

Guidance on source work

There is no shortage of advice available to GCSE students on how to answer GCSE questions. Visit any GCSE history website, such as John Clare's and you will find loads of great material carefully tailored to the particular school's needs. Students don't know how lucky they are in having such hardworking teachers who go to these lengths on their behalf. Rather than reproduce here what you can easily access elsewhere I will simply give you some examples of advice passed to me by teachers. I am not entirely sure of their provenance. I make no claim for this to be mine. I would very much like to acknowledge the person who wrote all, or parts, of it. If you recognise it as yours please contact me.

Comparing sources

Top Tips

Tip 1

When you are asked to compare two sources and to decide on their reliability and/or usefulness make sure you analyse **both**.

Tip 2

For each source analyse its **strengths and weaknesses** – what makes it reliable/useful, what detracts from its reliability/utility.

Tip 3

Come to a conclusion! Don't say they are both of the same reliability or usefulness, choose one and state your case **clearly**.

Looking at Bias

Don't fall into the trap of calling a source biased just because it is written by someone on a particular side of a dispute. Make sure you have **grounds** for describing a source as biased!

The essential skill is to explain **how and why** a source is biased and to explain why it matters that a source is biased namely that it **affects its reliability and perhaps usefulness.**

Looking at reliability

When considering **reliability** ask these questions:

Does this source distort the facts?

Does it give one side of the story or is it balanced?

Does it deliberately attempt to mislead?

Can the views expressed in the source be corroborated?

Is the author of the source in a position to know what happened?

Where did the author get the information from? When was the source produced?

Why was the source written/produced? Was there a hidden agenda?

When thinking about usefulness

The key trigger here is an understanding of **what your line of enquiry** is. For instance a **biased** source might be **extremely useful** if you are investigating

the **opinions** of a particular group at a particular time, but **less useful** if you were asked to investigate “**the facts**” of an event.

When sources disagree

It is an examiner favourite to ask why two or more sources don't agree.

Don't just describe the sources back to the examiner – this is **how** they disagree not **why**. Also take care to **remain focussed** – you have not been asked about reliability or usefulness here!

To understand why sources disagree requires an **understanding of motive** – **why** did the author produce the source? You also need to consider the **different access** that each author would have had to the facts. For instance a British historian might have better access to source material on British history than a Chinese one!

You also need to take into **account the background**, nationality, culture, religion etc. of the author and decide whether this may have had some bearing on how things have been **interpreted** in the source.

Use all the sources and your own knowledge

This type of question often requires you to study a relatively high number of sources and to agree or disagree on a particular statement. These are frequently questions **worth many marks!**

Consider carefully the statement offered by the examiner e.g. “Louis Pasteur was the most significant person in the history of medicine.”

Do you **agree or disagree** with it? Often as in the example given it is most **sensible to disagree** (explain why Louis Pasteur was important but explain the importance of others in the history of medicine).

List your knowledge which supports the statement.

List your knowledge which does not support the statement.

Look to the sources and add evidence from the sources to both your lists.

You will now be in a position to **write a balanced answer**.

Try not to sit on the fence – **come to a conclusion!!**

Reliability: Factors affecting reliability

Questions to consider for Written Sources

Was the author an **eyewitness** and if so how long since the events did the writing take place?

Did the author have **access** to all the relevant facts?

Did the author have **access** to a variety of **different sources**? Is there evidence of **balance** in the source?

Under what circumstances was the author writing – **was he/she free to speak his/her mind freely?**

Was the author trying to **persuade** people to share his/her views?

If the source is all opinion is it opinion **typical** of others at the time?

Questions to consider for pictorial sources

Drawings and paintings

Was it the artist's **intention** to give an accurate picture or a factual representation of what occurred? Or was it created to **form opinion**? What was the **motive** of the artist?

If the picture was intended to be an accurate representation, was the artist an **eyewitness**?

Was the picture a product of the artist's **imagination**?

Cartoons

These are frequently deliberately **exaggerated** for effect and in many cases simply unreal e.g. Winston Churchill portrayed with the body of a bull dog. In such cases it is clear that that the picture itself is not "reliable" so you will have to consider whether **the message** of the picture is reliable (did Churchill have bulldog qualities?). Does the message **accurately reflect** the generally held opinion of the person, event or thing?

Always remember that cartoons are usually produced for a precise moment in time and therefore are helpful in capturing what SOME people felt at the time. As today, different newspapers and cartoonists held different views, so cartoons are often NOT representative of the general mood.

Photos

The camera sometimes lies! However it is very unlikely that “doctored” photos will appear in exam papers. However **staged** photographs will often appear! Think of the College prospectus with all those happy hardworking students contently working away behind the screens of high specification computers! Think of those royal family photographs where sour faced expressions are airbrushed out in favour of beaming smiles. Ask yourself whether the photograph **portrays events which are typical** of such a context. Consider also the **motive** of the person who may have staged the photograph.

Statistics

Have they been **collected accurately?**

Have the numbers been **simplified** – rounded up or down?

Has the **scale** been altered for effect?

What important statistics have been **left out?**