

# FACTFILE: GCSE HISTORY



## USING SOURCES IN HISTORY



### A guide to using sources in GCSE History

The best advice to give when analysing sources is to look carefully at the source and to ask the most basic question of all: **What type of source is this?**

If it is a written document identify if it is:

- a personal recollection;
- an official report;
- an historical account;
- a fictional reconstruction or a newspaper article which is presenting a news story or commentary on events?

If it is an image identify if it is:

- a cartoon;
- a photograph;
- a poster;
- a grand portrait;
- a cheap engraving or an expensive oil painting?

We must also ask a number of other significant questions:

- Who produced it?
- Where were they?
- In what conditions?
- Why did they produce this text or object and for what reason?

There is a wide range of sources both written and visual available to historians and two key types of sources: Primary and Secondary.

There are many different **types** of primary sources:

- **Published Documents:** For example, books, magazines, newspapers, government

documents, reports, advertisements, maps, posters, legal documents, and other kinds of literature. When reviewing published documents, remember that just because something was published does not necessarily mean it is accurate or reliable.

- **Unpublished Documents:** These are personal documents that were never intended for wide circulation. Examples include personal letters, diaries, wills and similar things. Unlike published documents, unpublished records may be difficult to find because few copies exist. In some cases, unpublished documents can be collected and eventually published, but keep in mind that they were not originally intended for public knowledge.
- **Visual Documents:** These include photographs, films, paintings, and other types of artwork. Visual documents capture moments in time and can provide evidence about specific moments in history. Like other primary source documents, a visual document has a creator with a perspective - such as a painter, sculptor, or filmmaker. Using visual documents as primary sources requires careful interpretation about what the message is.
- **Relics or Artefacts:** These include pottery, furniture, clothing, buildings and other physical items. Archaeological material provides evidence that either corroborates with or contradicts literary sources.

### Secondary Sources

Secondary sources were made after the time period you are studying. You will find that some

secondary sources are better than others. As a general rule secondary sources that are created by scholars/ historians are usually more reliable. Though do not jump to this conclusion without checking it out. Historians aim to produce reliable and objective accounts, however, examine their work with the same critical eye as you would with any primary source.

Like primary sources, secondary sources come in different **types**:

- **Books:** Books such as school textbooks, often have large amounts of evidence about a particular historical period, author, theme or region. Not only are these useful for expanding your historical knowledge and background research, but they can also provide you with some good primary sources.
- **Academic Journals:** Research undertaken by university academics is published in academic journals. Journal articles are often the result of many years of research by specialists in particular areas of History. As a result, they contain a lot of information and usually draw heavily on primary sources. However, journals are written for an academic audience, so the language can be very difficult to read at first. Also, be aware that different academics and universities can have their own perspective, which may result in a bias in their articles.
- **Websites:** Internet sites vary widely in accuracy, reliability and relevance. If you choose to use websites as secondary sources, make sure you only use websites from respectable individuals or institutions (universities, museums, government archives, etc.).

A careful examination of sources allows you to decide on their relevance, reliability, and accuracy. Your opinion on these things allows you to explain the worth of your sources. When evaluating primary or secondary sources, the following questions might be asked to help you understand the nature and value of the material being considered:

- How does the author know these details (names, dates and times)?
- Was the author present at the event?
- Where does this information come from, e.g.

personal experience, eyewitness accounts, or reports written by others?

- Are the author's conclusions based on a single piece of evidence, or have many sources been taken into account, e.g. diary entries, third-party eyewitness accounts, impressions of contemporaries or newspaper accounts?
- All source materials of whatever type must be assessed critically and remember that even the most thorough work is viewed through the eyes of the writer/interpreter. This must be taken into account when you are attempting to arrive at the 'truth' of an event.

By asking key questions, you can begin to understand the source, and to think about how it might be useful historical evidence. Remember all sources are useful but the extent of their usefulness may vary. No one source can tell you everything or give you the full picture. The source needs to be used in conjunction with a range of other sources to try to ensure you get the fullest picture. Finally, remember that an unreliable source can still be useful, for example, a propaganda poster about Jews in Germany, may be very misleading about Jewish behaviour but it could be a valuable piece of evidence about Nazi propaganda.

When looking at utility and reliability, keep the following in mind:

- Bias;
- Exaggeration;
- Propaganda;
- Censorship; and
- Language and Tone- is it emotive, critical or uplifting?

## Examining different types of sources

### Written Sources

When trying to assess written sources you should think about the following:

- Who wrote it?;
- Who read/received it? ;
- When is it from?; and
- Where is it from?

Try to make sense of what it is saying. Go through the source line by line to ensure you miss no key points. Highlight or underline key words or phrases.

Try to identify exactly what the source is talking about? Write one or two sentences to summarise what this source tells you.

Think about why the author wrote this piece? Quote evidence from the source to help you to support your views. Think about what was happening at the time this document was created as this allows you to set the source in context. What did you find out from this document that you might not learn anywhere else? What other documents or historical evidence are you going to use to help you understand this event or topic?

## Newspapers

### Strengths

Newspaper journalists, editors and readers never know what is going to happen tomorrow. As a result news sources allow us to view historical events through the eyes of people who were there at the time. Reporters are often amongst the most important eyewitnesses to everyday events. News reporters like historians are often concerned to find the truth, but journalists work with the very recent past, i.e. current affairs and they try to present the stories as they unfold.

News events as they take place, often happen so rapidly in news stories, that they can be confused. We therefore rely on newspapers to help us to understand the events. Although, we have to treat newspapers with a degree of caution, as not all newspapers are trustworthy, accurate or reliable sources of information, they do give us a real insight into the news stories of any given time period. Be aware that in some countries newspapers are subject to censorship and control by governments or key groups in society and as such the 'news' stories can therefore offer excellent evidence of how the powerful seek to control the views of the public with their slant on recent events.

### Limitations

News sources are rarely factual and objective, but often include opinions. Think for example of why 'headline' news usually varies from country to country. When journalists write about and report on events, their work is often opinionated and seeking to influence its audience. News reports often lack access to vital information and are often trying to 'guess' what is happening and why. For example, the first reports of the 9/11 attacks in the USA suggested that a plane had flown into the World Trade Centre tower by accident, which was,

of course, inaccurate. Journalism cannot be as thoroughly researched or as emotionally detached as good history should be.

## Private letters, memoirs, biographies and autobiographies

These sources offer a reflection of the past through the eyes of one individual. The retelling of the events of someone's life either by themselves (memoirs, autobiography) or by a professional author (biography) is a long established route to finding out about the past.

### Strengths

These sources can provide a clear glimpse into the effects of historical events and the lives of individuals experiencing them first-hand. If the source was never intended to be read by a large audience, its contents might be of a more revealing nature and therefore valuable as a study of the personality by whom it was written. Where the decisions and actions of great men and women significantly affect the direction of events, then biography becomes an essential means of understanding the past. By understanding the personal background, the culture of the time and context of people in the past we can hope to gain an insight into why things were done or not done.

Biographical approaches to history help to personalise the past. It is often easier to understand events if they are presented at a personal, human scale. History is often presented by explaining major economic or social factors. Biographies by their very nature present the past through the eyes of the experiences of people.

### Limitations

All biographical accounts are subjective and in this respect suffer from the same problems as eyewitness accounts. Events are always relayed from the perspective of one individual and this can alter the relative importance of this individual in the event.

It is important to be aware that there is a tendency for biographers to admire and sympathise with their subjects or less commonly the opposite. Writing a good biography takes a lot of time, why spend this time on a character you do not feel strongly about? Biographies tend to be about influential people and can therefore result in history that is overly focused on 'Great' people. If the source is a result of recollections many years

after the period described, the details might have become blurred with the passing of time, certain aspects consciously or subconsciously forgotten, and memoirs may have been shaped to conform to views which have changed since then (i.e. benefit of hindsight).

## The work of Historians

### Strengths

Trained experts are the most useful and reliable interpreters of the past. Historians have the benefit of hindsight which contemporary sources do not. Contemporaries can be caught up in the emotion of the moment and be ill-informed, lacking a historical perspective. Whereas, historians can see the big picture of how events in the past are connected through chains of cause and consequence. They are in a realistic position to make judgments about significance. They can be more scientific, detached and objective, reaching conclusions about the past. Historians enjoy access to previously classified documents which are declassified after a fixed amount of time (e.g. 30 years in the UK) or after the collapse of authoritarian regimes (e.g. after the fall of Communism in 1990s). Most importantly historians work with the benefit of earlier historical research or the wider research community.

### Limitations

Historians are human beings and subject to human weaknesses, prejudices and limitations. Sometimes the book being quoted is a general text with only a few paragraphs on the subject being investigated. This allows you to question the historian's expertise in this particular subject.

Historians usually write books, a fairly restrictive way of conveying information about the past. Real historians are most at home in archives and libraries surrounded by books and writing articles for other historians. Many historians often lack the communicative skills of the novelist or television presenter. Much academic history writing is therefore dull and/or difficult to read.

## Diaries and Government Documents

### Strengths

Diaries and government papers are often considered the most reliable of documents. They are often the source of traditional historical research. The main value of these sources is that the people producing them know they can say or write what they like honestly, without

concern for the views of others. For those writing a personal diary, for example, they need not concern themselves with what their relatives think. Politicians need not be concerned with what the voters might think. This is very liberating and often provides more reliable evidence about the past.

Occasionally wars or revolutions result in regime change that means previously secret information is suddenly made available. The best example of this was the end of the Cold War in 1991 where communist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe were overthrown. Almost overnight secret government documents were released covering decades of history behind the Iron Curtain. These gave a real inside view, for the first time, of what life was like in the years of Soviet control.

### Limitations

Writing down thoughts about a day's events involves a process of selection that is simply one person's version of events. Although, some diaries (especially by politicians) are written with the intention of publication in mind, even genuinely private diaries can present problems. History students are keen to make the legitimate point that diarists have no motivation to lie to themselves. But conscious lying is not the problem. Diarists are also prone to what is commonly known as 'sour grapes' meaning that a person may be angry because they have not got or achieved something that they wanted and this can impact on their view of events. A second problem with diaries is the obvious lack of objectivity. This is an issue with all records of diplomatic conversations. The documents do not tell us what happened, but only what they thought had happened. A final weakness concerns the secret documents themselves. Just because documents have finally come down to us 'declassified', this does not mean that they are complete and uncensored. It is also important to remember that wars, fires and regime changes can also lead to the destruction of documents in which the remaining sample cannot provide a genuinely representative overview. This has been the case with documentary evidence of the Nazi regime in Germany, for example, which exists for very few German regions.

## Statistics

### Strengths

Statistics are often the end result of a lot of hard work, serious research and counting. They can summarise very accurately and with great precision very complex factors. Rather than vague

suggestions that there was a 'big increase' or 'many casualties' it is far better to have an exact figure. Statistics are therefore great for making comparisons over time. We can create graphs that show patterns and trends which can help us to visualise the statistics. From these we can suggest reasons for historical causes and consequences or the significance of events in the past. For example, if you believe that unemployment was an important factor in the rise to power of the Nazi party in Germany, it would be very useful to look at the statistics from the period 1929-1933 showing the numbers in work and out of work.

### Limitations

British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said, 'There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.' Statistics are often used to improve the power of an argument, it is tempting to use statistics selectively in order to make a point. To say that 'most statistics are made up' is less impressive than '51.73% of statistics are made up!' Somehow, numbers just seem more 'scientific'. It is important to remember that statistics are only the end result of research, which means we are not always aware of the methods that were used to arrive at the figures. It is very important to know who conducted the research and how they conducted their research.

It is important to be aware that in dictatorships or totalitarian regimes, such as China and North Korea, there is strict control over information and therefore statistics are likely to be highly unreliable. Another point to think about is that surveys can be conducted with the intention of arriving at a particular conclusion. So, for example, asking only young people about their favourite film will give a very different response than if you were to ask people over the age of 60 the same question. Other than accuracy, the main issue with statistics is the question of how representative they are. This is particularly true of percentages. '33% of teachers in my school are from Belfast' which sounds like a lot, but this is not representative if I'm the only one! In the end statistics are just numbers and not everything important about the past can be shown by numbers.

## Visual Sources

### Photographs

Photographs are very useful primary sources. They provide a rare glimpse of a particular time or event which will never happen in the same

way again. This is especially true for events that occurred before the development of television or digital technologies. They say pictures are worth a thousand words. Primary source images, whether they are photographs or prints, provide windows into unique perspectives of people, places, and events. Many people assume that photographs are unbiased, accurate records of historical events. However, that is not always the case. Photographers take great care to create the exact images they want their audiences to see. Therefore, it is important to analyse photographs in order to identify and understand the message. When people take a photograph, they make decisions about what to keep in, or leave out of, the picture. Photographers do this by choosing the angle from which they take the shot and from what distance it will be taken, either close up or further away.

To correctly interpret what the photographer intended the audience to understand from their image, we have to identify some specific information.

- 1. Identify the Main Subject:** Try to identify the most important people, locations or items in the image. You can work out what the photographer wanted you to focus on by looking at what is in the centre of the photo, or what appears to jump out at you.
- 2. Identify Minor Subjects:** What appears in the background, behind or around the main subject? Look for things of minor importance that appear to support the main subject. The photographer would want to also show these things to help you draw certain conclusions about the main subject.
- 3. Also think about:** Is the photograph a 'close up' of the main subject? This suggests that the photographer wanted the audience to feel 'part of the action' or to be confronted by the image head on. If it was taken from further away, it may be that the photographer wanted the viewer to feel 'detached' from the action or to get a 'bird's eye view' of things.

Not only does identifying the message of a photograph show that you understand the primary source, it also helps you in your analysis and evaluation of the source. For example, identifying the source's message can help you to work out:

- The purpose of the photograph.

- The motive of the photographer.
- The relevance of the source to your argument.
- The accuracy of the information presented in the image.

### Cartoons

Be aware that cartoonists are likely to use exaggeration in their work. Sometimes cartoonists overdo the physical characteristics of people or things in order to make a point. When you study a cartoon, look for any characteristics that seem overdone or overblown, such as facial expressions. Then, try to decide what point the cartoonist was trying to make through exaggeration.

Look at visual sources in this order:

- **First:** Think about the events in that period. Look at the date. Think about what was happening at that time. Who was involved?
- **Second:** See the different things in the cartoon. At first, just make a list of the things you see. List things that are in the cartoon, look for people and identify what they are doing and how they are presented. Often, in a cartoon, everything has a meaning.
- **Third:** Think about the cartoonist and their motives. Look at who drew the cartoon and where they came from. What would they have thought about the topic? What would they have been wanting to say?
- **Fourth:** Go back to the cartoon. Look at your list of the things you saw. Can you see who/what they stand for- what are they saying? What do they mean? What is the message in this cartoon?
- **Last:** Go back to the events. Now that you have thought about the cartoon and its meaning, ask yourself what is the cartoon trying to tell me about the event? How did people feel and think at the time? Looking back on the event what is the key message in this cartoon?

### Strengths

Cartoons offer an insight into public opinion at the time they were published. Newspapers often employ a cartoonist to produce cartoons on

political events that are happening every day. Contemporaries would have been likely to recognise the characters, the events, and understand the humour, irony, exaggeration, or mockery in the cartoon and therefore the cartoon provides a view of the past.

### Limitations

Cartoons have the disadvantage of exaggerating and simplifying difficult historical events. They are often politically motivated and make no attempt at objective, independent analysis. They can also be very unrepresentative. They may reflect the views of the readership of a particular newspaper. However, remember that this may be one newspaper with a limited circulation in one country. They may not actually reflect the views of most of the readership. Many cartoons are critical and intended to shape political opinion.

### Posters

You should take the same approach with posters as you would when looking at photographs and cartoons. Quickly scan the poster. What do you notice first? Are there people involved? Do you recognise them? Does the poster have a message printed on it? Are there questions or instructions?

Does it say who created it?

Think about the following:

- When is this from? What was happening at the time in history this poster was created?
- Who do you think is the intended audience?
- Why was it created?
- What are the main colours used –does one colour stand out? If so, why might this be the case?
- Are there any symbols or does the poster try to persuade mainly through words, visuals, or both equally?

Write one sentence summarising the message in the poster and try to take evidence from the poster to support what you are saying. What did you find out from this poster that you might not learn anywhere else? What other documents or historical evidence are you going to use to help you understand this event or topic?

## Film

### Strengths

Films can capture moments in history in vivid detail, providing a unique glimpse into a point in time. Film is also very useful for showing examples of propaganda, this is especially true of Nazi Germany. Film can show aspects of culture, for example, how people dressed at particular times in the past.

### Limitations

Behind every film is a creator with their own personal bias and prejudices, which may be reflected in their work, either consciously or subconsciously. Film can be manipulated by the creator to get across a certain point or impress upon the viewer his/her own views, e.g. parts can be edited, cut out or downplayed. The film maker can ensure that certain details can be stressed or highlighted. The creator ultimately holds the power to decide the message given by the film and of course, remember that films are often made for commercial reasons – to make money, rather than give an accurate depiction of an event in the past.

## Oral History

### Strengths

The distinctive advantage of this type of source is that it provides rare evidence of an event from a source that would otherwise not be recorded. Oral history is usually associated with the history of 'ordinary' men and women. Oral history is particularly useful for social historians concerned with day-to-day life. Oral records can be very subjective, providing a personal and human insight that can allow the reader to empathise with the historical character. This is particularly true for those actually conducting the interview.

### Limitations

Nothing can get across a story quite as well as the declaration of a witness saying 'I saw it with my own eyes'. In reality, however, eyewitnesses can be quite unreliable, especially if a long period of time has passed since the event that is being recalled. It is not that witnesses deliberately lie (although some obviously do) but that over time and constant retelling, their 'story' can change in subtle but significant ways. The inaccuracy is particularly clear for factual information, e.g. times, dates, places, names etc.

The subjectivity of the eye witnesses is also an

issue as we are getting a particular, personal perspective from a particular point in time and place. A single piece of testimony cannot claim to be a representative viewpoint or a reliable indication of general opinion.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that witnesses are involved in the events they describe; sometimes they might even be participants. Consequently at the centre of the action they may be emotionally attached and can therefore lack an objective, wider perspective.

## A suggested approach to analysing source material

One suggested framework for analysing sources uses the acronym COMA, for Content, Origin, Motive and Analysis:

**Content** - As the word suggests, content is what is contained in the source. In a written source take the time to read it line by line. Highlight or underline key words, phrases, dates and names. In a question where you are asked to use the source make sure you go out of your way to show that you are using the source by referring to it by name. For example, Source A tells me.... You can also use phrases or short 'clips' from the source as this shows you are making an effort to engage with the source.

In a visual source take a close look and see what you can identify and pick up from the source, without thinking too much at first. What is happening? Does the source represent a particular event or moment in time? Who is portrayed in the source? Do figures in the source represent specific people, such as political leaders – or do they symbolise a particular group or class? What are they doing? How are they dressed? What are they wearing, carrying or using? What is suggested by their body language? What about facial expression? Are they represented in a positive, negative or neutral light? Does the source contain any visual symbols? Where are they placed? What might they represent?

**Origin** - An essential part of understanding a source is knowing where it came from and who created it. Try to find out the author, artist or cartoonist responsible for creating your source. If possible, find out when and where it was created too. Is there any additional information, such as a caption, date or publisher? If any of this information is not provided, examine the content for clues. Does

the source use language, symbols or clothing from a particular region or area? Does it represent a specific event that can be dated? Is there a particular style that can be linked to a specific time or place? Think also about the context in which your source was created. What was going on at the time? Was your source created in response to an event, a law or policy, an idea or particular condition?

### Motive

Next, think about why the source was created. Written sources and visual sources, in particular, are created for a purpose, usually to inform or entertain, or to get people thinking or feeling a particular way. Try to understand the purpose of your source. Was it created to inform, to reflect, to celebrate, to commemorate, to persuade, to ridicule or mock, to satirise, to incite anger or outrage, or to evoke some other emotional response? In visual sources do they show particular leaders, groups or ideas in a positive, negative or critical light? What events, conditions or grievances might have inspired the creation of your image? How are these things portrayed? What does your source have to say about the context in which it was created? In written sources think carefully about the language and tone of a source. Is the language tough and aggressive, or gentle and conciliatory? Is it designed to inflame emotions, or appeal to logic? More subtly, does the kind of language used tell you anything less obvious about the author and the time?

### Analysis

This is usually the most difficult part of interpreting a source. You should think critically about the source, the claims it makes and the methods it uses. The first step is to consider its factual and historical accuracy. Does the source present a fair depiction of people, events or conditions? Or does it mislead by presenting false or exaggerated information? Does it offer an overly optimistic or negative view of particular people or events? Does it use style and tone – such as satire, caricature and mockery – in a way that is fair to its subjects? Do you think the source represents the views of a majority of people – or the views and attitudes of a smaller group? Does it mislead, omit certain information or use propaganda? Does it glorify a particular leader while ignoring their faults or failures?

## SOURCE EVALUATION SKILLS

### How do you decide if a source is useful?

You can argue that a source is useful if you found any of the following during your analysis of the source:

- It provides clear information about your topic.
- The author was an important individual in regards to the topic.
- It provides an important perspective about your topic.

There are a few other aspects which you need to consider in your evaluation of the usefulness of a source:

### Accuracy

Accuracy is the assessment that the information provided in a source is likely to be correct. Since it is almost impossible to be 100 per cent certain of a source's accuracy, your answer needs to reflect this. So, for example when referring to the accuracy of a source use words such as 'Extremely - Very – Somewhat – Rarely – Not very'.

To assess the accuracy of a source, ask questions like:

- Was the author/creator of the source present at the time of the event?
- Is the information backed up by other reliable sources?
- Are there clues of bias in the source that may suggest it may be inaccurate?

### How do I establish accuracy?

The easiest way to argue in favour of a source being potentially accurate is to show that the information provided by the source is backed up by a different source.

However, there are other ways you can also argue that a source is potentially accurate:

- The author/creator of the source was present at the time of the event.

- The author/creator is writing to an audience who would have been fully aware of the information relating to the topic.
- The source was written with the explicit purpose of recording unbiased information.
- The information is backed up by a separate, more reliable source.
- There is no obvious bias in the source and that it tries to deal fairly with the different perspectives on an event or person.

### What if a source is inaccurate?

Finding out that a source has provided inaccurate information is not necessarily something to be concerned about. It simply means you take this into account when assessing the usefulness of a source. Remember that an inaccurate source is still a useful source.

### How do I prove inaccuracy?

The easiest way to argue that a source is inaccurate is to show that the information provided by the source is contradicted by a different, more trustworthy source.

However, there are other ways you can also argue that a source is potentially inaccurate:

- The author/creator of the source was not present at the time of the event.
- The source was written with the explicit purpose to misinform people, e.g. propaganda.
- The information is contradicted by a separate, more reliable source.
- There is obvious bias in the source and it fails to deal fairly with both perspectives on an event or person.

### Reliability

In assessing the reliability of sources you are trying to establish if they are trustworthy. In the same way that it is rare to get sources that are 100 per cent accurate, it is hard to be completely sure that sources are 100 per cent reliable. Therefore, when you are talking about the reliability of a source, a good approach is to think in terms of 'degrees of reliability'. So, for example, use words such as '**Extremely - Very – Somewhat – Rarely – Not very**'.

Based on what you discovered in your analysis of the source, you can establish reliability based on any of the following:

- The author/creator of the source was present at the time of the event.
- The author/creator of the source has a highly educated perspective on the topic, e.g. a university professor.
- The source has been fact-checked, and subsequently approved, by its audience, e.g. an academic journal.
- The purpose of the source was to provide facts, rather than to provide opinions, about the topic.

Based on what you discovered in your analysis of the source, you can establish if it is unreliable based on some of the following:

- The author/creator of the source was not present at the time of the event.
- The author/creator of the source does not have a clear perspective on the topic, e.g. they have no formal education in History.
- The source has not been fact-checked by an educated audience, e.g. it is an online blog post.

