

WORKING WITH SOURCES (FOR ALL FET GRADES 10-12)

This useful information on working with sources has been adapted from the Department of Education's document called NATIONAL CURRICULUM STATEMENT GRADES 10-12 (GENERAL) LEARNING PROGRAMME GUIDELINES HISTORY.

The full document is available on the following website:

http://curriculum.pgwc.gov.za/php/circular_docs/49_lpg_history.pdf

Practical tasks on sources are provided on this website under the link TEST YOURSELF.

1. Types of Sources

There are a wide variety of sources, which include:

- ❖ Written
- ❖ Oral
- ❖ Visual
- ❖ Material sources (objects).

These sources are all useful to the historian in order to find historical evidence.

Sources can include letters, documents, books, photographs, drawings and paintings, cartoons, speeches, monuments, statues and buildings, skulls and bones, fossils, print and electronic media (internet, television etc), tables and graphs, maps, poems and novels, diaries, songs etc.

2. Questions you might be asked about sources

The most common types of questions you will encounter are:

- ❖ Obtaining direct information from the source. These are the easiest questions that could be asked.
- ❖ Questions requiring you to show wider knowledge of the period dealt with by the sources - how the source reflects the time.
- ❖ Straightforward interpretation of the sources. What is being said by the originator of the source? What are the originator's views/ opinions on the issue?
- ❖ More complex interpretation involving more than one source - this looks at subjectivity/bias and reliability. You may be asked to discriminate between sources. You may be asked to compare and contrast the different views expressed by the sources and suggest reasons why their views differ.
- ❖ Using the information about and in the sources to write your own history (knowledge construction). This can be a paragraph, or a piece of extended writing.

3. Questions to ask of sources

Is the source reliable?

A source may be reliable for some purposes, but unreliable for others. There are a number of questions which should be asked of the source:

- ❖ Who produced the source and when was it produced?
- ❖ Was the person who created the source an eyewitness?

Remember that an eyewitness account does not necessarily mean that the source is reliable or accurate. Eyewitness accounts are not necessarily always true, accurate or unbiased.

- ❖ What is the perspective/attitude of the creator of the source to the subject matter/topic?
- ❖ Is there an alternative point of view to the one in the source?
- ❖ Was the source created a long time after the event?
- ❖ Why was the source produced?
- ❖ How accurate is the information in the source? (This requires you to compare the source with others and with your own content knowledge.)
- ❖ Does the issue of accuracy tell us anything further about the intention of the person who created the source?

Remember: A cartoon may be unreliable in telling you the facts about an event, but could be reliable for showing the way people thought about an event at the time it happened.

Is the source useful?

This is similar to asking about reliability, as the questions you will need to ask are similar. If a source is, for example, biased, it may not be useful if you are trying to find out about an event; however that same source might be useful in showing how people felt at the time.

For example, a historical map of the world is useful for the time we might be investigating, but it may be full of intentional biases or unintentional mistakes and is therefore not reliable.

4. Hints to assist you in answering questions

Using evidence from the sources to explain the answer

Questions may be asked where the evidence in the source, and your own knowledge, must be used to explain the answer.

In this case you have the opportunity to show what you know about the event and say how or whether the sources reflect the thinking and attitudes and events in the past.

At all times you must use evidence extracted from the sources to support your answers. This is just as important with source-based work as it is when you are constructing an argument in the essay questions.

Using the information from the sources to write a paragraph/extended piece of writing

The ultimate aim of working with sources is to construct knowledge from the evidence and write history. When doing this, you will need to use your knowledge about bias, reliability, and so on, when writing the paragraph.

5. Some examples of sources

Graphs, tables and maps

You may be asked to gather information to answer a question from a graph of election results, tables and maps.

You need to look at these carefully to find out what information the sources contain before answering the questions.

For example:

- ❖ Which direction did the German army have to take to invade Austria? (map)
- ❖ In which election did Hitler gain the most seats in the German parliament? (table)
- ❖ In which year did the American economy slump dramatically? (graph)

Cartoons

Questions will usually be asked about the cartoonist's attitude towards an event. In other words, what does the cartoonist think about the event?

Cartoons need to be studied very carefully:

- ❖ What information is written on the cartoon? This can be either in the caption or other information.
- ❖ Look at the date. If the date is not on the cartoon you may be required to work it out by looking at the historical context. This includes the people represented in the cartoon and the historical event represented in the cartoon.
- ❖ What message/perspective is the cartoonist trying to convey in the cartoon?

Photographs

Although an eyewitness usually takes a photograph, you need to understand that we cannot be certain that the photograph is an accurate reflection of what happened.

Photographers have a purpose in mind when they take photographs, so this purpose needs to be questioned. Sometimes photographs are altered to improve the appearance of people; parts of a photograph can be blocked out; or a photograph could even be a fake.

Questions that could be asked of photographs include:

- What is the subject matter? (intention)
- Why was the subject chosen? (purpose of the photograph/motive of the photographer)
- How is the subject matter portrayed? (intention/perspective)
- Is this a posed photo or is the subject matter unaware of the photographer? (photographer's perspective)
- How the subject matter is arranged - posed, seated, etc? This can tell us of societal roles, gender relations, power relations, etc. (perhaps unintentional on the part of the photographer)
- Why is the photo taken from a particular angle? (perspective)
- Why was it depicted in a particular way? (perspective/motive)
- What mood is reflected in the photo? (motive/perspective)
- What is in the background of the photograph? Do you think that the photographer purposefully intended to include the background? How does it help us to understand the time during which the photograph was taken?
- What was the purpose of the photograph - for sale, publication in a particular newspaper, magazine? Remember that newspapers are written from a particular perspective or view. (motive)
- Who is the intended viewer? (perspective)

Documents

Documents can include extracts from constitutions, speeches, letters, diary entries etc. Even writings of historians or extracts from textbooks could be used.

These have to be evaluated in terms of their reliability and bias, as well as determining what information can be gained from them.

Another important skill is the comparison and contrast of various documents: e.g. stipulations of treaties, eyewitness accounts from various points of view etc.

What do markers look for in source-based questions?

Assessing or marking all but the simplest source-based questions is very difficult. Markers are made aware that they should beware of relying too heavily on the assessment guidelines.

- There is an almost infinite number of ways of expressing complex answers to complex questions.

- A candidate may see things in a very different light to the assessor- so this does not necessarily mean that the assessor is right and the candidate wrong.
- Evidence of real thought is rewarded whenever possible even if the assessor does not agree fully with what the learner is saying.
- The important thing the assessor is looking for is whether the learner can support his or her opinion.
- Unsubstantiated statements of opinion, even if they accord with the assessor's views, indicate a low level of understanding and should not be rewarded with high marks.