

Recognizing the Role of Chance, Error, and Oversight in History

What is it? Many things affect the course of history, even accidents and mistakes. **Chance** is an unexpected or accidental event. **Errors** are mistakes people make, such as using poor judgment. **Oversight** occurs when someone does not pay close attention to what is important.

How to do it. Look for examples of chance, error, and oversight in your reading. What was the effect of each accident or error? How might the outcome have been different?

Try it. Read the following passage about the American War of Independence. Notice any chance happenings, errors, or oversights.

In 1777, the British planned to capture Albany, New York. Three British armies were to attack from different directions to take the city. By controlling Albany, they could prevent colonial forces from joining together.

General Burgoyne to the north and Lieutenant Colonel St. Leger to the west set off as planned. However, General Howe to the south decided to attack Philadelphia before heading to Albany. Once his troops occupied Philadelphia, he stayed there. While he enjoyed the company of wealthy British supporters, George Washington attacked and prevented Howe's army from ever setting out for Albany.

Meanwhile, Burgoyne was clumsily moving his army through the woods. He had planned for his army to live off the land, but his troops were an easy target for local militias. As a result, his men suffered without food and supplies. As for St. Leger, he was only part way to Albany when colonial soldiers forced him to retreat.

With only limited troop strength in New York, the British lost the Battle of Saratoga later that year. It was the turning point of the war.

Identify two errors or oversights and their consequences. An example has been done for you. Can you think of a chance occurrence that might have changed the outcome?

Error or Oversight	Consequence
1. General Howe decided to attack Philadelphia instead of marching to Albany.	1. Attacked in Philadelphia, Howe's army never got to Albany to support Burgoyne and St. Leger.
2.	2.
3.	3.