



How do I do Sourcework?

This is a question which many students have written to ask about.

What follows are suggestions only, and by far the best way to learn how to do these will be to write answers to actual questions and get your teacher to mark them.

REMEMBER

THE FIRST thing to do when confronted by a Sourcework question is to establish:
WHAT KIND OF QUESTION IS IT?

There are **FIVE** types of Sourcework question:

Extraction (ie what can we GET OUT of this source?)

eg 'What can we learn from Source(s) A (B,C etc.)... about <???' ?'

REMEMBER – The examiners will usually ask this about a **specific issue** addressed by the source, so **IGNORE** anything in the source which does not deal with what they are asking about.

REMEMBER – This is usually a smaller/easier question, so look at how many marks are up for grabs and don't spend too long on it.

- 1st** Describe what the surface information says - if the question is worth 3 marks, simply list three relevant facts the source tells you.
- 2nd** If the question is worth 5 marks, see what the source infers – is there a message 'between the lines'?/ is it trying to create 'an impression'?/ is there an underlying message/ does it tell you further things about the author/the times/the situation? Include at least two inferences. Can you 'put two things from the source together' to deduce something further?

Differences

eg 'Why is source A's interpretation different to Source B's?'

- 1st** If you have been asked simply **HOW** the content differs, look first for **OBVIOUS** surface differences of fact, but then study the words/ details to deduce differences in approach, emphasis or tone.
- 2nd** If you have been asked **WHY** the sources are different, you will need to compare who wrote them, in what situation, and the motives/ intentions/purpose of the author - depends on the sources and the wording of the question. This is a question when it is usually vital to use your own knowledge
- 3rd** Make sure you come to a **CONCLUSION** based on facts/inferences/interpretations in the sources.

REMEMBER

when answering:

- **ALWAYS** use a quote/ facts from the Sources.
- **ALWAYS** use your own knowledge/ **FACTS** - esp. when it says 'use your own knowledge'
- **ATBQ** (= 'answer the bloody question')

Reliability

eg 'How accurate is Source A as a source of information...?'

REMEMBER – primary sources (from the time) are immediate and even eyewitness, but they may lack perspective/ objectivity/ may be biased. Secondary sources (written afterwards – eg textbooks) can be dispassionate and use a number of primary sources, but they may be guilty of misinterpreting facts (until the 1960s, history books were often written to carry a message – eg Marxist, Nazi)

REMEMBER – sometimes the question may ask you about the 'accuracy' of the source = reliability!

- 1st Test the information/claims of the source against other sources and your own knowledge. Does it give the true facts *and* feelings from the time – use your own knowledge.
- 2nd **VITAL:** Look at the provenance to establish **context, origin and purpose** – the situation in which it was written, who wrote it, and whether it is one-sided/propaganda etc. Look at *sufficiency* – does it give the whole story – what has it missed? Relate what you are saying to the specific context of the source - try to talk not only about generalities such as 'it may be biased', but about the specific situation (e.g. <N> would be biased because...)
- 3rd Make sure you come to a **CONCLUSION** based on facts.

Utility (utility = 'usefulness' to historians)

eg 'How useful is Source A to...?'

REMEMBER – nothing is ever useless; even the most biased source reveals what *that author* thought. Talk most about the ways in which the source is useful.

REMEMBER – this is a question about Quantity and Quality - how much information is it telling you, and how reliable is the information it is telling you? A **USEFUL** source is a source that **TELLS YOU A LOT** and **WHICH YOU CAN TRUST**.

REMEMBER – sometimes the question may ask you about the 'validity' of the source = utility!

- 1st Look at what the source is telling you and compare it to what you need/would like to know – remember both surface and inferred information.
- 2nd Measure the *sufficiency* of the source – *how much* info/ are there gaps?
- 3rd Useful for what? Can you trust the author's statements? Look at *accuracy*, context, origin and purpose: a source which is inaccurate may be useful for revealing the author's opinions and prejudices, but it is not useful for telling us the facts. Is the author's view objective/typical?
- 4th Compare the source's **STRENGTHS** against its **LIMITATIONS** and come to a **CONCLUSION**.

Reaching Conclusions

eg 'Use all the Sources to debate'

- 1st Recount relevant surface/inferred information from the Sources.
- 2nd Realise that the sources support both sides of the argument., and that you can use the sources and your own knowledge to argue both for and against the proposition.
- 3rd Weigh the evidence to come down one way or the other, **OR** state case and prove it, discounting contrary evidence
- 4th **VITAL:** Refer to the content and utility (sufficiency/ accuracy and reliability) of the sources in debate.