time and geographical space, spanning historical eras and cultures. In the humanities we study others and ourselves.

Compared to other organisms occupying our planet, humans are unique in several respects. We have a remarkable ability to record what we see, think and feel. We engage in complex performances rich with meaning. We appear to be the sole creatures that can contemplate and reflect on natural beauty and our own creations. Our linguistic proclivities and toolmaking abilities allow us to transmit complicated processes and ideas to future generations. All of these abilities result in **artifacts** that are the **raw material of humanistic inquiry**: literature, artworks, poetry, philosophies, performances, sacred texts, customs and rituals, letters, and music. Think of these artifacts as our attempts to express ourselves to each other—and hence, as snapshots of our humanity at specific times and in specific contexts.

## What Do You Think?

1. What are the merits and limitations of scientific and humanistic methods when attempting to understand what it means to be human?
2. Can you think of examples where we were moved to respond to suffering in some cases, but did nothing in others? Why does that happen? What prompts us to behave in this way?
3. How can a discipline like history be represented in both the humanities and social sciences? What is it about the subject matter and/or methods that allows history to defy easy categorization?
4. Can people draw different conclusions from the same set of cultural artifacts or observations? Why or why not? Can you provide an example of artifacts or observations that either can or cannot be subject to multiple interpretations?
5. Imagine that you take a trip to a foreign country with a dramatically different culture than yours. How might study in the humanities help you better understand its people and their culture?

What do scholars in the humanities do with these artifacts? They engage in **careful analysis** and **interpretation** of them. What exactly is happening with respect to a particular artifact? What does it mean? Is that meaning plain or symbolic? In what ways is it a product of its culture and place in history? Humanists often practice viewing the human condition through **multiple perspectives**, because this allows for a more complete and nuanced understanding. For instance, colonialism looks very different in the cultural artifacts of the colonizers than it does in the cultural artifacts of the peoples who have been colonized.

Research in the humanities is rigorous, and is subject to critique at conferences, in **peer reviewed** journals, and when books are published, but humanists typically do not engage in the scientific method favored by natural scientists and many social scientists. Instead, they **dig below the surface** of words, concepts, and artifacts to uncover underlying meanings, values, and viewpoints. They also **trace ideas, practices, and cultural developments through time and geographic space**.

In an era of information overload and social media echo chambers, humanistic inquiry enlarges our ideas about who we are, how we came to this point in our history, and how we are similar to and different from others. It expands our understanding and helps us avoid shallow explanations that lack fullness and depth.



David Hubert—Gallarus Oratory, Ireland