



CIE AS History Paper 2 Part (a) Exam Tips

This is a transcript of the CIE AS History Paper 2 Part (a) Exam Tips podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

In this podcast I'll be specifically focusing on Part A questions on Paper 2 of the Cambridge International Examinations AS Level in History, syllabus code 9389. What I'm about to say is based upon notes from the examiner's report combined with my own practical tips and tricks for using your knowledge and skills in the right ways in order to gain the number of marks you deserve.

The examiner's report is a document written by the chief examiner – that's the person who sets the exam and is therefore also the person who wrote the mark scheme – in which they explain what students do well in the exam and what needs to be improved. It's therefore a really handy way to find out the things you should include that examiners like to see – and avoid the mistakes that lower your grade.

However, before we look at the chief examiner's comments, it's important to remind ourselves of what the examination itself actually looks like. Paper 2 lasts for a total of one and a half hours, within which time you have to answer questions on two different topics from the regional option you studied in class. The timing is therefore relatively straightforward – 90 minutes to answer questions on two topics means you should spend no more than 45 minutes on each topic. If you studied the European option, for example, you will have to answer questions on two topics from the list of France 1789-1804, The Industrial Revolution, c.1800-1850, The Origins of World War I, c.1900-1914 and The Russian Revolution, 1905-1917. Questions on all the topics will be there – you just choose the questions on the two topics you feel you will do best on.

Although the exam paper refers to each topic as a 'question', the reality is that you have to answer two questions for each topic – these are referred to as Part A and Part B for each topic. Together they are worth 30 marks.

Part A questions are worth 10 marks, while Part B are worth 20. Since this is a third of the topic marks, you should spend a third of your topic time answering the question. This means you should spend an absolute maximum of 15 minutes answering Part A questions.

Part A questions are what are referred to as 'causation' questions. This means that they require you to explain 'why' something happened. There is a generic markscheme for each question, which shows that to get the highest marks you need to analyse and explain a range of different reasons. Your answer needs to be supported by precise evidence, and so I strongly advise my students to practise the PEE paragraph structure to ensure that their paragraphs show a clear connection between their argument, evidence and analysis. Marks in the highest Level for Part A are awarded to those answers that also "consider the relative significance of factors and reach a supported conclusion." This means that you need to demonstrate that some factors were more or less important than others, and explain why.

So ultimately Part A questions require you to write a multi-causal explanation, using detailed evidence, and justify the way you ranked the different contributing factors. This is clearly



shown in the mark scheme, and you should hopefully already know this from your work in class.

In terms of structuring your answer, I've already said that the PEE paragraph structure – or something similar – will help you. If you're not sure what I mean by this, check out some of my IGCSE exam skills podcasts at www.mrallsophistory.com for an explanation. You should organise your argument so that each paragraph addresses a different cause – you may do this chronologically if appropriate, but I often find that thematic essays in which each paragraph looks at a different category of causes works best. If you're asked to explain why Louis XVI was executed, for example, you would probably include paragraphs on Louis' actions, the role of the Jacobins, and the impact of the War. You would include specific examples in each paragraph to support your points, and explain why each of them contributed to Louis losing his head. You'll see that this approach avoids being chronological – it forces you to identify and explain the reasons for the execution rather than just telling the story in a descriptive or narrative way.

This type of essay structure is the type of thing the examiners are looking for, as proved by what the chief examiner said about student responses in the exam. The chief examiner's report states that, "causation can only be adequately explained by an appreciation of the combined effect of a number of factors, both long and short-term." This is an important thing to remember, as it shows that the examiner expects students to demonstrate a broad knowledge of the topic, and prove that events in the past happen due to a combination of many factors, which you should ensure you have learned in sufficient detail. This isn't actually any different to what the mark scheme says, or what I've already spoken about, but the fact the chief examiner feels the need to say it again suggests that some people do not answer the question properly.

According to the examiner's report, the strongest answers are those that focus consistently on explaining why different factors caused the event in the question to happen. The best students use a wide range of examples drawn from the long, medium and short term, and show how they interacted with each other. This makes it possible to then judge the relative significance of factors, to show which were more or less important than others.

Importantly, the chief examiner's report also highlights common mistakes that students make in their answers to Part A. In particular it warns against drifting into narrative or descriptive accounts of how something occurred. The question does not ask *what* happened – it asks *why*. If your answer does not clearly explain why the factors you include caused an event to happen, your answer will not gain many marks. Similarly, if you don't discuss a number of different contributing factors then your answer will not gain many marks. This means that a thorough and detailed knowledge of each topic is very important. Basically, you need to make sure that you revise each topic fully to ensure you can discuss the key events and personalities in detail.

The very fact you've listened to this podcast shows that you are aware that there is a technique to answering these questions, and so I hope that it has helped in some way towards you developing and mastering the technique needed to get the grade you deserve. For guidance on answering other AS History questions, visit my website at www.mrallsophistory.com