



CIE AS History Paper 2 Part (b) Exam Tips

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

In this podcast I'll be specifically focusing on Part B questions on Paper 2 of the Cambridge International Examinations AS Level in History, syllabus code 9389. For information on other AS History questions, visit my website.

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.

Part B questions are worth 20 marks, or two thirds of the total marks available for each Topic. Based on the timing formula I discussed in my previous podcast, you should therefore spend no more than 30 minutes answering each Part B question. Part B questions are analytical, and many of them are worded in a way that asks you 'how far' you agree with something. However, even if they don't use that specific phrase the technique to answer the question is the same – you must present a balanced answer in which you address both sides of the argument and support your points with detailed evidence.

You will be familiar with this type of question if you studied GCSE or IGCSE History, but at AS Level the approach is obviously more advanced. Previously you may have taken a very formulaic approach, in which you argued one side of the argument, then argued the other, and then presented a balanced conclusion. That approach will work at AS Level, and will score you at least a Level 3 – that's 10 marks out of 20 – and possibly even a Level 4 (or 15 marks out of 20) since the mark scheme says that this Level is awarded for answers that 'develop a balanced argument'.

However, the highest marks are only awarded for those responses that – in the words of the mark scheme – 'develop a sustained judgement'. It's the term 'sustained judgement' that is important here. Your judgement is your overall conclusion, and so to sustain this judgement means you must constantly refer to your overall opinion throughout your essay. Writing a balanced but formulaic answer does not sustain your judgement, as you would be dedicating about half your essay to just one side of the argument. What you need to do instead is create a running analysis, or a series of smaller balanced arguments that run through your essay.

This is where planning and organisation becomes massively important. As well as organising your essay into evidence for and the evidence against the question, you must also sort it in to themes. You'll be used to sorting evidence into themes from your Part A questions, but now you're adding the balanced argument on top of it.

The best way for me to explain this is by giving you an analogy. Let's imagine you're answering a question on France 1789-1804, and have been given a question in which you are asked how far Napoleon maintained the aims of the Revolution. A simple approach to this



question would present all the things Napoleon did that maintained the aims of the revolution – i.e. liberty, quality and brotherhood – then all the things he did that went against these aims, and then reach a balanced conclusion.

The problem is that this approach does not give a ‘sustained judgement’. Instead, it presents two opposing viewpoints and then reaches a conclusion. A better approach would be to assess how far the different *themes* of Napoleon’s rule – such as his different political, social and economic policies – maintained the aims of the revolution, almost like a series of miniature balanced essays.

Having written an introduction in which you outline your overall argument, the main body of your essay could therefore take the following approach. You could firstly write a balanced paragraph in which you discuss Napoleon’s social policies. You would present evidence of social policies that maintained the aims of the Revolution, and then evidence of those that didn’t, and argue whether overall his social policies maintained the aims of the revolution. You’d then move on to your next category or theme for the next paragraph – such as economic policies – and present the ways in which his economic policies maintained the aims of the Revolution and the ways they didn’t. And so on. By constantly evaluating both sides of the argument in a structured and well organised way, you are able to present what the mark scheme refers to as a ‘sustained judgement’.

The examiner’s report says that ‘the most impressive responses were based on the development of consistent and balanced arguments, explicitly focused on the requirements of the specific question, leading to reasoned and fully-supported conclusions.’ I think you can probably guess what weaker responses. That’s right: they didn’t answer the question, or didn’t present balanced answers, or were too narrative and descriptive. This means they told the story of the events, rather than assessing them in relation to the question. Other answers may have been balanced, but didn’t include sufficiently detailed evidence. So to summarise, your answer needs to focus closely on the question being asked, present a balanced thematic argument, and support your points with detailed and accurate evidence.

Remember that in the Paper 2 exam you need to answer Parts A and B from two different topics. Part A should take an absolute maximum of 15 minutes, while Part B should be a maximum of 30 minutes. This timing, however, does not take in to account the time involved in choosing which questions to answer, time to plan your responses, or time for reading through afterwards. You should therefore be aware that you actually have less than 15 minutes and 30 minutes for each Part A and Part B respectively. It’s vital to keep a very close eye on the clock in the exam hall to ensure that you don’t over-run.

All A Levels are challenging, and for many people the biggest challenge with AS History is the timing. It is a challenge to write sufficiently detailed and analytical answers in the time available. But the exam is not about regurgitating everything you know about the subject. You must select the most appropriate *parts* of your knowledge to answer the questions you face. This is the key to keeping within the time limit. You need to know the content inside-out, but you also need to be aware that you have to choose only the most relevant examples to answer each question.



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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 helps in some way towards you developing and mastering the skills needed to get the grade you deserve. For more revision podcasts on exam technique and specific subject content, visit my website at www.mrallsophistory.com