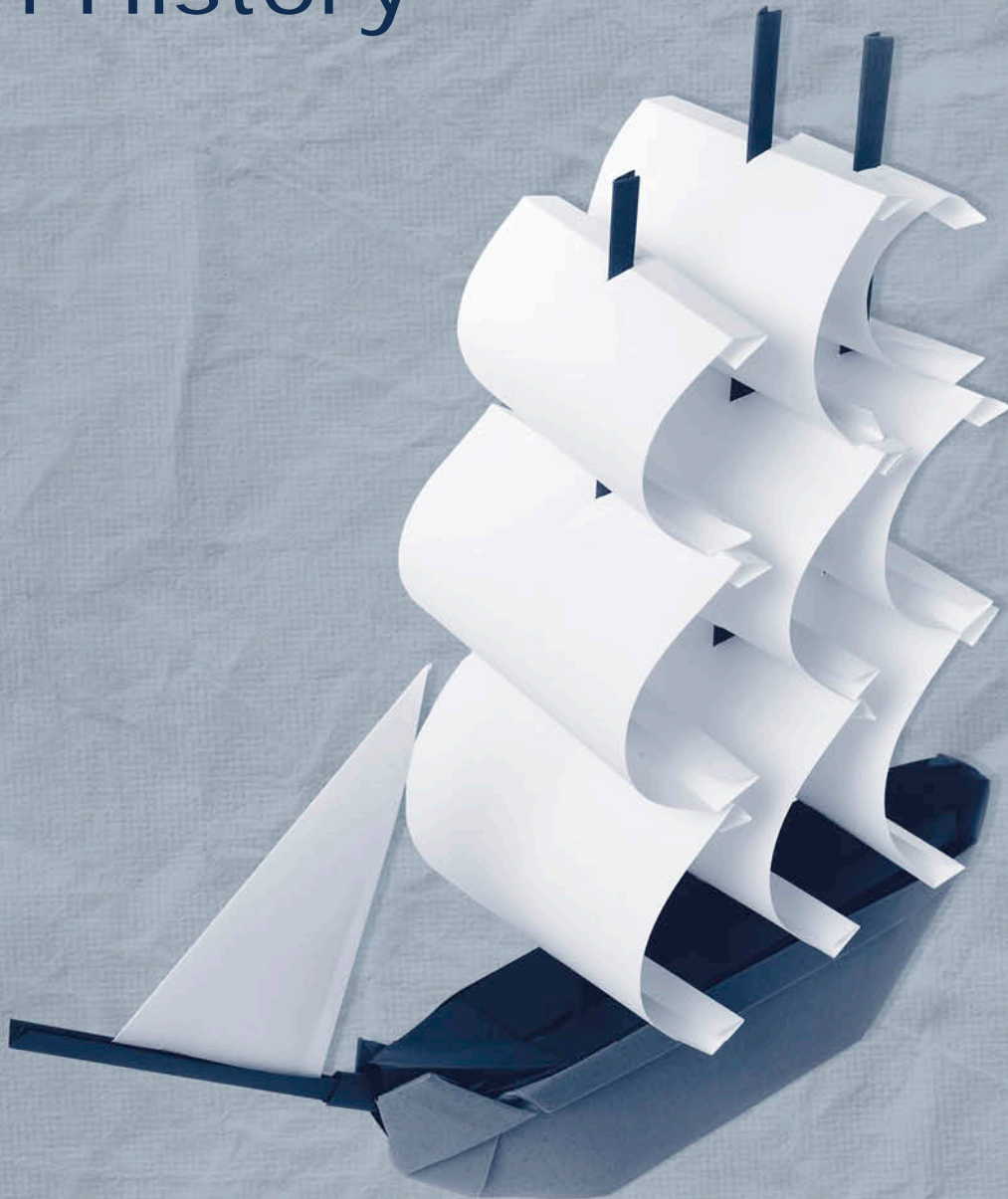


# Pearson Edexcel A level in History



## DEVELOPING STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

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by Arthur Chapman (abridged version)

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## Introduction

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The study of historical interpretations has been an important feature of the history curriculum for many years. The latest subject content requirements for Advanced Level History continue to stipulate its teaching. Pearson's Edexcel GCE A level History (2015) assesses the study of historical interpretations through the coursework component of the qualification, as well as in Paper 1 Section C.

Through the independently researched coursework assignment, students analyse, explain and evaluate the interpretations of three historians around a particular question, problem or issue, with the specification allowing a free choice of coursework topic and title. Students should understand the nature and purpose of the work of the historians as well as form their own critical view based on relevant reading on the question.

By the end of the course students will:

- recognise that interpretations are representations and constructions of the past
- recognise the relationships between interpretations and the questions that they seek to ask and answer
- comprehend and analyse the defining elements of particular interpretations
- explain why historians arrive at the interpretations they do and understand that differences in interpretation can be legitimate
- be able to evaluate differing interpretations against appropriate and relevant criteria
- organise and communicate their findings.

This guide draws on recent research and practitioner work on historical interpretations and aims to provide support for teachers in developing A level students' understandings of historical interpretations by addressing the following questions:

- What are historical interpretations?
- What do we know about A level students' thinking about historical interpretation?
- How can we help A level students' develop their thinking about historical interpretations?

Note that this document offers guidance on teaching and learning approaches. For guidance on coursework requirements and marking criteria, please refer to the specification only.

This is an abridged version of a fuller guide being prepared by Arthur Chapman, which will be available online in due course.

## What are historical interpretations?

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A key point to note about historical 'interpretations' is that they are plural. To understand historical interpretations, it is necessary to understand something about the nature and development of the discipline of history.

Although histories have been written for millennia, the academic discipline of history is generally understood to be a nineteenth century creation (Beiser, 2011; Berger, Feldner and Passmore, 2003; Novick, 1988). Despite the expectation, shared by leading nineteenth century practitioners of the discipline such as Lord Acton, that the professionalisation of history would lead to the creation of 'ultimate' history providing a singular and definitive account of the past (Carr, 1961, p.1; Megill, 2007, pp.162-164), the growth of academic history in the twentieth century led to the proliferation of histories rather than to their consolidation (Ankersmit, 1994).

### The illusion of ultimate history

Like everything and everyone else, the discipline of history and the historians who practice it exist in time. History asks and aims to answer questions about the past, however, neither history nor the past are static. The topics, issues and themes that we think merit attention, the questions that we consider worth asking, the methods of research and analysis that we use to answer these questions and the sources that we have available to us all change with time. Our understandings of time itself and of change over time are emphatically impacted, for example, by changing research technologies and methods.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, historians are a very diverse group and they are all located in social, cultural, political, economic, geographic and ideological spaces, as well as in time (Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, 1995; Novick, 1988). Histories are decisively shaped by the identities of the people who write them (Schama, 1991). Histories are always narratives, to one degree or another, and writing a story involves a series of identifications and decisions, all of which are shaped by the assumptions and identities of the story's narrator.

'Ultimate' history seemed possible in the late nineteenth century partly because it could safely be assumed that professional academic history was 'his-story' (rather than 'her-story' or 'their-stories') and because it could safely be assumed that high – rather than gender, or labour, or racial, or cultural – politics was the 'fit and proper' subject of this story.

### History is a collective practice

'Ultimate' history, then, was an illusion.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean, however, that the discipline of history is an illusion. Despite their differences, historians have a great deal in common and share a common professional identity as historians, despite variations in approach, in interpretive framework, in topic, in method, and so on (Megill, 2007). Now, as in the late nineteenth century, history is an interpersonal and collective practice, and gains much of the objectivity that it can claim from this

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<sup>1</sup> It was possible to think of Stonehenge as a stand-alone monument, for example, until the development of aerial photography during the First World War made it clear that it was one of a number of elements of a much larger scale ritual landscape. It was possible, in the 1950s, to construct interpretations of Stonehenge that linked its builders to Mycenae and Greek antiquity but it was no longer possible to do so once the development of radio carbon dating made it clear that the chronology of Stonehenge predated Mycenae (Chapman, 2007; Chippendale, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that this was well-understood very rapidly, as Mandell Creighton's 'Introductory Note' to the 1902 *The Cambridge Modern History* shows (Ward, Prothero and Leathes (eds.), 1902, Volume 1, pp.1-6). Lord Acton himself, notoriously, did not manage to write very much history, ultimate or otherwise.

fact (Evans, 1997; Megill, 2007; Rüsen, 2005; Seixas, 1993). History is the work of many hands – of archivists, historians, curators, and so on (Samuel, 1994) – and not driven simply by individual subjectivity and whim. Historians both depend upon each other's work and depend on each other for the recognition and validation of their own work. The disciplinary community of historians acts as the arbiter of what counts as historical work and history is made through public and open debate within this community. Histories always involve stories, to one degree or another, but there is much more to history writing than story-telling: the *form* of historical writing, characterised by close attribution of sources and an infrastructure of argumentation and justification (Grafton, 2003; Megill, 2007), embodies a commitment to debate and critical evaluation.

Learning about historical interpretations involves coming to understand why it is that history is inherently plural and changing, rather than singular and 'ultimate'. Learning about historical interpretations also involves coming to understand the ways in which interpretations are constrained by disciplinary practices. The rigour of historical practices is not measured by the permanence or the 'ultimate' nature of the histories that they produce. Rigour consists, rather, in the qualities of research and argument that historical works display and in the processes of debate and argument through which historical claims to knowledge are advanced, tested and, perhaps, sustained and developed.

Historical interpretations, then, are representations and constructions of the past, created in particular moments of time, by particular authors who have particular agendas and who aim, through the interrogation of the records of the past, to make sense of time and change (Rüsen, 2005). In so far as they are historical (rather than simply about the past), historical interpretations are arguments and, as such, are amenable to rational scrutiny and debate. Historians cannot, as it were, 'make it up' or 'say what they like'.<sup>3</sup> The processes of historical debate aim to ensure that the representations of the past constructed in historical narratives are subject to rational evaluation and these processes differentiate histories from the past-referencing practices of collective memory, party history, national myth, and so on (Lowenthal, 1985 and 1998; Megill, 2007; Wertsch, 2002; Wineburg, 2001 and 2007).

### **Summary**

Students should understand:

- that histories are representations and constructions of the past
- that histories are inherently plural and variable
- that histories exist in time and change with time
- that histories are authored and shaped by the subjectivities of their authors
- that histories are typically narratives grounded in evidence and argument
- that history is a discipline and an interpersonal practice.

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<sup>3</sup> This is the burden of the so called 'Irving case'– Irving claimed to be a historian and was judged not to be, because he did not adhere to acceptable scholarly standards (Evans, 2001).

## What are the challenges to understanding?

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This section addresses the following questions.

- What does research tell us about the barriers to understanding that we are likely to encounter?
- What do we know about how young peoples' thinking can be progressed?

### Research on younger children's thinking about historical interpretation

Project CHATA explored 7-14 year-old students ideas about history and historical accounts or interpretations. From this research and data arising from the Schools Council History Project Evaluation (Shemilt, 1980), Lee and Shemilt developed a progression model for accounts, reporting a number of assumptions that students often hold about accounts, summarised in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Progression in ideas about accounts: outline<sup>4</sup>**

1	Accounts are just (given) stories
2	Accounts fail to be copies of a past we cannot witness
3	Accounts are accurate copies of the past, except for mistakes or gaps
4	Accounts may be distorted for ulterior motives
5	Accounts are organised from a personal viewpoint
6	Accounts must answer questions and fit criteria

Before level 4 in this model students tend to understand historical accounts as (usually flawed) copies of a fixed past. At levels 4 and 5 students tend to understand accounts as either deliberately distorted or simply personal and subjective representations. It is only at level 6 in this model that students begin to engage with historical methodology in any sustained way: here we have a recognition that what historians say is shaped by the questions that they are trying to answer and / or by the concepts that they use to make sense of the past.

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<sup>4</sup> Based on Lee and Shemilt, 2004, p.30; this figure draws and the paragraphs that follow draw heavily on Chapman, 2011

## Common misconceptions

### The past is fixed

Many students talk about history in a way that assumes that the past has a single and fixed meaning, and these students talk about historical interpretation as if it should also be singular and fixed (accounts should agree in mirroring a 'fixed' past). This is a misconception. What we can say about the past relates to the topics and issues that we focus on and the questions that we ask and to a range of other variables, including, for example, the methods that we use to answer our questions. As Lee and Shemilt argue, histories are more like theories, developed to solve problems and to answer questions, than they are like pictures, developed to mirror 'what happened' (Lee and Shemilt, 2004).

### Historians are searching for the 'truth'

Many students assume that historical sources should be thought of as witness statements reporting 'what happened' and that the historian's job is to find reliable reports and to piece them together, in the manner in which one might reassemble a jigsaw or a broken mosaic, to create a true 'picture' of the past. This is a misconception and one that fails to appreciate the importance of questions. If accounts are answers to questions then it follows that there can be as many different and legitimate accounts as there can be different questions about the past. Questions also determine the conclusions that can be drawn from sources. Any source, 'reliable' or otherwise in testimonial terms, must be interrogated and reliability is relative to the question that is asked.

## Research on 16-19 year-old students' thinking about interpretation

The table below shows a range of ways 16-19 year-old history students tend to explain variations in historical interpretations.

**Table 2: Types of Explanation for Variation in Interpretation<sup>5</sup>**

Explanatory Type	Definition
1. Authorial explanation	Variations in interpretation are explained in terms of authors' backgrounds or background beliefs
2. Archival explanation	Variations in interpretation are explained in terms of the variable or limited nature of the archive available to historians.
3. Impositionist explanation	Variations in interpretation are explained in terms of variations in how historians imposed their preconceptions on the record of the past through their interpretations
4. Hermeneutic explanation	Variations in interpretation are explained in terms of variations in how historians construed or constructed the meaning of the record of past.
5. Inquisitorial explanation	Variations in interpretation are explained in terms of variations in the questions that historians asked about the past.

Many of the students who explained interpretive differences using the first three explanations above drew on ideas common in the CHATA findings, lending support to them by showing continuity of ideas across age groups. Students who offered explanations of the fourth and fifth type, however, were clearly developing

<sup>5</sup> Based on Chapman, 2009(a), p.96

powerful ideas about the *active role* that historians play in constructing knowledge of the past.

As was argued in relation to the CHATA data, it is important to consider students' thinking about interpretations alongside their ideas about other aspects of historical thinking, notably 'evidence'. It was common to find that students with restricted understandings of interpretation also had simplistic understandings of evidence, often assuming, for example, that historians rely mainly on witness 'reports' or 'testimony' and that they operate by piecing together the truth from reliable reports. Developing student thinking about interpretations and developing their understandings of evidence are likely to be parallel and closely related tasks.

## Strategies

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The History Virtual Academy (HVA) project was an online discussion environment in which students were presented with contrasting historical accounts of a topic and asked to explain how it was possible for differing accounts to arise and to adjudicate between the conflicting accounts; once they had made posts, students received feedback from academics and also from each other and then re-posted answers to the discussion questions. During the project, it became apparent that via a process of *reflection* prompted by *formative feedback*, students could make good progress on their understanding of historical interpretations through a process of *reflection* prompted by *formative feedback*. The kind of feedback that seemed to be most effective did two things:

- first, it asked students to engage with issues in their full complexity by providing developed explanations
- second, it provided question prompts to encourage students to consider issues that they had neglected to raise.

The second type of feedback – which asked students to consider new questions that they had not explored – is exemplified by the list of questions below. These questions aimed to focus students' thinking on historical interpretation as an activity and to foreground processes that this interpretive activity involve, regardless of individual 'biases', such as questioning, selection, contextualisation and conceptualisation.

- Are the historians asking the same questions or are they in fact answering different questions about the past? (It is possible to set out with different aims – to set out to describe something in the past, to explain it, to evaluate it and so on.)
- Do the historians examine the same source materials as they pursue their questions about the past?
- Do the historians ask the same questions of their source materials?
- Where different conclusions are drawn from similar facts or sources, it may be because the historians disagree about what these things *mean*. There are many reasons why they might. Consider these possibilities (and others that you can think of!):
  - Do they have differing understandings of the *context* (the period, the background situation and so on)?
  - Are they defining *concepts* in different ways (if we disagree about whether a 'revolution' has occurred, for example, it may be because we are using different criteria to define the concept 'revolution')?<sup>6</sup>

**See Activity 1.**

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<sup>6</sup> (Chapman, 2012, p.198)



## Interpretations, representations and constructions

We need to help students to understand:

- that historical interpretations are *constructions* – things that historians *actively make* rather than simply find
- that histories are more like *theories* – developed in answer to questions or in response to problems – than they are like pictures
- that although histories involve *representation* (description, explanation, and so on), they are not simply *re-presentations* of a fixed past.

### How historians use evidence

It is useful in moving students' thinking forward to spend time at the beginning of their work on interpretation exploring and developing their understandings of how historians use evidence to answer questions and of the ways in which answers to questions depend upon assumptions and criteria that historians bring to the task of making sense of the past. **See Activities 2 and 3.**

### Comprehending and analysing interpretations

Understanding particular historical interpretations necessarily involves comprehension – understanding what histories say, in a literal sense. Developing students' understandings of historical interpretations, therefore, entails developing their ability to read and to understand what they read. Understanding historical interpretations also involves understanding of what they are and what they are trying to do. History – literally and etymologically – is a process of enquiry about the past. Histories, as has been noted above, are answers to questions and attempts to solve problems more than they are simply pictures of the past. We need to help students become sensitive to the different aims that historians have in their writing and the enquiries and questions to which their histories respond.

#### What historians are saying

- *Understanding academic history*  
Students need to understand what particular historical works are saying and doing before they can think critically about them. **See Activities 4 and 5.** They need to actively read articles. **See Activity 6.**
- *Recognising arguments*  
Students need to understand how historians state their case and how they use argument and citation to make their case. **See Activity 7.**
- *Application of understanding*  
Once students have understood what argument is they can be asked to apply this understanding by analysing historical texts. **See Activity 8.**
- *Citation*  
In helping students understand how history works, spend some time exploring footnotes and how they work to support what historians say.

#### What historians are doing

An equally and perhaps more important aspect of comprehension is understanding what an historian is doing and this in turn can be understood in at least two complementary ways:

- an interpretation can be understood as attempting to provide *an answer to a question* that its author has posed, tacitly or explicitly
- an interpretation can be understood as *aiming to perform one of a number of generic 'tasks of historical writing'* (Megill).

In a paper first published in 1989, Allan Megill identified 'four tasks' that all historical writing must engage in, to one degree or another and these 'tasks' are outlined and summarised in Table 3 below (Megill, 2007, pp.63-77).<sup>7</sup>

**Table 3: The Four Tasks of Historical Writing<sup>8</sup>**

Task	Explanation
1. Description	Describing an aspect of historical reality – telling what was the case
2. Explanation	Explaining why a past event or phenomenon came to be
3. Evaluation	Attributing meaning, value and / or significance to aspects of the past
4. Justification	Justifying descriptive, explanatory or evaluative claims by supplying arguments to support them

Understanding the tasks that an historian has set themselves helps if we want to *understand why historical works differ*, since they may be attempting to do different things. Understanding what an historian is trying to do is also essential if we are to *evaluate* the extent to which they have been successful: we need to know what an historian is trying to do before we can ask the questions 'How have they gone about doing it?' and 'How well have they done it?'.

**See Activity 9.**

## Explaining why historians arrive at differing interpretations

### Purposes

Students should encounter histories of different types, particularly histories that enable clear differences in historians' purposes to be readily established.

Differences in purposes include:

- kinds of historical focus (social history, economic history, and so on)
- scale of focus (studies of individuals, villages, empires, and so on)
- differences in what histories are seeking to *do* in the broader context of the evolution of historiography (challenging or defending a consensus, applying a new approach to familiar content, and so on).

**See Activity 10.**

### Methods

It is not possible to answer any empirical question – in the past or the present – without making decisions about the methods that you will use to help you answer it. Understanding method involves going beyond the surface narrative structure of a work of history and exploring its infrastructure. The key question is not 'What does the historian claim?' but 'What research strategy have they pursued to develop their claims?'. **See Activity 11.** When delving deeper into an historian's work it is key to ask questions of their choice of sources. **See Activity 12.**

<sup>7</sup> Table 3 is based on Megill's work but adapts it: Megill uses 'interpretation' to refer to what is called 'evaluation' here, for example.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Chapman, 2011(a), p.102 after Megill, 2007

## Assumptions

Just as a question is needed before an enquiry can begin, so ideas about how the world works, about what is important in it and about how we can go about making sense of it are necessary before one can ask a question. Assumptions are often unreflective (simply taken for granted) and tacit (not explicitly theorised).

How can we help students grasp the assumptions and interpretive frameworks that histories express?

The task is fraught with difficulty, since, if we set the task up badly it is very easy for students to assimilate both to simplistic ideas about bias and to tacitly assume, naively, that if only historians could maintain an open mind and be sufficiently 'objective' interpretive differences might evaporate. This is particularly likely to happen if students are offered 'schools of history' summaries that present conflicts of interpretation as unexplained choices of 'position' (Marxist, Feminist, Revisionist, and so on). The net effect of approaches like this can be to make historians seem little more than capricious ideologues. Perhaps a solution is to focus on choices of enquiry and on structure – since interpretive assumptions are clearly apparent in both, as we have seen. **See Activity 13.**

## Understanding that differences in interpretation can be legitimate

If students have been introduced to and have understood some of the range of considerations explored in the previous section of this guide then they are likely, already, to have an appreciation of the fact that histories frequently differ and, indeed, of the fact that our default expectation should be for histories to differ – depending on their purposes, methods, context and so on.

It is probable that raising students' awareness that there are decisions to be made and their awareness of the ways in which historians have made the decisions that they made will help them to see both that legitimate differences in the calls that historians make can arise and that these decisions can be compared and evaluated comparatively.

## Evaluating interpretations against appropriate and relevant criteria

Students can find evaluating historical interpretations challenging and a number of problems can present themselves, including the following:

- 'fence-sitting', when students systematically avoid discriminating between accounts and insist on finding undifferentiated value in all the historical arguments that they are asked to consider
- simplistic evaluation, when students make superficial judgements based on naïve criteria (of the kind, for example, that say 'X is best because it is published by Cambridge University Press' or 'Y is best because it was published most recently and new evidence may have come to light')
- overstated judgements, when students dismiss or endorse arguments in an 'all or nothing' way, without nuance or a sense that arguments can have strengths of different kinds.

To overcome problems such as these, we need to help students to appreciate:

- that evaluation is relative, not absolute (it depends upon our purposes)
- that evaluation requires detailed engagement with historians' arguments
- that evaluation is a matter of applying criteria – we cannot make a judgement without them – rather than simply 'checking the facts'.

## Purpose

Evaluation in a vacuum does not make sense. Supplementary reading for the coursework task will help to inform students' judgements. **See Activity 14.**

## Argument

A good argument is one whose reasons do in fact provide grounds for accepting its conclusions. Most of the time most of the arguments that historians provide meet this test – which is, perhaps, one reason why students find it difficult to evaluate what historians say. We need a tighter question than 'Does it make sense?' if we are to evaluate arguments with precision.

Two questions – developed by authors specialising in critical thinking (van den Brink-Budgen, 2000) – can help us here, perhaps.

### The alternative conclusion

The first is the 'alternative conclusion' test. Once we have modelled an historian's argument, and are clear about the conclusions that are drawn and the evidence from which they are drawn, and once we have established that the 'reasons' given do provide grounds that make the conclusion plausible, we can then ask the following question: 'Can alternative and equally plausible conclusions be drawn from this evidence?'

### The assumptions test

A second tool is the assumptions test. We all make assumptions when we argue (when someone says 'Don't do that, it's unhealthy' for example, they assume that you want to remain healthy). The problem is that the assumptions that people make, when considering complex historical questions, are often questionable.

**See Activity 15.**

## Evaluation criteria

It is best to develop students' understanding of making a judgement through the application of criteria by exploring historians' use of criteria in historical debate – history 'in motion' – not least because this reinforces the key learning point that history is an inter-personal practice that operates through discussion and debate. Most A level topics address issues that historians have debated with vigour. These debates might be approached through controversial books – which were often controversial precisely because they challenged existing beliefs.

E.P.Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson, 1968) is a case in point. The book was highly controversial precisely because it challenged so many accepted assumptions – about what 'class' was and about how it should be understood and studied, about the standards of living of the working classes in the early nineteenth century, about the extent to which Britain was on the brink of revolution in this period, about the role of Methodism in the lives of the working class, and so on – and it led to debates and to new research on these topics. Reviews of the book were often highly critical, to the extent that Thompson included a lengthy 'Postscript' to the second edition responding to his critics. The second edition of the book is, therefore, a resource for exploring the manner in which Thompson responded to his critics and, hence, for exploring his objectivity as an historian.

- Did he, for example, simply re-assert his initial position, without seriously engaging with the arguments of his critics?
- Did he accept some criticisms but simply add new qualifications and 'ad hoc' arguments to shore up his original claims?

- Did he, by contrast, accept key criticisms and modify arguments in significant ways to take account of points that were raised and acknowledged?
- Or, alternatively, did he succeed in showing that his critics were mistaken and overly committed to historiographical consensus and their existing positions?

**See Activity 16.**

## Activities

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These activities draw on recent research and practitioner work. They are ordered to build students' familiarity and confidence with academic interpretations, finishing with evaluation of interpretations using valid criteria.

### Developing thinking around interpretations

#### Activity 1

##### Aims

Diagnostic: What *assumptions* are students making about interpretations?

Developmental: To move away from initial and simplistic ideas (such as 'bias', 'schools of history' stereotypes, and so on) and to move them towards an appreciation of what historians **do** when **constructing** interpretations.

##### Tasks

1. Ask students to jot down their initial answers to the question 'Why do historical interpretations differ?'
2. Present them with two contrasting interpretations of an event or issue (ideally, ones that differ dramatically)
3. Ask them to write down a bullet-pointed explanation of 'Why' the accounts differ.
4. Ask them to swap answers and discuss them using their initial list of ideas (point 1). Are there possibilities that they did not explore? Do they need to add new ideas to their initial list.
5. Discuss whole class and aim to encourage close attention to the texts themselves and to challenge labels/stereotypes.
6. Introduce and explain some of the ideas they neglected to raise (e.g. Are the historians asking the same questions? Do the historians ask the same questions of their source materials?). Discuss and model how they might be applied to the texts.
7. Ask students to redraft their answers
8. Ask students to collectively produce a new list of reasons why historical interpretations might differ and to discuss the questions 'What new ideas have they developed?' and 'Which ideas seem to be most powerful?'

## Interpretations, representations and constructions

### How historians use evidence and establishing criteria<sup>9</sup>

#### Activity 2

##### Aims

To draw attention to the necessity of making decisions of a conceptual, methodological and practical nature when constructing accounts of the past.

##### Tasks

1. Ask students to imagine that two research teams have set out to answer an identical question about a contemporary location but have come up with dramatically divergent answers. Ask them to explain why such divergent answers may have come about.  
For example: Two research teams have been instructed to count the exact number of people in Lemon Quay, Truro at precisely 11.57am on Tuesday 15 February 2011. One team reports the number as 267.5 people and the other as 1,756. How on earth do we explain this dramatic discrepancy?
2. Debate, establish and evaluate the criteria for the research teams.  
For example:
  - Where does a town square begin and end? If someone is in a shop on the square do they 'count'?
  - If someone is pregnant should they be counted as one person or as one-and-a-half people?
  - If someone is asleep in the square are they 'there'?
3. Transfer the exercise to a concrete historical case. Discuss why the divergent interpretations may have come about. What were the historians' criteria?  
For example: the question of the number of 'Chartists' who attended the Kennington Common meeting of 10th April 1848 (the answers at the time ranged from 15,000 to 300,000).
4. Students now devise (defensible) historical methodologies for solving the problem. Debate the merits of the approaches that they come up with. Explore the ways in which historians have approached this issue and have been asked to evaluate these approaches.  
For example: We cannot count the number of 'Chartists' or 'Chartist supporters' at a meeting without making decisions about how to define these concepts.
5. Discuss good questions to ask about the historical case and consider the issues that arise once historians have decided upon a question.

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<sup>9</sup> adapted from Harris (1974)

## Comprehending and analysing interpretations

### What historians are saying

#### Activity 3<sup>10</sup>

##### Aims

To develop understanding of what particular historical works are saying and doing before they think critically about them.

##### Tasks

1. Present students with cards containing evidence from an historical interpretation (an article, a chapter, etc.), for example Eamon Duffy's *The Voices of Morebath* (2001).
2. Ask students to classify the information under headings, for example 'evidence of acceptance' and 'of resistance'
3. Students then consider the implications of the evidence that they classified and draw their own conclusions about the topic, for example drawing conclusions about the overall success or failure of Reformation policy.
4. Present students with extracts from your chosen article in which the historian draws conclusions, for example Duffy's book draws conclusions about what the evidence from Morebath tells us about the success and failure of the Reformation.
5. Students evaluate the historian's conclusions.

#### Activity 4<sup>11</sup>

##### Aims

To develop understandings of historical writing and historians' arguments.

##### Tasks

1. Select a historian's work for close reading, for example Claudia Koonz's *Mothers in the Fatherland* (1988). Students should read short extracts and annotate with queries and explanations.
2. Students then summarise the key claims that the historian makes in these extracts.
3. Students label key passages of the text with adjectives to help identify and characterise the historian's wider 'world view'.
4. Students then explore similarities and differences between the historian's claims, for instance about women's lives under Nazism, and the views of other authors by organising cards that summarise key claims (for example, 'Women's health and welfare improved') on a Venn diagram where the component circles stand for the different historians' arguments.

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<sup>10</sup> From Rachel Ward (2006)

<sup>11</sup> From Diana Laffin *Better Lessons in A Level History* (2009), pp.60-68



## Active reading

### Activity 5<sup>12</sup>

#### Aims

To develop a sense of historiographic developments over time.

#### Tasks

1. Give students an enquiry question to frame their reading, for example 'Why was Pitt able to secure his ministry by the end of 1784?'
2. Students read a number of accessible secondary accounts, collecting information and explanations. Ensure that students are comfortably extracting key points from these works. Note that where there has been a historiographical shift in emphasis, it is beneficial to start off with earlier accounts, for example Asa Briggs and Ian Christie.
3. Students create cards from their reading to capture different types of explanatory factor (e.g. royal power, Pitt, Whig failings and the people). These should be sorted to model relationships between factors.
4. In pairs or small groups, students discuss their initial answer to the question, identifying where they need further information.
5. Students can search for further information in groups, looking for new points a page at a time or splitting up paragraphs. Use a variety of terminology for the new points, such as 'detail', 'major point', 'new argument'.
6. Lastly, students should review how newer accounts differ in emphasis from the earlier accounts with which they began.

### Activity 6<sup>13</sup>

#### Aims

To understand and compare 'the different narrative structures historians use'

#### Task

1. Give students extracts of historians' works and ask them to break the interpretations into six visual scenes.  
For example: for the rise of Thatcher – 'Andrew Marr kicks off with Keith Joseph and Alfred Sherman... John Charmley compliments Thatcher's courage but again focuses on Joseph and Heath and Whitelaw's loyalty... Richard Vinen approaches a similar narrative spending more time on Josephism, and Enoch Powell and Heath's campaign and very little on Thatcher herself...' which shows that historians seeking to understand the rise of Thatcherism (or Thatcher) have spent little time on Thatcher herself.

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<sup>12</sup> From Gary Howells, 'Why was Pitt not a mince pie? Enjoying argument without end: creating confident historical readers at A Level', *Teaching History* 143 2011

<sup>13</sup> As above

## Recognising arguments

### Activity 7

#### Aim

To develop understanding of what an argument is.

#### Task

1. Present students with the table below of arguments, disputes, narratives and nonsense. Ask them to identify which text is an argument?

<b>Which of these four texts is an argument?</b>	
<p><b>Text 1</b>            Frank: "Apples are hideous!"            Marcia: "Nonsense! Apples are beautiful!"            Frank: "I tell you: apples are hideous!"            Marcia: "Nonsense! Apples are beautiful!"</p>	<p><b>Text 2</b>            Once upon a time, I was walking down the road minding my own business. I was very tired (it had been a long day at the orchard). I decided to take a nap. I lay down in the shade of a particularly inviting apple tree. The sunset flickered through the leaves of the tree. The rustle of the leaves sent me to sleep.            Next thing I knew, a fat apple had landed on my nose!</p>
<p><b>Text 3</b>            Apples are hideous things that should be feared and avoided!            Only the other day as I was sleeping minding my own business a great big fat apple fell out of its tree and smacked me in the face.            See!</p>	<p><b>Text 4</b>            Apples grow on apple trees. I like to go on holiday to Cyprus. There are no apples on the moon.            I have a sister (she is called Zoe). She doesn't like apples very much.            Barack Obama is President of the USA.</p>

Text 1: dispute; assertion and counter-assertion are exchanged without any supporting reasons

Text 2: narrative; linked by sequence not inference

Text 3: argument

Text 4: nonsense

## Application of understanding

### Activity 8

#### Aim

To apply understanding of what an argument is by analysing an historian's work.

#### Tasks

1. Students read/watch an extract of an historian's work. For example, Professor Robert Gellately in *The Nazis: A warning from History* (BBC, 1997) 'I think the Gestapo could not have operated without the cooperation of the citizens of Germany...'
2. Students then write statements from the historian's work on cards and organise them into a logical form by sequencing and adding links, using the plus and therefore signs.

For example:

There were not enough Gestapo officials.

+

Between 80-90% of crimes were reported to the Gestapo by citizens.

∴

The Gestapo could not have operated without the cooperation of the citizens of Germany.

## What historians are doing

### Activity 9

#### Aims

To understand what a historian is trying to *do* when producing an historical work.

#### Tasks

1. Give students a number of historical works (chapters, articles, etc) and ask them to consider what the titles of the works reveal about what their authors are likely to be doing in the works themselves and about their authors' questions and purposes.<sup>14</sup>
2. Ask students to develop or confirm their suggestions by looking at some features of the work, for example the bibliography or abstracts at the start of a journal.

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<sup>14</sup> It is likely to be helpful, of course, when selecting works for students to compare and explore, to ensure that the works selected approach the topic students are studying through contrasting questions and by writing histories of different kinds.

## Explaining why historians arrive at differing interpretations

### Purposes

#### Activity 10

##### Aim

To understand the importance of purpose in historical writing, such as historical focus (social, economic, etc.), scale of focus (individual, local, empires, etc.) and evolution of historiography (challenging or defending a consensus, etc.).

##### Task

1. Supply students with extracts from a number of historical works. In pairs or groups, students should explore the ways in which historians write – differences in narrative technique, style and so on. Consider how one aspect of a particular history (such as *how* it is written) may relate to and be shaped by other aspects of that work (such as the *type* of history that is being written).

### Methods

#### Activity 11

##### Aim

To understand historians' methods by going beyond the surface narrative structure of a work of history and exploring its infrastructure.

##### Task

1. Bring a collection of works of different types into class and physically explore textual features with students. Explore the conclusions that we can draw from these features about the nature of the scholarship that a book embodies. You could create a table of features for this comparison.

#### Activity 12

##### Aim

To analyse sources to understand the opportunities and challenges they present for a particular enquiry.

##### Task

1. Take two works or extracts on the same issue and discuss the sources that the historians have employed.
  - What might we learn (and not learn) and with what degrees of confidence from sources of these kinds?
  - What are the probable advantages and limitations of using these sources to explore the historians' enquiry?

## Assumptions

### Activity 13

#### Aim

To identify differences in historians' works.

#### Task

1. Present students with contrasting works of history on the same topic (in the sense in which Hampson's *A Social History of the French Revolution* and Schama's *Citizens* are about the same thing) and ask them to identify differences in how works frame a topic and go about organising it.

## Evaluating interpretations against appropriate and relevant criteria

### Purpose

### Activity 14

#### Aim

To develop understanding of valid criteria.

#### Tasks

1. Select a number of works about a given topic and provide and justify a provisional ranking based on sample pages/abstracts.
2. The question could then become more specific and students then pool their initial lists and come up with a justified smaller list of five or six books that seem most relevant, as rigorous resources, for that new, more specific, enquiry.

### Argument

### Activity 15

#### Aim

To develop skills in evaluation of historians' works by challenging their conclusions and assumptions.

#### Tasks

1. Using one interpretation/work per group, ask each group to model what their historian is arguing. (It is helpful to have examples of historians' arguments where they are drawing inferences from the same, or similar, data and where the inferences that they draw differ in striking ways.)
2. Ask students to apply both the 'alternative conclusions' and the 'assumptions' tests to these arguments.
  - Can alternative and equally plausible conclusions be drawn from this evidence?
  - what assumptions has the historian made?

## Establishing criteria

### Activity 16

#### Aim

To develop understanding of how historians use criteria to make a judgement.

#### Tasks

1. Analyse an exchange between an historian author and an historian critic, and ask:
  - what criteria does the critic deploy in their review of the author's work and what kinds of issue (methodological and/or substantive) do they focus on
  - how does the author respond?

#### Extension task

2. Consider – of the exchange as a whole – the question 'Does this exchange simply amount to 'dispute'?' (in the sense that it amounts to an exchange of assertion and counter-assertion and to the entrenching – rather than the development – of initial positions).

#### Resource note:

Criticisms and responses to criticism can be explored in a number of ways – through exchanges in academic journals (such as the exchange between Robert Findlay [1988] and Natalie Zemon Davies [1988] over Finlay's review of *The Return of Martin Guerre* [Davies, 1983]) or through readers that collect together key articles on historical topics (such as Bartov [2000] on the Holocaust and Ward [1998] on Stalinism).

The Institute for Historical Research's 'Reviews in History' website (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/>) is a very valuable open source resource. It contains numerous reviews and replies to them, such as:

Jay Winter's review of Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War* (1998) and Ferguson's reply (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/72#author-response>)

Dianne Purkiss' review of Robert Poole (ed.) *The Lancashire Witches: Histories and Stories* and Poole's reply (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/348#author-response>)

David Andress' review of Timothy Tackett's *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (2015) and Tackett's reply (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1783#author-response>).

## Author Profile

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Dr Arthur Chapman is Senior Lecturer in History Education at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London where he works with trainee and experienced history teachers, leads the MA in Humanities Education and supervises doctoral students.

Prior to becoming an academic, Arthur taught Advanced Level History for 12 years and, where possible, aimed to follow specifications that enabled interpretation to be addressed systematically, such as the pre-Syllabus 2000 'London Syllabus E'. This guide is informed by that experience and also by the author's involvement in systematic research into 16-19 year old English history students understandings of interpretations (Chapman, 2001, 2009a and 2011) and by the author's role in leading a teaching development project that focused on Advanced Level students' thinking about historical interpretation (Chapman, 2009b, and 2012; Chapman and Facey, 2009; Chapman and Goldsmith, 2015; Chapman, Elliott and Poole, 2012).

This guide cannot aspire to be definitive – the nature of our topic prevents that – but it does aim to stimulate questions and sketch some provisional answers.

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