

# HOW TO ANSWER A SOURCE BASED GCSE HISTORY QUESTION

Whether primary or secondary, historical sources are imperative if we are to gain a clear understanding of the events that shaped the lives that we lead today. What would our knowledge of the impact of the Norman Conquest be without the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle or the Domesday Book? How else could we gain a precious glimpse into the lives of our ancestors without the 1881 census?

Central to the National Curriculum's GCSE History Specification is the recognition of this fact with source-based analysis forming a major part of its teaching and assessment. Whether your exam board is AQA, Edexcel or OCR, the ability to interpret, evaluate, and analyse a historical source is a key part of the GCSE History examination.

So what is the best way to answer a source based question? How can it be utilised to ensure that you receive the optimum amount of marks?

## Preparation is key

The key to doing well in any examination is preparation. It is all about being ready and prepared for exams.

### Read the National Curriculum GCSE History Specification:

Although it may seem like a long and slightly intimidating read, this document will provide you with a very clear idea of both your expected learning outcomes and the grounds on which you will be assessed.



## Specimen Exam papers and Mark Schemes.

Although you will be given the opportunity to practice examination papers in class, be pro-active. Both AQA and Edexcel publish specimen exam papers and mark schemes online. Tackling as many exam papers as possible will give you a thorough grounding on what to expect on the day, as well as sharpening your analytical skills and highlighting both your strengths, as well as your weaknesses. Comparing your answers with mark schemes will give you some idea of the standard your work has reached and can highlight any areas that you may need to improve on. Model answers are also now available on these sites, providing a clear indication of the standard you need to aim for.

## Know your stuff

This may sound like an obvious thing to say, but developing a full understanding of your period, events, and themes will enable you to both analyse and evaluate a source with greater impact, producing a solid level 4 answer that provides:

AQA GCSE HISTORY 8145/2B SPECIMEN MARK SCHEME

A developed evaluation of the source by a sustained, balanced judgement of the source supplied by factual knowledge and understanding related to the enquiry point and the broader, thematic study.

As opposed to a basic, level 1 answer that:

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...may show understanding/support for the source, but the case is made by assertion/basic inference.

## Approaching the Question

If there was only one piece of advice an examiner could offer students, it would not only be that they read the question, but that they read it repeatedly until they have fully understood what it is the question is asking them to do. When presented with a Punch cartoon of Emmeline Pankhurst as a source, a student may provide the most eloquent analyse/evaluation about the use of Punch Magazine as propaganda, but this will achieve very few marks if the question asks how the cartoon is representative of the public perception of the women's suffrage movement. Identifying and highlighting keywords within the question will help to focus your mind and make it easier to refer back to if you suspect you may be losing your way.

Certain now that you have understood what you need to write, it is time to examine the source itself. Whatever the source may be: diary entry, newspaper article or cartoon etc., it is vital that you read its description, as this will assist you in identifying the source and also place it within its given historic context.

Your first impressions of the source are often the most valuable, so highlight any details that strike you as relevant, then ask yourself:

What type of source is it?

What type of source is it? How does this influence the style of writing and/or the way the information contained has been presented? A diary entry, for example, only intended for personal

use, with be freer in style than, for example, a newspaper article whose job it is to report the news in the clearest, objective way possible.

*Who produced the source? This is an important question to ask as it can influence the historic value of a particular source. A paper written by Edward Jenner on the smallpox vaccine would have a higher historic value, than one written by a milkmaid.*

What is its purpose? Is it to entertain, to inform, or to persuade etc.?

When did it originate?

When did it originate? Is it a primary source (originating from the period it describes). Or is it a secondary/contemporary source (originating after the events it describes and usually based on the evaluation of a combination of primary sources).

What is both its witting and unwitting testimony?

What is both its witting (what it means to tell us) and unwitting (information we are able to gain from the source other than that which was originally intended) testimony? Can it be relied on as an accurate depiction of the events it describes or is it subject to an individual point of view? For example, an account of the Match Girls Strike of 1888 given by a female striker would probably differ from an account of the event given by the chairman of Bryant & May, whose account may also unwittingly provide testimony as to the attitudes towards working women in the late Victorian period.

Considering your answers to the last two questions, what do you believe the historic value of this source to be? Be prepared to back your opinion with direct reference to the text in your answer.

By asking and answering these questions you have hopefully cleared any exam nerve smog that may have been clouding your mind and focused your brain into tackling the task at hand.

## Answering the Question

So, you are confident that you have understood the question and have carried out a preliminary analysis. It is now time to bring them both together and formulate your answer.

The temptation when you are writing under timed conditions is just to start in the hope that somehow, you will produce an answer worthy of a good mark. Examiners, when marking papers, are looking for answers that demonstrate clearly that you have engaged and understood the source and can demonstrate and understand its relevance to the period in question. Time spent planning your answer at this stage can make this an achievable goal and help to focus your answer, resisting the temptation to go off topic and prevent you from forgetting a key fact that could alter your grade. How you plan your answer, whether by producing a mind map or just noting keywords is up to you. Even if you should run out of time, the presence of a plan would give the examiner some indication of where your answer was heading and you may be awarded points as a result.

One of the most common problems experienced by students when answering a source based history question is knowing how to start. What should the introductory passage say? The best way to overcome this is to incorporate the question into your answer. For example:

Question

'Source A opposes Kaiser Wilhelm II. How do you know?'

First sentence:

The opposition to Kaiser Wilhelm II is evident in Source A through...

In approaching the question this way you are demonstrating to the examiner your understanding of what is expected of you and at the same time provide a focus for your writing, making it less likely that you will go off topic.

Your first paragraph should then be followed by incorporating the strongest evidence you have to support your argument backed by direct reference to the source. Much of source-based analysis is interpretative. If you can support the points you make throughout your answer by referencing the text and by demonstrating both its value and relevance to the period and themes you have studied, you can avoid the fate of the unsupported, generalised source-based answer scoring the lower grades.

The following is a model answer provided by the AQA examination board. The student was required to analyse and evaluate a cartoon of Edward Jenner giving the smallpox inoculation to patients at St. Pancras Hospital, in terms of how useful it would be to a historian studying vaccination:

Source A

Source A shows society's negative reaction to Edward Jenner's discovery of the Smallpox vaccination. The cows sprouting from people's bodies are a representation of the unnatural effects people believed they would develop if they got vaccinated.

This is useful because it is a reminder that although the discovery is significant today, it was rejected by a lot of people around the time it was found. The origin of this source states that it was drawn in 1802 by James Gillray only three years after Jenner's discovery. As the vaccination was still relatively new in 1802 many people did not trust it, especially as Jenner had no way of explaining the effects of his work as germs had yet to be discovered. Therefore, the person drawing this may have set out for it to be portrayed negatively so that people may revert to more common treatments such as inoculation. This would stop many doctors going out of business as they weren't familiar with Jenner's practice and didn't trust it. The purpose of this source is to shine a negative light on Jenner's vaccination so that people would not rely on his methods of treatment. At this time inoculation was something widely practised by many doctors throughout Britain. This is useful as it can give us a further explanation as to why his discovery did not take off as quickly as we would presume. This being because if Jenner's vaccination became popular enough, many doctors would lose money from performing inoculations, hence them spreading rumours such as those seen here. The source is a cartoon and this impacts on its utility as cartoons tend to be exaggerated and for comedic effect thus decreasing their utility to historians. They must be used in combination with a variety of other source types.

The examiner's commentary to this answer discusses the student's complex evaluation of the source. How the student demonstrated and utilised sustained judgement and specific textual and historical knowledge, whilst also recognising its purpose and value as a source. It achieved a level 4 grading.

## and finally

The new GCSE History 9-1 specification now allocates four marks to the use of S P a G (Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar) in the examination, with 'high performance' answers achieving the full

marks where:

- Learners spell and punctuate with consistent accuracy.
- Learners use a wide range of specialist terms as appropriate
- Learners use rules of grammar with effective control of meaning overall.