



Succeeding at Sourcework

This is a transcript of the [Succeeding at Sourcework](#) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

This revision guide is a bit different to the other revision materials I usually create. Rather than focusing on key details and information I'll instead be looking at how to deal with sources in the exam.

Every exam board will ask you to demonstrate source analysis skills on at least one of your exam papers. Lots of students tell me that they find source analysis a particularly difficult part of the exam, and so this guide is intended to help you demonstrate your source skills and achieve the grade you deserve.

Try as I might, I've so far been unable to successfully look into the future and find out exactly which topics are going to come up on the exam. Therefore this video is going to instead focus on the main five types of source question:

- [Comprehension](#)
- [Comprehension in context](#)
- [Reliability, usefulness and the reliability of sources](#)
- [Source comparisons](#)
- [The interpretation of sources](#)

Don't worry if you don't know what these terms mean, or if you haven't used these exact terms in your lessons. This guide will help you recognise the type of question being asked and help you approach it in a way that will maximise your mark.

Before we start looking at these types of questions though, there's a few general tips and tricks I'd like to share with you that always come in handy when working with sources.

1. Make sure that you read the questions – and their corresponding sources – carefully. This will help you relate your answer to the question and avoid getting bogged down writing about everything you can remember on that particular topic. You should only include information that is relevant to that exact question.
2. Make sure that you read and use the captions that often appear at the bottom of cartoons. These are massively – hugely in fact – helpful in helping you to interpret the cartoon.
3. Be careful about the amount of time you spend on each question. Look at how many marks a question is worth as this will give you an idea of how much time you should spend on answering it. If a question is only worth a few marks, for example, you shouldn't spend as long as one that is worth more. Remember also, however, that the number of marks does not necessarily correlate to the number of points you are expected to write. Marks are awarded according to Mark Bands and Level Descriptors that are linked to the standard of the analysis in your answer.



These general tips apply to every question that you will come across in your exam. Now it's time to look at the specific types of question you might face.

Source Comprehension Questions

These are often the early question on a paper, and usually have lower marks than some of the questions that require more detailed analysis. While there's no 'easy' questions on a History exam, comprehension source questions are arguably the easiest that you'll come across.

Comprehension questions are just looking to check that you understand what is in the source, in terms of the surface detail and any other messages that you can infer from it. The questions are usually worded along the lines of 'What message does source X give about this particular topic' or 'What impression does sources Y and Z give about the topic'. Therefore all you need to do is write down what the source tells you about the person or situation mentioned in the question. To do this successfully you should firstly read or look at the source or sources stated in the question very carefully and write down the obvious things you can pick out. Make sure that you relate your answer to the exact question, and don't be inclined to start going off on a tangent just because you're being asked about a topic you know something about.

The second step in answering these types of questions is to then look beyond the surface detail and see what you can infer. This is what you can work out from what you've read or seen in the source even though it might not be specifically stated, or immediately obvious. You need to think about whether anything is being suggested in the source that isn't featured directly. Once you've done that, write down what you've inferred and use the source to back up the points that you're making. This means you need to refer to the content of the source in your answer, either through a direct quote, a paraphrase, or a description of the details you've identified. However, it's important that you don't start going overboard here. You **MUST NOT** – and I say that sternly for a reason – you **MUST NOT** waste your time by listing everything that you find in a source, because it won't get you any marks. Your evidence from the source needs to be concise and focused on the question being answered. It's what you do **with** the source content that actually gets you the marks – in brief, what can you see, and what does it mean?

Of course the golden rule goes for comprehension questions as well as the others: if the question tells you to look at specific sources you must make sure you refer to them in your answer! If the question tells you to read Source A and then comment on it, make sure that you include details from Source A in your answer. Similarly, if you're told to look at source C and D, then you need to include evidence from them in your response. If you don't refer to the source or sources in your answer, you are condemning yourself to only getting a maximum of half marks.



Source Comprehension in Context Questions

You've probably never called these questions by this name, but you will have seen them before. These are the types of questions that need you to understand what a source tells you about a person or situation and then link it to your own knowledge of the period.

Most commonly these questions ask you to use the source and your own knowledge to explain something, and it's important to clearly keep the question in mind while you're doing so in order to focus on that specific aspect of the topic. These types of questions are usually along the lines of "How does Source A help you to understand...whatever the topic is. Use the source and your own knowledge to explain your answer." They may instead say, "Use Source E and F, and your own knowledge, to explain...whatever it might be."

"Tell me how to answer the question!" I hear you cry. Well, the first thing is again to make sure you closely study the source or sources that you are told to do, and gain a clear idea of what they tell you. You should start by going through the same process as you would for a straightforward comprehension question, looking for clues that help you infer a message beyond only the surface details.

Once you've written about what the sources tell you, think about what else you know from the things you've learned about the issue you're being asked about. If this is relevant to the issue, and assuming it can help you explain more about the source – perhaps what was happening at the time the source was created – then make sure to include it in your answer.

It's vital that if the question asks you to use the source and your own knowledge you must actually use both. It's no good spouting off general facts you've learned in class without making it relevant to the source, but similarly it's no good talking about the source without referencing your wider knowledge of the topic. I always find it best to look at the source first and then add in your own knowledge to help you understand the source better. This way it's more likely that the knowledge you use will be relevant to the question – make sure you keep referring back at the question in your answer to keep your response closely focused.

In more general terms, 'comprehension in context' questions don't usually require you to comment on the usefulness or reliability of the sources unless they specifically state this. You're best to save your thoughts on the reliability, usefulness and value of sources for a question that actually asks you to comment on this.



Source Reliability, Usefulness and Value Questions

You're guaranteed to see a question of this type on your exam paper, so it makes a lot of sense to be prepared for it.

In these types of questions the examiner wants to see that you recognise that some sources have more value to historians than others, some are more reliable than others, and some are more useful than others. These are all subtly different issues, but the way you approach the question is broadly the same, which is why I'm looking at them together.

A question might be something along the lines of "What is the value of Source A for an historian trying to find out about...a certain thing?" Or it might be, "How useful is Source B for someone studying...whatever it might be?" Alternatively it might say, "How reliable is Source C regarding...something."

The first thing to do with these questions, once you've had a good look at the source and made sure that you understand what it's telling you, is to consider its reliability. To do this you need to pay close attention to who created it, when it was created, and why it was created. This requires you to consider the provenance of the source – that's the bit in italics at the bottom – as it gives you a lot of this information. You then need to cross-reference this with your own knowledge to put it into context.

It's important to go into the exam knowing that sources can never be completely reliable or unreliable – but they can be more or less reliable. Every source has positive and negative aspects, and you need to consider these in your answer. If the source comes from an historian, you should think about whether they might have been personally involved or if they're physically detached from the event and the time. If the source comes from an individual who was involved in the event and lived through it, you should consider whether they might have had a negative or positive experience of it. Was the source created at the time of the event, or later on, after it had finished? What's their motive for creating it – why did they spend the time to write or draw it? And finally, what is or was their position or role within that event.

In terms of contemporary sources, those are the ones that were created at the time, newspapers are commonly used. The key questions still apply, however. Have a think about the country of origin, and any possibility of national attitudes that might shape the point of view that they're writing from. Think also about the motivation of the writer or publisher – is it an accurate and objective report, or is it designed to persuade people of a particular point of view? Is the source actually an eyewitness account of the event, or is it a commentary of something pieced together from a series of eyewitnesses? Furthermore, is the report subject to any form of censorship and so purposefully not giving a full account?

Considering all these issues can help you judge *how* reliable a source is. Remember that there will be some positive aspects but also some negative. It's no good just saying 'the source is biased' without explaining what the bias is – whose side is the person on, and why is that a



problem? But even a source that is 'biased' will be able to give some information that is based on fact.

The issue of usefulness requires you to consider 'useful to whom and for what'? Just because a source isn't entirely reliable, it doesn't mean that it can't be useful or of value to a historian or someone else studying that topic.

Let me illustrate with an example: a source written by a male British politician that gives a negative view of women having the right to vote may be 'biased'. But despite this, it could still be very useful to reveal male attitudes towards women and the right to vote in the early 20th Century. What lies at the heart of 'usefulness' and 'value' questions is a consideration of what the source is being used *for*. This is why you need to pay close attention to the question, since this gives you a clear focus.

It may help to think of your response in terms of – oh yes, it's that again – a comparative table. On one side, what are the values of this source to an historian trying to answer the question set? On the other side, what are the problems with using this source to answer that question? Once you've identified and discussed points on both sides of the argument you need to make final judgement. This means reaching a firm conclusion on 'how useful' or valuable you think that source is. It's a sliding scale – where does the source fit? Is it a long way towards the useful side, or is it more on the 'not useful'? Is it slightly? Reasonably? Quite? Those are the kinds of words you should be using to judge how useful, valuable or reliable a source is.

Let's finish with a recap of the key things we've looked at:

1. Firstly, you need to use both the content and the provenance of the source to reach a judgement on reliability.
2. Secondly, a source is never completely useful or completely useless. What you interpret as an **unreliable** source may still be useful for revealing a certain point of view.
3. Thirdly, usefulness and value of sources can only be judged in terms of the question they are being used to answer.
4. Fourth, make sure that your answer is relevant by regularly referring back to the question to ensure you keep yourself on track.
5. Finally, planning what you are going to say in your answer is very important. Nevertheless, don't spend all your time writing the plan – you must ensure you actually write your answer!

It's very likely that you'll be asked to compare the usefulness or value of sources, and need to decide which source is more useful. In this case you need to go through the process for each individual source in order to reach a judgement or conclusion on which you think is the most useful.



Source Comparison Questions

There are really two different types of question that may call for source comparison. The first are those that want you to compare the value of sources, and those that want you to compare their messages by identifying agreements and disagreements. Answering a question about the value of sources is dealt with earlier. To answer questions that call on you to compare source messages, stick around for my advice.

The question could ask you to 'compare' two sources, but more likely you'll be asked about what the sources agree on and how they disagree. Whichever way the question is worded, you must always look for evidence on both sides. Let me repeat that. No matter whether you are being asked how far the sources agree or how far they differ, you must always look for both agreements AND disagreements. It's also important to note that these questions are asking you about the content or message of the sources, not their provenance. You need to identify agreements and differences in what they say, not where they came from.

Just as with usefulness and value questions, it could be worth drawing – or at least thinking about – a comparative table or chart with similarities on one side and differences on the other.

Now, let's go back over the Golden Rules for a comparative question.

1. Firstly, if you are asked to compare sources your answer must include both similarities and differences between the sources
2. Secondly, it's worth drawing up a quick table to focus your thoughts and use of evidence to ensure you're looking at both sides
3. And finally, even though the exact details might be slightly different the broad issue covered in the sources might actually agree



Source Interpretation ('how far') Questions

This is usually the last to appear on the exam, and invariably carries the most marks. Therefore you need to plan your time carefully to ensure you leave a good chunk at the end to answer this question in sufficient detail.

Interpretations questions will ask you to explain or often make a judgement about 'how far' you agree with a certain view of the past. You need to draw on the sources, and often also on your own knowledge, in order to do this. Imagine that your source topic is Britain in the First World War. A typical question might say something like, "Study all the sources. Men volunteered for the army in 1914 because they thought it would be an adventure. How far do the sources agree? Use the sources and your own knowledge to explain your answer."

As with all the other kinds of answers you'll have written on the exam up to this point, you've got to make sure that you again create a structured and well-balanced response. As this question is worth more marks than the other questions you've got to ensure that you plan your answer well. You could again do this in the form of a comparative table that briefly sorts the sources into those that agree with the statement, and those that disagree.

In terms of writing your answer you should begin with a brief opening paragraph which directly addresses the question and presents your opinion. The main body of your answer would then contain a number of paragraphs that draw on the sources you've sorted, grouping together those that support the question statement and those that oppose it. At the end you'd write a concluding paragraph that again directly addresses the question and gives your overall opinion.

In terms of the example question I presented a couple of minutes ago, you would present a paragraph that looks at the sources that support the view that people thought joining the army would be an adventure. Then you would write a paragraph focusing on the sources that go against the view that men volunteered because it would be an adventure. Your conclusion would then reach a judgement on the two sides and present your view on how far you think the sources in the paper show why that interpretation has been reached.

To score the very highest marks you should demonstrate some level of source evaluation in your answer. This means that, as well as saying whether a source supports or opposes a particular view, you should consider why a source does this. This involves considering the provenance of the source and using your own knowledge to explain why it says what it does.

Overall, though, the main thing to demonstrate in your answer to this question is balance, meaning that you present evidence on both sides of the argument. To do this well you must plan your answer and time carefully.