

How to handle *why*-based exam questions

This article considers the key historical concept of causation. When did historians start asking 'why' instead of 'what'? And how can understanding this approach inform your examination answers?

Since the time that Carr produced his argument, *why*-based questions have figured prominently on AS and A-level history examination papers. However, candidates still struggle to get to grips with the demands of such questions and often drift back to providing descriptive and narrative-based answers. This column provides some tips on how to tackle questions that centre on the concept of explaining why events or actions occurred. This concept is also linked to theories of causation.

Explore the issue

- The historian John Tosh believes that narrative-based history often lacks utility as it makes explanation difficult. How might narrative history 'hide' explanation?
- In this issue of *MODERN HISTORY REVIEW* (see pages 18–21), Cogliano's article on the American Revolution is partly narrative based, and yet his aim is to explain why the revolution happened. Pick out of the narrative what you think are the key reasons he has tried to highlight. To what extent has the narrative approach hidden explanation? (Note that Cogliano's article is used to illustrate key points throughout this

The great historian — or perhaps I should say the great thinker — is the man who asks the question 'Why?' about new things or in new contexts.' E. H. Carr, *What is History?*

When Carr wrote this in the early 1960s he was challenging the popular view that history was about narrative — that is, that it involved providing a well-told story, based on facts, about the past. Carr implied that narrative, as linked to describing what happened in the past, was a low-level skill. His view was that interrogating the facts by asking *why* something happened or *why* somebody carried out a certain action was far more challenging than stating *what* happened.

Interrogate the facts and try asking *why* not *what*



article but you do not need to be studying the American Revolution to make sense of the guidelines being given here on how to handle causation questions.)

Types of explanation

It is useful to know a little bit of theory about causation as this can help inform approaches to tackling 'why' questions. Broadly speaking, there are two types of explanation.

Causal

According to this explanation, actions or events have either a single (mono-causal) explanation or group-based (multi-causal) explanation. These models are usually linked to the idea that there was a direct or indirect cause of an event or action. Sometimes causes are inferred (suggested), especially where supporting evidence is flimsy or unclear. Note that historians often talk about a chain of causation. They attempt to demonstrate how causes are linked.

Intentional

Intentional arguments consider that actions and events are based on the motives of individuals and what influences those motives. Note that historians often talk about a chain of action and reaction to demonstrate how intentions are linked. Also, analysing motives invariably involves consideration of the ideas or ideologies that individuals or groups hold.

Explore the issue

- How likely is it that an event or action was due to one (mono) cause?
- Other than ideologies, what else might have influenced the motives of individuals or groups in the past?
- How useful are the causal and intentional theories in helping to explain the origins of the American Revolution?

The interaction of types of explanation

Types of explanation can be seen to interact in two ways.

Conditional

This involves viewing the occurrence of an event or action as a result of the build-up of conditions (or the laying of a foundation). This is linked to 'time' and what is called the diachronic model — that is, that specific events are the result of the build-up of long-term and short-term developments.

Contingent

This involves consideration of 'triggers' that interrupt or end the build-up of conditions. This is linked to the synchronic model.

Explore the issue

- To what extent was there a trigger for the American Revolution?

Making sense of how types of explanation interact

When using theories of explanation/causation to answer exam questions it is helpful to consider the categories or general factors under which strands of explanation can be placed. The most obvious factors to consider are those of an economic, social, cultural, political, dynastic, territorial, religious and military nature. A matrix of ways of looking at the causes of an event or action is given in Table 1.

Table 1 Causation matrix for the American Revolution

Factor	Long-term	Short-term	Possible trigger
Economic	Britain's wars with France created debt	British leaders tried to lessen the debt by taxing American colonists (starting with the Stamp Act of 1765)	The Tea Act of 1765
Social			
Cultural			
Political			
Dynastic			
Territorial			
Religious			
Military			

Creating this kind of grid could be a useful way of organising your material and ideas when planning to answer questions on causation. It might also help in ordering your views about the importance of each factor so that you can reach an informed judgement about relative significance in your conclusion. However, note the following:

- Candidates frequently fail to give careful thought to the meaning of factor terms. For example, 'economic' and 'economical' are often confused. Also, many exam answers simplistically equate 'economic' with money or finance.
- It is important to consider when a long-term factor merges with a short-term one. What periods of time might constitute long term and short term?
- Think about how factors might be linked. Identifying and explaining links will help you structure your answers and arrive at a judgement about relative importance. If you do this you will undoubtedly avoid a 'listing and describing of factors' approach (often revealed in paragraphs that begin with 'One key factor/reason was that...').

Explore the issue

- Copy and complete Table 1 to show how the matrix approach to analysing causes can be applied to the origins of the American Revolution. (One factor has been completed to get you started.)

Counter-factual explanation

On occasion, historians drift to counter-factual explanations, or 'what if' theories of historical interpretation, applied to causation. For example, would the American Revolution have occurred if the Tea Act of 1773 had not been passed?

Explore the issue

- What are the strengths and limitations of this approach to explanation in history?

A final point for reflection

The historian A. J. P. Taylor, writing in 1969 about the origins of the First World War, famously stated that 'the only safe explanation is that things happen because they happen'. How valid is this view of causation?

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