

Awarding-body support materials

How to use them to achieve high grades

Awarding bodies offer a range of support materials designed to help you prepare for exams. Surprisingly, these resources are underused and yet are readily accessible online. This column discusses why such material is valuable and how it can best be utilised to produce top-level answers

The specification is the most important document provided by an awarding body. It contains information about: assessment aims and objectives, subject and topic content, ideas and regulations concerning what can and cannot be studied, mark schemes and guidelines concerning preparation for coursework.

Using the specification

Teachers will not necessarily provide you with hard copies of the specification as most are very long and will contain some information that is not relevant to your programme of study. What you are likely to get is a version of their scheme of work. It will interpret the specification and provide a pathway through the multitude of options for you to follow. However, it is still useful to read relevant sections of the specification:

- It will give you information about technical details such as module reference numbers and titles.
- It will tell you about the general ethos behind studying history and why the subject is important.
- It will give you a precise idea of the levels of knowledge, understanding and skill that is required to achieve marks at the highest levels.
- It will provide you with detailed information about module/unit content which you can check against information provided on the

general topic planner you are likely to be given by your teacher. This will ensure that you are clear about the depth and breadth of material that you are meant to be covering.

As a rule, awarding bodies will only set questions containing words and terms that can be directly traced to topic content as stated in the specification.

Download a copy of the specification for your history course and periodically refer to it reassure yourself that you are doing everything that is required to be successful.

Mark schemes

Mark schemes are extremely useful tools as they steer you towards what is expected for certain levels of achievement. However, there are two types of mark scheme — generic and indicative content-based — which have separate uses and benefits. Note that although generic mark schemes remain the same, unless the specification changes, from one yearly exam session to another, indicative content mark schemes change and are published as separate documents from specifications.

Generic

As the title suggests, a generic mark scheme is one that contains generalised statements about what you need to demonstrate to reach a certain level. Although the wording in such schemes is indeed generalised, they are helpful for the following reasons:

- They flag up the skills needed to achieve a particular level.
- They push you to decipher and unpack key assessment words and terms, such as context, understanding, analysis, evaluation, judgement and argument.
- They prompt you to question the meaning of words and terms, such as very good, well-supported, convincing and implicit.
- They indicate the differences between levels of achievement and what is required to move from one level to the next.

You should actively use generic mark schemes to check the quality of your work both before and after submission (once your teacher has given feedback) as a way of deciding what level you are working at. You can also use them to test the quality of sample answers to questions that often appear on awarding body websites and in officially endorsed textbooks.

Indicative content

These mark schemes provide an idea of the kind of relevant content (mostly factual material) that could be included in exam answers. The following type of comment usually precedes details pertaining to specific questions:

Answers will be credited according to candidates' deployment of material in relation to the qualities outlined in the generic mark scheme. The indicative content below is not prescriptive and candidates are not required to include all the material which is indicated as relevant. Other relevant material not suggested below must also be credited.

Two points need to be noted about this.

1 The first sentence in the comment highlights the importance of linking content to the concepts and skills mentioned in mark schemes.

2 The next two sentences stress that the stated content serves only as an indication of the kind of factual evidence that can be used to support arguments. If you deploy other evidence you will get credit as long as what you use is valid and reliable.

Studying an indicative content-based mark scheme is helpful as it:

- provides an idea of the depth and detail required for a good solid answer
- highlights the type of evidence that is deemed by examiners to be relevant
- gets you thinking about other evidence you have come across that might also be used in an answer to the question concerned

Examiners' reports

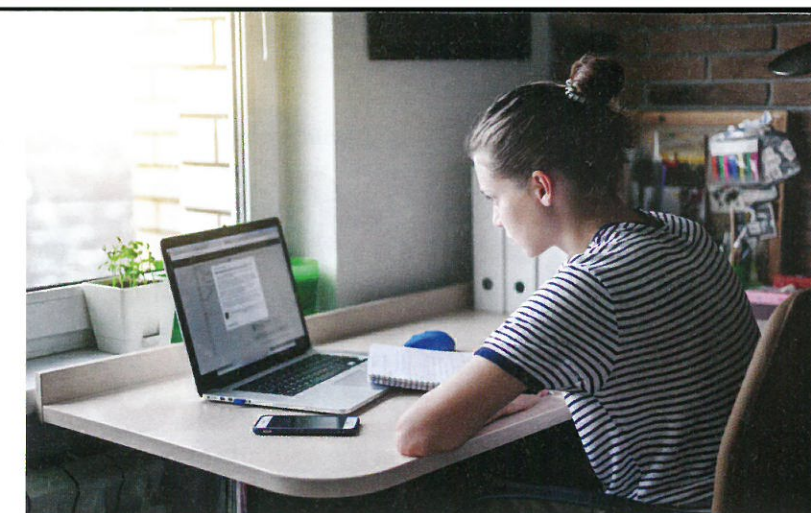
Senior examiners are obliged to produce reports for the exam papers they manage. They are instructed to include information on the general performance of candidates and how particular questions were tackled.

Some students are either oblivious of the existence of examiners' reports or do not bother accessing them, presumably because they feel that they are full of 'exam speak' and are only written for teachers. However, close scrutiny of these documents reveals that they can be a mine of useful information.

You will realise that such reports are invaluable for the following reasons:

- They give an indication of the academic strengths required to produce good answers.
- They flag up common pitfalls when answering questions.
- They reveal the importance of thinking in a balanced and critical manner (for example, by considering how assertions can be challenged).
- They show the different routes answers can take to reach solid and well-structured arguments.
- They highlight the importance of avoiding generalisation along with the need to be compact and precise when writing.

You should access a range of examiners' reports that cover a number of years so that you can identify change and continuity in the way that particular topics have been tackled.



Past exam papers

It is impossible to overemphasise how important it is that you use past exam papers. They are crucial in:

- enabling you to see how papers are set out and how the rubric (rules about answering questions) is worded
- helping you be aware of the wording of questions, particularly with respect to command stem, key words and terms and topic focus. You should be able to identify that there is consistency in the way questions are put together. Thus, in preparation for exams, you should 'expect the expected'
- allowing you to see that all aspects of a specification may be examined, although some topics can be spotted as being more popular than others when it comes to question setting. It can be helpful to try and identify patterns in question setting although awarding bodies are not obliged to rotate the setting of questions in a regimented way
- getting you to practise setting your own questions in the style of the relevant exam paper, and then answering them. This could be combined with writing your own mark schemes to the questions you devise

Although past papers are essential resources they should always be used in conjunction with the other support materials provided by awarding bodies, especially specifications. The latter change fairly regularly and it is important to ensure that any past papers you access match up-to-date specifications.

Other resources

Awarding bodies provide a range of resources other than those discussed above. These might include topic booklets, exemplar answers to questions, examiner and/or subject officer blogs, access to exam chatrooms, technical updates (such as information about syllabus changes) and administrative information such as timetables for examinations. You would be wise to consult relevant awarding-body websites regularly to ensure that you are getting maximum use of the resources available.

In general, as a student of history, it is sensible to be aware of exactly what is required of you when it comes to the assessment of your knowledge, understanding and skill of the discipline. The best way to reinforce that is to make efficient and effective use of the guidance materials provided by your teachers and the awarding body responsible for administering the assessment process.

Andy Holland is an experienced history teacher.