

QUESTION ANALYSIS

Question analysis is a fundamental skill for an advanced level student of History. The question analysis involves:

- *examining the parts of a question*
- *understanding the significance of a question*
- *developing a line of argument in response to the question*

Factors that affect your ability to analyze questions:

- **Extent and depth of reading**
- **Quality of notes**
- **Experience of Question analysis**
- **Historical understanding**

What is the purpose of a question at a more advanced level in History?

You should be able to show:

- a. the knowledge and understanding of factual material (**narrative – facts**)
- b. the ability to draw conclusions from historical evidence (**identification and understanding**)
- c. the ability to evaluate opinions (**historiography – “different perspectives”**)
- d. the ability to select and organize relevant knowledge – to analyze and answer specific historical questions (**analysis**)

Notice that:

1. the order of the objectives reveals something of the process of historical writing. The historian starts with some **knowledge or facts** (a), **adds opinion, interpretations, judgements**, (b) and (c) and **presents them in a logical and relevant essay** (d). The last of these objectives is most important, since understanding it will make the difference between good and bad essays or grades.
2. marks are awarded in line with these objectives. Firstly, **some credit will be given for knowledge**. Every essay must have a solid foundation of factual knowledge. You cannot avoid reading and making notes to provide a fund of knowledge on which to draw. Secondly, knowledge is not the only thing that is important in a good essay, “*wholly narrative answers (factual or story telling) will be restricted to a maximum of 6/7 marks out of the 15 available for an individual question*” (Markband comment for 6/7 marks out of 15: “*for a narrative with implicit explanation*”). **Allowing for your knowledge being detailed and accurate that gives a maximum of 40% – a bare pass.**

Most of the marks will be awarded for demonstrating more sophisticated skills, like analysis, judgement, interpretation and assessment of knowledge. Mastery of the information must be proved by marshalling it, that is in the way you select and organize information relevant to the question. For this reason, you are not asked questions which would require only knowledge, as this would be solely a test of memory. Advanced level questions, therefore, do not begin “*What happened in...*” or “*Describe the events of...*”

QUESTION THE QUESTION

The first approach that may be used in breaking down questions is to look for the question types. There are two basic question types:

1. **Explanation type** (giving reasons for something)
2. **Assessment/Evaluation type** (weighing up something and saying how fair, sensible, reasonable or true it is)

NOTE: Many questions will be a combination of these two types. (Ex: “*What were the problems which faced Stalin on his accession to power and how successfully did he resolve them?*”)

You decide the question type by concentrating on what we shall call the “**instruction part**” of the question. In this part the instructions are given before the question, or the problem is set. The wording of the instruction will usually be the clue to the type of question:

Some examples:

- **Why** was Britain so slow to develop a national system of education before 1914? (*Explanation*)
- The period 1880-1914 witnessed a revolution in English education! **How true is this statement?** (*Assessment/Evaluation*)
- **What were** the problems which faced Stalin on his accession to power and **how successfully** did he resolve them? (*Explanation/Assessment*)

The division into explanation and assessment is not rigid. Because:

1. many questions are a combination of the two types. Study this example “**What problems** faced (the *Bolsheviks in 1917*) (**explanation**) and **how satisfactorily** were they resolved by 1924?” (**assessment**)
2. the rest of the question may shift the emphasis from explanation to assessment. You could perhaps, be asked to assess the value and strength of an explanation. Look at this example “**How far** can the origin of February Revolution 1917 be explained by the Russian participation in World War One?” (**assessment**)

It’s a good idea to dismantle a question into different parts like:

- The instruction part (example – underlined)
- The main topic (example – box)
- The key factor, phrase or words (example – **bold text**)

EXAMPLE: Consider the **importance for Russia** of Stalin’s policies in the period 1927 to 1939.

PARAPHRASE

It’s a good idea to paraphrase the question after you analyzed the different parts but you have to make sure you understand all parts of the question, so you don’t change the question.

EXAMPLE: This essay will assess the **significance or importance for Russia** of Stalin’s policies between 1927 and 1939.

In what way can paraphrasing the question help you?

- The key factor, phrase or word is more important than the main topic.
- Paraphrasing brings the key factor, phrase or word of the question to the surface and forces you to answer it, not write just about the main topic.
- You will be inclined to more relevance in the examination. It will discourage the all too common, careless “*triggering*” of a response (usually chronological and narrative) to a few familiar words.
- Paraphrasing should tell you whether you can answer the question. Too often students look for any excuse – a familiar form of words as the main topic – to relieve themselves a mass of factual information.

NOTE: These tools of analysis are not always necessary or infallible. The questions may be simple enough not to require the application of the whole process. Whatever analysis you do will give important direction to the construction of an argument at the planning stage of essay writing.

EXERCISE: Look at the essay questions you had in the past + look up old Exam Questions. Identify what type of question it is (explanation/evaluation/assessment). Dismantle the questions into different parts (instruction part/main topic/key factor, phrase or words). Paraphrase the question and see if there are any “*hidden*” parts you should consider in the answer...