

Ten things never to do in an exam...

Avoid some major pitfalls, and turn disaster to glory, with our top ten

One thing is certain: history is hard. Not only is history hard, the exams are hard too. As a result, in a history exam you are under immense pressure. But however much pressure you are under, however hard the exam is, never, under any circumstances, however right it may feel, never, ever do any of the following.

1 Write 'this source is biased'

A discussion of bias is a difficult thing to pull off in an exam. First, there is the problem of spelling. Students have been known to spell biased as 'biast', or 'biassed', or sometimes just 'bias' — which, incidentally, is a whole other word.

Secondly, having sorted out the spelling, there is a more complicated problem. All sources are biased. Therefore writing 'this source is biased' doesn't really contribute anything.

Finally, does it really help you to answer the question? Often when students write about a source being biased they lose sight of the question and therefore their comments on bias don't really achieve anything.



TOP TIP: If you are going to write about bias, make sure you say what the source is biased against, and make sure the point you are making answers the question.

2 Tell the story

Stories are wonderful things. However, there is a time and a place and an exam is neither. The important thing to remember is that in an exam you are up against the clock. Therefore writing everything you know about Hitler's rise to power, or the reform of the Corn Laws, is not a good idea.

TOP TIP: Rather than telling a story, it is a much better idea to make an argument. Here's how they are different. A story tends to start at the beginning and end at the end, narrating events in chronological order. What is more, a story includes all kinds of details that may not be relevant to the central point. By contrast, an argument is designed to explain something. Therefore, when you make an argument you include only the most relevant information and you put it in the order that is most likely to explain your key points.

3 Be vague

Vague essays never do well. Imagine you are an examiner, and you are marking two essays. The first is full of relevant detail: statistics, proper names, correct dates, technical vocabulary. The second is vague. Which one is going to do better? Clearly, detail beats vague.

TOP TIP: Use relevant detail. Detail includes dates, the names of key individuals and places, statistics, and the technical terms that you have learnt in your course. Try and write two or three detailed sentences in each paragraph.

4 Copy out the source

In an exam there is nothing more intimidating than a blank sheet of paper. As a result, students sometimes just start writing. Sometimes you can fall into the trap of copying out the source — all you need are three little words, 'Source 1 says', and you're off. The problem is that copying a source is easy, and you don't get many marks for doing easy things at A-level.

TOP TIP: Avoid copying. Make sure you know what you are required to do with the sources before the exam. If you are supposed to be cross-referencing, then cross-reference; if you are supposed to be analysing them, then analyse. There will never be a time when copying large chunks is the right thing to do, so don't.

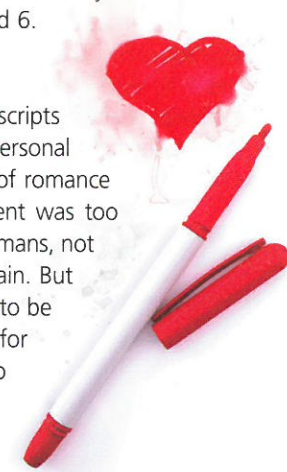
5 Forget to use the sources

Exams are hard, but exam boards always do things to try to make them easier. For example, exam boards give clear instructions. Sometimes those instructions include something like 'Use Sources 1, 2 and 3'. Pay attention to the instructions and make sure you do what they ask.

TOP TIP: Don't get confused. If the question asks you to 'Use Sources 1, 2 and 3' DON'T use Sources 4, 5 and 6.

6 Write the examiner a note

Examiners tend to mark hundreds of scripts every year. About one in every 500 is a personal note to the examiner. Often it's a tale of romance gone wrong, explaining that the student was too heartbroken to revise. Examiners are humans, not robots, so they are likely to feel your pain. But the crucial thing is that examiners have to be fair, and there are no marks at A-level for heartbreak. Therefore, writing a note to your examiner is a strategy that simply doesn't work.



7 Lose focus on the question

Focus is a constant problem. There are literally hundreds of ways to miss the point of a question. Losing focus will mean losing marks.

TOP TIP: Read the question, and look at your plan at the end of each paragraph to refocus on the question.

8 Focus on the wrong time period

Questions often contain dates, or a reference to a decade. Make sure you pay attention to these. For example:

How far did living standards in Russia improve in the years 1928 to 1941?

If you are answering this question and you write about the period 1917 to 1928, or 1819 to 1914, you will have missed the point entirely.

TOP TIP 1: Read the question at least twice before answering it. Underline any references to dates, or any other details that might give the question a specific time period.

TOP TIP 2: Dates are usually chosen for a reason. For example, in the question above, 1928 was chosen as it was the beginning of Stalin's rule, and 1941 as this was when Germany invaded Russia during the Second World War. Try to work out why the examiner has chosen those dates: what period of history did the examiner have in mind?

9 Do the wrong topic

Exam papers often have a whole range of different topics. Edexcel's Unit 1 paper, for example, contains 14 different questions on 7 different topics. Make sure you do the one that you have been preparing for. The most common mistake is getting the dates wrong. For example, you might have been studying post-war Germany 1945 to 1991, and answer a question on Germany in the 1930s by mistake.

Alternatively, you might just fancy your chances writing about a topic you studied at GCSE, or a topic that you've recently seen discussed on a television programme.

TOP TIP 1: Check the dates carefully — make sure you are really doing the right option.

TOP TIP 2: Learn the title of the topic you are studying, and look for it on the exam paper.

TOP TIP 3: However well you learnt something at GCSE, or however good the documentary you saw last week might have been, you will be better off doing the question you have been prepared for.

10 Use the wrong skills

Exam questions test specific skills. Some test your ability to deploy accurate and relevant own knowledge. Some test your ability to analyse primary sources. Others test your ability to analyse secondary sources. Others again test your ability to integrate sources and own knowledge.

The crucial thing is to make sure you give the examiners what they want. Using lots of own knowledge in a question that just has marks for sources will lead to a poor mark. Similarly, treating secondary sources as though they were primary sources is also unlikely to lead to a good result.

TOP TIP: Make sure you know what type of question you are dealing with and how best to approach it before you enter the exam.

Conclusion

History is hard, and history exams are hard too. But importantly, exams are fair: almost all students get what they deserve almost all the time. That said, sometimes good students underperform because they don't quite know what they are up against, or they make a simple mistake, such as writing about the wrong dates. Make sure you do well by treating the exam seriously and by giving the examiners what they want.

Robin Bunce is a history teacher.

