

How to evaluate at A2

This new series focuses on the skills you need to get the best grades in your AS and A2 exams. We start by looking at what evaluation means, and how to go about it

Every exam board asks you in your A2 course to evaluate the ideas and interpretations of historians. Indeed, this is an important skill for all historians.

You might have heard the word 'evaluation' at AS. The exam boards do not always mean the same thing when they talk about it at A2.

At AS, an exam question could require you to decide how important different factors are and to explain your decision. Some exam boards call this 'evaluation' at AS.

At A2, 'evaluation' means that you have to look critically at the ideas and interpretations of historians and decide how valid they are.

This might seem difficult at first — after all, who are you to say whether a professional historian is right or wrong? But historians argue and debate with each other all the time, so it is important that you can do the same.

Take a look at the points in the boxes to learn how to produce successful answers to evaluation questions.

Remember that every exam board sets different tasks and has different exam criteria that you should get to know. Their websites have mark-schemes, reports and past questions to help you.

Evaluation: step 1

Get to know the 'facts' of your topic really well

Know about the events, actions, personalities and data relating to the subject you are studying. It is very difficult to identify problems with an argument if you don't know about the period that the historians are discussing. These 'facts' can also be very useful in picking holes in an argument or opinion. Examples could include the passing of the Representation of the People Act in 1918 if you are studying women's suffrage; estimations of the numbers killed by famine in Russia in 1921 if you are looking at the experiences of Russian peasants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; or the actions of Rosa Parks in beginning the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 if you are examining the American Civil Rights Movement.

Evaluation: step 2

Read the articles, books or extracts you are given in detail

This will help you to identify arguments and understand the context in which the arguments are made. Skim-reading is not so helpful here, because you can easily miss the nuance of an opinion when you read a section too quickly.

Evaluation: step 3

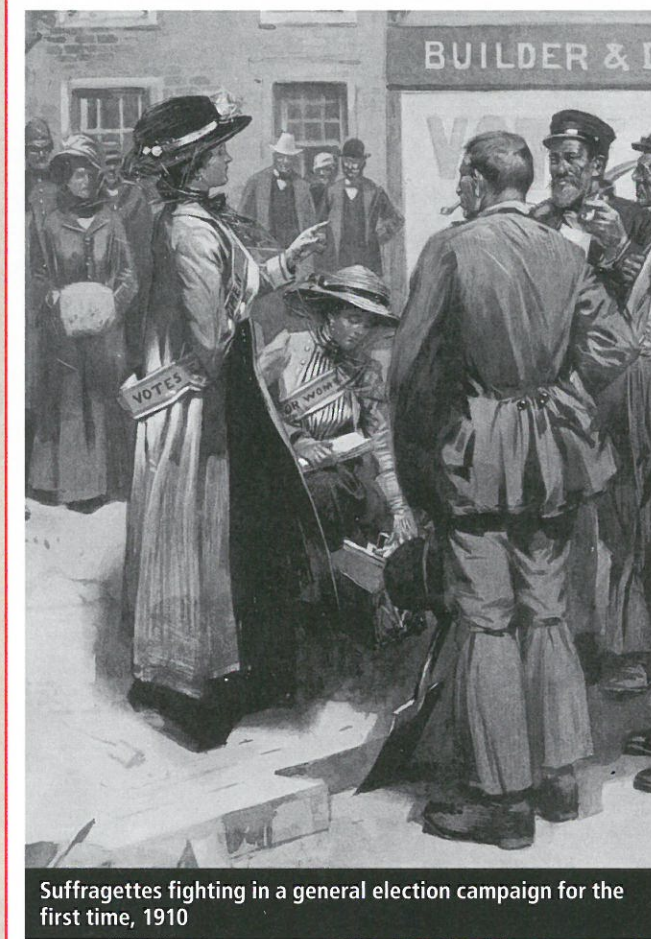
Now identify the argument in each historian's work

What is their opinion on the question that you are trying to answer? You need to focus on the specific demands of the question rather than finding their opinion on a wider area. For example, if your question concerns the extent to which the militant actions of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and the WSPU from 1903–14 delayed women getting the vote, you need to focus specifically on historians' opinions on that issue, rather than their opinions on women's rights more generally.

Evaluation: step 4

Compare the opinions you have found

Are there historians who agree on an aspect of your question? Are there historians who strongly disagree with each other? You could put these in a table to organise your notes. So with our previous example, you could group together historians (e.g. John Ray, Constance Rover) who agree that the violence of the suffragettes brought attention and publicity to the cause of women's suffrage. You could then group together historians who disagree with that opinion.



Suffragettes fighting in a general election campaign for the first time, 1910

Evaluation: step 5

Use the research you have done to determine who has the strongest argument

Look at the historians' opinions and read over your notes again. You need to decide basically who is right. Who has the strongest argument? Whose argument has problems and is weaker? Your research, reading and notes will help here. For example, if a historian says that Russians suffered less oppression under Lenin than under the tsars, you could refer to Lenin's creation and use of the secret police agency the Cheka in December 1917 and the establishment of the gulags in 1918 to criticise this argument.

Sarah Ward is an A-level teacher, examiner and author.