

Forming Research Questions

Being able to form a clear and insightful research question is often something that history students underestimate the difficulty of. A good research question should have a **clear command term**, a **narrow and conceptual focus**, and contain an element of **controversy or debate**. Read through the following ideas and activities to help you start thinking about a possible research question:

1. Consider Your Interests

- This can be hard to form but the best place to start is with your interests. Consider what period or topic from history really interests you. It might be something you have read about personally, something in the news, or something from your IBDP lessons. Then think about time, place, and space - where, when, who, what, and why? Initial thinking along these lines will help you to narrow down what you are actually interested in.
- Next, narrow this down further by considering if any of the following elements could be related to your topic: events; situations; developments; individuals; policies etc. Try doing a brainstorm around your topic using these headings. Let your own interests guide you as you do this. Unpacking topics in this way can often throw up surprising events and situations that you may have bypassed before.
- The third thing you should do is to then consider what is significant, debated, or even controversial about your topic. Is there a particular aspect of the topic that still creates debate today? Does an aspect have contemporary relevance? Is it in the news? Or has it been under-reported or misrepresented in the past? Finding an aspect of a topic or a new angle that might elicit some form of debate is a great

idea - you will have to integrate differing perspectives into your essay, anyway, so don't make it hard for yourself!

2. Consider Command Terms

- While you don't need to explicitly put in command terms like 'evaluate' into your research question, you do need to implicitly base your question upon some form of structural device or way of thinking. For example, consider the research question: 'To what extent were US and Soviet responses to the 1979 Iranian Revolution guided by similar attitudes to the Islamic world?' A tough and intriguing question! Clearly, this question is about comparing and contrasting - yet the question doesn't explicitly use those words. Having already thought about a possible topic, now consider how the following command terms might be used to structure your research question.
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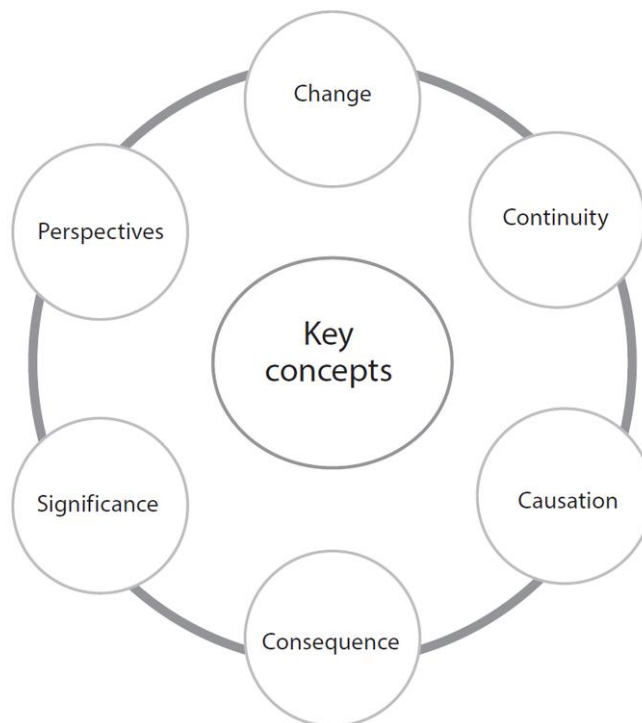
Command Term/Definition

- **Analyze** - Break down in order to bring out the essential elements or structure.
- **Compare** - Give an account of the similarities between two (or more) items or situations, referring to both (all) of them throughout.
- **Compare and Contrast** - Give an account of similarities and differences between two (or more) items or situations, referring to both (all) of them throughout.
- **Contrast** - Give an account of the differences between two (or more) items or situations, referring to both (all) of them throughout.
- **Discuss** - Offer a considered and balanced review that includes a range of arguments, factors or hypotheses. Opinions or conclusions should be presented clearly and supported by appropriate evidence.
- **Evaluate** - Make an appraisal by weighing up the strengths and limitations.
- **Examine** - Consider an argument or concept in a way that uncovers the assumptions and interrelationships of the issue.
- **To what extent** - Consider the merits or otherwise of an argument or concept. Opinions and conclusions should be presented clearly and supported with appropriate evidence and a sound argument.

3. Consider Key Concepts

Exploring topics by thinking about key concepts is another way to come up with or refine your research question. Key concepts in history are like thinking devices we can use to help us analyze and evaluate events. In History, the key concepts are: Cause; Consequence; Change; Continuity; Perspectives; Significance.

As you have already explored in your studies, some questions ask you to evaluate the causes of an event or its consequences. Sometimes, you need to consider to what extent things have changed or stayed the same over time. Perspectives require us to consider why differing perspectives emerge, and what these differing viewpoints are based on. In almost every essay question there is an element of considering the wider significance of an event - however you could base a whole project on the significance of an event - why is it remembered? Who remembers it? How do we consider how something is significant?



Source Evaluation

Using OPCVL to Evaluate Sources

History is comprised of both evidence and interpretations. Historians make claims about the past based on the available evidence. This is what makes history. As historians we rely on sources of evidence to provide us with information about the past. If sources of evidence are compromised or limited in some way, then they can undermine the validity, accuracy and reliability of a historians' claim. An important skill as a historian is therefore to be able to evaluate the reliability and usefulness of historical sources in order to build a more accurate picture of the past.

In IBDP History, Paper 1 Question 3, your IA, and your Extended Essays all require you to evaluate sources in some way. This entails considering the origins, purpose, and content of sources to ask whether a source is valuable or limited to a particular investigation. For each source that you are attempting to evaluate, whether in the exam or research, it is recommended that you draw up an evaluation table like in the example below:

Source Name:	Values	<u>Limitations</u>
Origin		
Purpose		
Content		

Then use the information below in order to understand how OPCVL can help you to evaluate sources:

Origin of the Source

In order to evaluate a source for its values and limitations, you must first know what it is. Clearly, the more you know about where a source is from, the easier it is to work out its purpose, content, value and limitations. Sources of evidence in history are products of their time. To fully understand them, you need to understand **who** created the source, **when** it was created, and **where** it was created. Thus, the origins of the source give us important contextual information that can make it valuable - or limited - to a historian.

Who created it?

- Understanding the author of the source gives us more context in which to understand the source. Consider the **role or position** that the author had. Was he/she in a position to understand events? Did their position give them access to information? Or did it prevent them from seeing the bigger picture? Did their **career and education** give them a better ability to understand events? Who were they working for? Would the responsibilities of their position affect what they would say? What **political ideas or religious beliefs** did they have that might affect their views of the event? What **nationality, ethnicity, culture** are they from? How might that influence what is written? What about the **age of the author**? Does age affect how people write and reflect about events?
- Also bear in mind that the source may not have a single author, but maybe created by a government department or business. How would that affect its values and

limitations? Taking all the above into account, consider whether you can detect how and why the author may be **biased**. Does that make the source valuable or limited? In many cases, bias is unavoidable yet is not necessarily a bad thing - a biased source tells us a lot about the opinions and values of an author. And biased people can be accurate and truthful too! You just have to cross-reference and corroborate what the source is saying with other sources to determine whether the information in the source is typical and consistent with other contemporary sources.

When did they create it?

- The date when a source was created also has a huge influence on both its values and limitations. **Primary sources** created at the time and contemporary with the event are very useful as they reveal how people thought at the time, without any hindsight bias. They are also free from the filtered interpretation of others. Yet sources by authors created at the time of the event also suffer in that the author is often reacting to events without a complete picture of that event. **Secondary sources** created after the event have the benefit of hindsight and can tell us more about how that particular document was received by its audience. But again, distance gives them less immediacy, and they lose sight of the thoughts and feelings of people at the time, failing to fully highlight intentions and motives.

Where did they create it?

- Where the source is created is often overlooked yet it provides us with extra contextual information about the source that may seriously affect its values and limitations. If a source was created in an authoritarian society, we can assume that some degree of **censorship** or even self-censorship by the author may have been present. This may have influenced what the author was willing to say, making a

source limited in its usefulness. Yet even if a source is subject to censorship, what remains tells us a lot about what could have been discussed - revealing much about what was permissible in this society. You also need to compare this with the date it was created and ask yourself what other events were going on at the time in that place that may have influenced the author in any way.

Purpose of the Source

Sources don't just appear in thin air. They are created for a reason or purpose, even if that reason is not immediately clear to the author. Evaluating the purpose of a historical source requires you to not only consider the reasons why a source was created but to also consider who it was created for. Answering these questions can reveal a lot about the hidden motives behind sources and the reasons for the messages that they seek to convey.

Why did they create the source?

- The **purpose of a source** isn't always immediately clear, to the reader or the author. Sometimes sources are created to convey factual information as accurately as possible. Other times the sources give the opinions of an author. They can even be created as propaganda to communicate deliberate messages. Or they can be a combination of all three. Clearly, the reason why a source is written or created influences what information is contained or even the accuracy or trustworthiness of the information.

A good example of this is a newspaper. A newspaper's purpose is to inform the public with factual information. People buy newspapers because they trust the accuracy of the reporting. This makes it valuable. Yet newspapers are owned by

individuals who may have strong political views or biases. They may in turn put pressure on their editors to only publish stories which agree with their perspective. They may also edit other stories to remove information or publish falsehoods. This may make a newspaper a limited source in terms of factual accuracy, but it may also make it valuable if we are trying to detect the views of the newspaper's owner!

Who did they create the source for?

- The audience of a source is also an important aspect to consider. You wouldn't necessarily tell a rude joke to a friend in the same way you would your parents! You may leave some rude details out to avoid getting into trouble! The same is true with historical sources. The intended audience of the source always affects what information is presented or the way in which it is conveyed. For example, you may think that a governmental report or budget, designed to convey factual information is valuable. It's not giving an opinion. Yet the intended audience can influence what the source is saying. Is it a secret governmental report? Then clearly the source maybe more useful and accurate because the government feels free to publish information without the fear of the public accessing it. This may mean that data and facts are presented in an untouched way. Conversely, if the governmental report is designed for public release, then we can assume that the government may want to hide uncomfortable or damaging facts, or at least attempt to present them in a favorable way. This may make the source less accurate or less reliable.

Content of the Source

The last aspect to approach when evaluating sources is the actual content of the source - or what is being said. You may have found a source from a first-hand observer; at the time and place of an event you are studying. That source maybe a police report, in which we can assume that the interviewee is trying to be as accurate and truthful as they can. So far so good. Yet if all the source says is, '*...the witness reported that the sky was blue...*', then it's not particularly useful, is it?! Therefore, considering the content of a historical source is vital when evaluating its values and limitations to your investigation.

Language / Tone?

- The language and tone of a source can convey valuable information about the author's mood or deeper feelings. Is it optimistic or pessimistic in tone? Is it accusational, arrogant, supportive, critical, joyful, cynical, neutral, sensational, certain, friendly, hostile, skeptical? What does that indicate about the beliefs or behavior of the author? Is the language academic? Everyday? Jargon laden? What does that tell you about the author or even the purpose of the source? Does that affect its values or limitations?

Facts / Opinions?

- Consider the balance between facts and opinions in the source. Factual information can be useful but gives no indication of the views of the author. Opinions, whilst often not based on facts, do reveal a lot about the true feelings of the author.

Thoughts / Feelings?

- Thoughts and feelings, whilst being insightful in a source, need to be questioned by considering the purpose and audience of the source. Is the author being sincere

with their feelings? Would they have reason to mask or hide their feelings? Or would they gain from exposing their true feelings? If they are trying to persuade, then the author could be pretending in order to strengthen a particular message.

New Information and Absent Information?

- It is vitally important to consider what is being said in relation to other sources and your own contextual knowledge of this period of history. Is the source revealing new information that hasn't been mentioned before? Does that make it valuable? How could we check its accuracy in this case? Remember to use your own knowledge of the period to contextualize this new information and consider what implications it has for your study. If no other source mentions this information, then that undermines its values as it is less typical, and therefore less reliable or provable. Sometimes, sources are telling in what they leave out, rather than what they contain. Is there a particular detail, fact, event or witness that the source doesn't mention? Why not? Consider the reasons why a source may not discuss something in particular. Perhaps the author wasn't in a position to know. But consider - what if they were - what would they have to gain by hiding information? And how does this affect the values and limitations of the source?

Emphasis

- The emphasis the author places on information within the source can also make it more valuable in some cases. What is emphasized or not emphasized? Why is this? What situations, events, facts, opinions, groups, people, words, phrases, arguments or perspectives are emphasized? Why is this? Does this affect the reliability of the source?

Relevance / Irrelevance

- A common mistake that wastes lots of time when researching is the question of relevance. Many sources from esteemed historians and eminent historical actors seem to be important. Their origins and purposes may recommend them to your study. Yet if the information, whilst interesting, is not relevant to your particular research question, then its value to you is questioned. Always consider the relevance of information!

Values and Limitations of the Source

Once you have analyzed and considered the origins, purpose and content of a source, you then need to consider how each makes it valuable or limited to you. It's important to remember that this depends on your actual investigation, exam question or essay question. A source that seems limited for your question might be very useful to a historian studying another aspect of your topic. This is important to bear in mind when answering source evaluation questions - the utility of a source is always dependent on the questions we ask of it.

The type of source can also affect its values and limitations. This again depends on your exam question or what you are trying to find out. For example, CCTV camera footage is very accurate at showing the actions of someone during an event. But it tells us very little about their motives. Different sources have naturally different values inherent in the nature and purpose of that source.

BUT REMEMBER! DO NOT MAKE VAGUE COMMENTS ABOUT THE TYPE OF SOURCE - ALWAYS BE SPECIFIC TO THAT SOURCE!

Primary Sources

For Text-Based Sources

- Who is the author?
- When was the source composed?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What is the purpose of the source? Factual? Persuade?
- What is the historical context in which the source was written and read?
- How do the author's gender and socioeconomic class compare to those of the people about whom he or she is writing?
- What unspoken assumptions does the text contain?
- What biases are detectable in the source?
- Was the original text commissioned by anyone or published by a press with a particular viewpoint?
- How do other contemporary sources compare with this one?

For Artifacts

- When and where was the artifact made?
- Who might have used it, and what might it have been used for?
- What does the artifact tell us about the people who made and used it and the period in which it was made?

For Art Works

- Who is the artist, and how does the work compare to his or her other works?
- When and why was the work made? Was it commissioned? If so, by whom?
- Was the work part of a larger artistic or intellectual movement?

- Where was the work first displayed? How did contemporaries respond to it? How do their responses compare to the ways in which it is understood now?

For Photographs

- Who is the photographer? Why did he or she take this photograph?
- Where was the photograph first published or displayed? Did that publication or venue have a particular mission or point of view?
- Do any obvious details such as angle, contrast, or cropping suggest bias?

For Cartoons

- What is the message of the cartoon? How do words and images combine to convey that message?
- In what kind of publication did it originally appear? Did that publication have a particular agenda or mission?
- When did the cartoon appear? How might its historical context be significant?

For Maps

- What kind of map is this? Topographical? Military? Political?
- Where and when was the map made? What was its intended purpose?
- Does the map contain any extraneous text or images? If so, what do they add to our understanding of the map itself?

For Video and Film

- What kind of film is this? Feature? Documentary?
- Who are the director, the producer, and the screenwriter for the film? Have they made other films to which you can compare this one?
- Who is the intended audience? Why was the film made?

- Does the film use particular cinematic techniques that convey a particular mood or tone?

For Sound Recordings

- Who made the recording, and what kind of recording is it? Music? Speech? Interview?
- Was the recording originally intended for broadcast? If so, why was it broadcast, and who was the intended audience?

Secondary Sources

- Who is the author? What are his or her academic credentials?
- When was the text written?
- What is the political, social, and cultural context in which the source was written?
- Who is the publisher? Is the text published by a scholarly press or a popular one?
- Who is the intended audience for the text? Scholars, students, general reading public, or other audience?
- What is the author's main argument or thesis?
- Does the author use primary sources as evidence to support his or her thesis? Is the author's interpretation of the primary sources persuasive?
- Are you aware of any primary source evidence that the author does not consider?
- Does the author contradict or disagree with others who have written on the subject? If so, does he or she acknowledge and effectively address opposing arguments or interpretations?
- Do the footnotes/endnotes and bibliography reference other important works on the same topic?

- Does the author build his or her argument on any unsubstantiated assumptions?

Website Sources/Tertiary Sources

- Is the author's identity clear? If so, what are his or her academic credentials? Does the author list an academic degree? Is he or she affiliated with a college or university? Do other Web sites provide additional information about the author?
- Does the author provide evidence for his or her assertions, such as citations and bibliographies? Are the sources up-to-date? Does the author include the sources for statistics?
- Is the site affiliated with an academic institution, press, or journal?
- Is the site sponsored by a particular organization? Do you know anything about the interests and concerns of the person or group that publishes the site? Does the organization seem biased?
- Does the site allow users to add or change content? If so, you cannot rely on the site to provide accurate information, even if it includes notes, references to academic sources, or useful links.
- What is the purpose of the site? Is it designed to inform? Persuade? Selling a product? Does the site contain advertising, and if so, does it affect the way the content is presented?
- Does the information on the site coincide with what you have learned about the subject from other sources?
- Has the site been updated recently?
- Does this site contain useful links to other sites? Are the linked sites affiliated with reputable institutions or persons?