

How to use historiography

Although the A-level specifications do not require historiography to be taught it does rear its head, albeit in a disguised way, where assessment tasks involve the evaluation of secondary sources. This is especially the case with exam questions focused on historical interpretations

Simply put, historiography is the collection of histories on a particular topic. For example, the articles written in this magazine end with a reading list consisting of references to key histories on the topic discussed. Reading lists, therefore, are examples of historiographical references.

Furthermore, historiography is commonly used to represent the 'history of history' — this is where the interpretations, approaches and methods used by historians, past and present, are evaluated. However, evaluation does not mean making value judgements about whether historians were and are right/wrong or good/bad. It is more a case of deciding whether the work of individuals and groups of historians carries validity and reliability as historical evidence.

Why do historians disagree?

Before considering how historiography can be used for exam tasks it is worth giving some thought to why historiography is important.

The main reason is that it reveals that key to the study of history as a discipline is debate. Historians are usually adept at presenting and defending arguments, so the notion that there are often no right or wrong answers to historical problems is central to an understanding of the nature of history. In turn, reflecting on why historians produce different viewpoints on the same topic, even ones that are 'well-worn', is also integral to studying history in its widest sense.

- There are a number of specific reasons why historians disagree.
- Historians are products of time and place. The era and geographical region in which historians are born, brought up and work will undoubtedly affect how they make sense of the present through studying the past.
- Time and place also impact on access to historical sources. For example, those who specialise in researching Russian history often refer to how the opening up of historical archives in Russia to the West, by the end of the twentieth century, has resulted in a great deal of revisionist writing about Russia's past.
- Personal factors such as race, culture, gender and social class will influence how any individual perceives the past and present. It is often the case that historians studying particular genres of history such as the role of women in the past or the impact of British imperialism will have been attracted to such areas as a result of personal experience and knowledge.
- Historians are human, and all humans have different ways of knowing, including reason, language acquisition, perception, intuition and emotion. Evidence suggests that there is no single way in which individuals learn — we use different ways according to what our

wants and needs are at any point in time. This explains why some historians might present their ideas in a very logical, reasoned manner while others might incorporate ideas that reflect and appeal more to emotional aspects of the past.

- Historians often use different methods to investigate the past. For example, local historians use fieldwork, medieval historians focus a good deal on manuscripts that require translation from Latin, and those who focus on 'history from below' might utilise interview techniques and oral testimony. Different methods usually result in different perspectives being taken.

How can historiography be used in exam tasks?

There are two main ways in which historiography can be used when answering exam questions, especially those requiring extended writing.

Views as evidence

Views of historians can be used as evidence to support a line of argument. See Box 1, which contains a passage about Lloyd George and the Liberal Party in 1914–18.

Notice how the writer acknowledges the work of Wilson by directly quoting key phrases from his book. Particular views of historians should always be referenced and not disguised as the views of the student. Also, direct quoting can be useful to strengthen and emphasise the importance of an argument, especially where the writer cannot think of another way to summarise the view of the historian whose work is being consulted.

Comparing and contrasting

Historiography can be compared and contrasted to both support and refute lines of argument. See Box 2 for an example.

Using material in this way should remind you that the study of history involves debate. It requires historians not just to present their views but also to defend them against counter-claims.

Task

Use material from the article by Alun Wyburn-Powell (page xx), as historiographical evidence to answer the following question:

To what extent was Lloyd George to blame for the decline of the Liberal Party from 1914 to 1924?

Exam tasks that focus on historiography

In recent years there has been a shift in A-level specifications towards using historiography as the basis for exam-type tasks. These tasks mostly refer to 'interpretations' rather than 'historiography', but, in essence, they are the same (even though such interpretations may be adapted and/or come from historians who are more prominent than others). So, for example, you may be given a question that starts by asking you to:

Read the following two passages and answer the question that follows.

Evaluate the interpretations in both of the two passages and explain which you think is more convincing as an explanation of the (reasons/consequences... for/of...)...

To answer this type of question successfully you should be aware of the skills required (see Table 1).

Note that there is no requirement to analyse the interpretations using reference to provenance. Some coursework tasks demand this

Box 1 Views as evidence

If, then, the Liberal Party was in reasonably good shape in 1914, it is tempting to argue that it was the First World War itself that was the agent of Liberal decline — the 'rampant omnibus' (in Professor Trevor Wilson's famous metaphor) that knocked down and ran over the Liberal Party. 'The out-break of the First World War,' he writes in his *Downfall of the Liberal Party*, 'initiated a process of disintegration in the Liberal Party which by 1918 had reduced it to ruins. (Adelman, P. (1994) *The Decline of the Liberal Party 1910–31*, Heinemann).

Box 2 Comparing and contrasting

However, Wilson has probably exaggerated the impact of the First World War on the demise of the Liberals. Some grassroots party members were undoubtedly upset by the decision of the Liberal Party leadership to enter the war especially as it started to result in censorship, conscription and the abandonment of free trade. More important was the formation of Lloyd George's coalition government in December 1916, which resulted in a Liberal Party split. Asquith and his followers disapproved of the arrangement and formed an opposition group. But, although, as Wilson claims, this split was a product of the war, the historian Adelman is correct in countering this view by stating that the division was not irreversible. The decline of the Liberal Party was more to do with the extension of the franchise in 1918 than the direct impact of the war. The link between the experiences of the war and more people getting the vote is at best tenuous.

Table 1 Historiography skills

High-level answer	Low-level answer
Interpretations are explained to reveal that they are understood.	Interpretations are described or paraphrased to reveal some understanding.
Interpretations are evaluated by comparing and contrasting them with relevant and appropriate contextual knowledge.	Interpretations are evaluated using highly generalised knowledge bordering on assertion.
Answers develop to reach a well-explained and developed judgement.	Answers show little attempt to reach a judgement.

but exam questions tend not to. However, it might be that referring to the provenance of an interpretation, especially in the case of an essay question, will strengthen an answer. This would be especially so where a particular 'school of thought' was being expressed (for example, a Marxist view of the Wall Street Crash).

Conclusion

Overall, you should be aware of what historiography is and its connection to the wider debate over what is history. Although it is not integral to most A-level courses in history it is an essential component of the discipline. In fact, maybe history is just historiography. What do you think?

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