

Working with historical sources

As part of your research for essays – in particular your IA and extended essay – you will need to go beyond your textbook and use a range of historical sources. It is also important, however, that you examine these sources carefully to see how useful they are for your purpose.

To help you do this, always ask the following questions in order to assess the **origin** of the source.

- What type of source is it?
- Who produced it?
- What were the circumstances in which the source was produced? (This includes date, country, type of government, nature of censorship, etc.)

You then need to ask questions to identify the **purpose** of the source.

- What was the purpose or intention of the author?
- Who was intended to hear or read the source?

You also need to consider if there is evidence from other sources which supports the message of a particular source.

Every historical source needs to be looked at in relation to the questions above. However, it is possible to ask more specific questions about each type of source.

Below are five types of source that you will be using for your IA and extended essay investigations, with some suggestions of the type of questions that you should consider when using them. There will be more discussion about these sources, and also about primary sources, in chapter 2, which examines how to approach questions on evaluating sources in Paper 1.

Extracts from textbooks or works by historians

What is the purpose of the book? This question is relevant particularly when choosing to use textbooks or historians' work for your research. The aim of a textbook is to make information accessible to students and so will often be packaged clearly and succinctly. This has advantages for you as the reader as the information should be easy to digest. However, there is the possibility that particular information and/or analysis may be less detailed than work by a historian. For the IA and the extended essay in particular, it will be necessary to go beyond textbooks to look at books written by historians writing in the field in which you are interested in researching. (See page 8 on reading for information.)

When was the book published? This is important for giving an indication as to how up to date the textbook or historian's research is. New documents are released every year and so more recent books will have the advantage of access to more documents. For example, 1990 is a key date for books on the Soviet Union as this is the date after which historians had much greater access to Soviet archives.

What is the title of the book? From the title, you should be able to see what the purpose of the author is – whether it is to take a very broad view of an era or country or a very specific, in-depth look at a particular issue. This will affect the book's level of detail and therefore how useful it is to you.

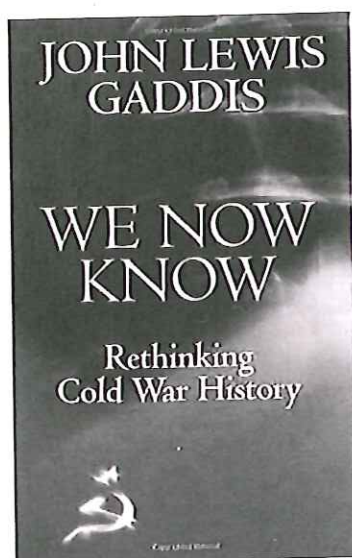
Where was the book published and where does the author come from? This is relevant for censorship issues and access to documents.

Does the author have any personal interest in the topic he or she is writing about? Don't forget that most writers of textbooks and historians do attempt to be as impartial and professional as possible in their writing. For example, if a British person is writing about the role of Germany in causing the First World War, this will not automatically make the writer one-sided in his or her approach. If you suspect that the author has a particular purpose in his or her writing and is not taking a neutral approach, try to find evidence for this in the actual source.

How comprehensive is the bibliography and how rigorous is the referencing? Looking at the bibliography and checking the referencing will give you a good idea of the range of sources used and whether the writer's assertions are supported by evidence.

Activity

Consider the following source.



Gaddis, J. L., 1997, *We Now Know. Rethinking Cold War history*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Using the points above, consider the value and limitations of this source for a student analysing the causes of the Cold War. Don't forget to research Gaddis's credentials as a Cold War historian.



John Lewis Gaddis

Biographies

Who is the author? Does the author have direct access to the subject or did he or she have to rely on accounts from others? Is the author likely to be someone who will give an objective account of his or her subject or someone who has an interest in putting the subject in a positive light?

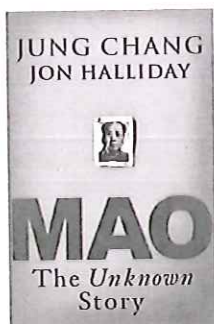
Where was the book published and where does the author come from? Again, this is relevant for censorship issues and access to documents.

How comprehensive is the bibliography and how rigorous is the referencing? Looking at the bibliography and checking the referencing will give you a good idea of the range of sources used and whether the historian's assertions are supported by evidence.

Activity

Task 1

Find a biography of a key figure from the period of history you are studying. With reference to the questions above, analyse how useful you consider it would be in adding insight into your chosen period.



Chang, J. and Halliday, J., 2005, *Mao: The unknown story* Jonathan Cape: London.

Task 2

What questions would you ask about an autobiography in order to assess how useful it is for your research?

Internet sites

There are many excellent online resources that you can now access as part of your research. However, you need to be just as rigorous in your analysis of these as you would be of written sources. Anybody can put up a web page and many sites are unregulated and not monitored, so it is essential to ask the following questions.

Who is the author of the website? As with evaluating the author of a history book, you need to consider the qualifications of the author and his or her likely experience and knowledge on the topic you are researching.

Is the author presenting the views for himself or herself? Or is the author writing under the umbrella of an organization such as a university or magazine (which therefore may well have approved the article).

When was the article posted?

Are there citations or a bibliography which would allow you to verify information given?

What is the purpose of the website? Is it a website designed specifically for students? If so, for students of what age? Will it cover your topic in enough depth? Is it a personal view on a topic (which could make it subjective)? Is it written for general interest – for historians as well as non-historians? Again, this might mean it lacks specific detail.

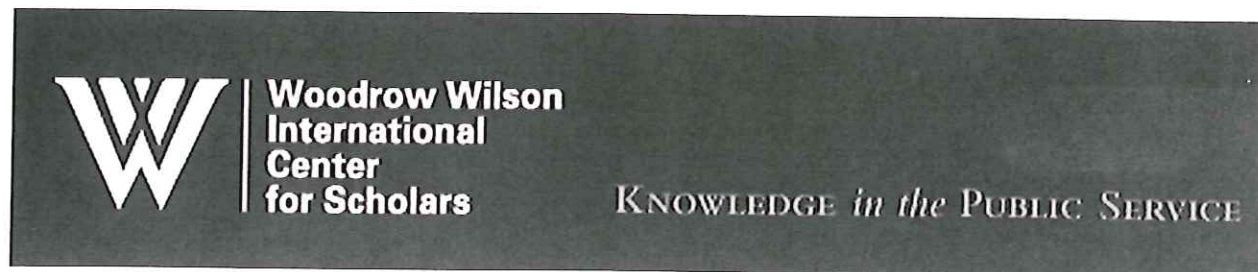
Activity

Consider the following websites:

www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/

www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=topics.home&topic_id=1409

www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk



Using the points above, consider the value and limitations of using these sites for historical research for your IA or extended essay.

Documentary film

What is the title of the documentary? Is it likely to present a broad overview of the topic or to look at one aspect of the topic in depth?

What is the purpose of the documentary? Is it aiming to appeal to a broad adult audience or is it designed for schools? Is it aiming to be 'sensational'; that is, to reveal new information or a new interpretation of events for the first time? If so, what evidence is presented to support this? Are reputable historians interviewed in the documentary to support the claims put forward?

What is the style of the documentary? This is linked to its purpose. Many documentaries are made in a 'docu-drama' style to make them more interesting; does that affect their factual content?

When was the documentary made? Is it likely to include up-to-date evidence?

What reviews are there of the documentary? Did it generate any controversy?