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HISTORY A

Independent Study Guide

Delivering Results, Step by Step

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www.ocr.org.uk/history

Introduction

This is a guide for students, containing suggestions for how you might want to approach unit Y100 'Topic based essay' of A level History A (H505).

This guide has been written by Dr Leif Jerram, a Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Manchester. This guide gives excellent insight into skills and techniques that you could use to plan and write their coursework; as well as indicating the kinds of skills that will be developed if you go on to study History at University.

Use of this guide is not compulsory, but we do recommend this as a great resource for students.

We will be producing separate coursework guidance for teachers.

Using the Guide: Breaking the Project Down

This is a long project – it is going to take many months to deliver. That might look daunting, but in fact it works in your favour, because it means we can break the task down into its component parts. Each of these parts will be manageable by you. Sometimes, the solution is donkey work: it will take a lot of time. More often, the solution will be brain work. This does not take much time, but requires a type of thinking that often feels weird, counter-intuitive or pretentious. These two things – donkey work and brain work – are like each of the tracks that your project will run on. Give up on either one of them, and the project will be derailed. Each chapter of this guide corresponds roughly to a 'stage' in delivering the whole project, and each explains what sorts of 'donkey work' and what sorts of 'brain work' will help deliver the outcomes you want. Between the teachers and students working on this project, each stage should be managed within a particular time frame that the teacher should set, and should produce specific written work, even if this is in the form of bullet points, lists, 'think pieces' (where you write down what you are thinking, with all the contradictions and confusions included) and mindmaps.

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Getting to Grips with Brain Work – and Dealing with 'Common Sense'

Most people are familiar with donkey work. It is about hours spent at a task. It is quite easy to commit to this, and the sense of whether we are doing it or not seems within our grasp. We all know when we are sacking off the work, and going to the pub or the shops instead. This goes for students, teachers, university lecturers, managers, designers, mechanics, computer programmers – whoever. We all know we are capable of doing donkey work, and so we feel more in control of time-consuming graft than with brain work, even when we ignore it! Sometimes, we just do not do enough donkey work. But equally common is spending ages grinding away at a task, when actually what we need to do is sit back and think. A Buddhist friend of mine has a saying: 'Don't just do something! Sit there!' It is a wise way of highlighting that sometimes the rush to action is an excuse for not thinking about something properly.

But brain work can often feel beyond us. Again, this goes for students, teachers, university lecturers, managers, designers, mechanics, computer programmers and whoever else. Instead of asking all sorts of complicated questions about a topic, sometimes all of us think, 'Why make this so complicated? If we just use our common sense, the answer is obvious.'

But think about it. Are you happy with common sense answers? As a historian, I am not. I could never be happy with them. Once upon a time, it was common sense that women should not vote. It just seemed obvious to people. It was common sense that white people should capture black people, and sell them. This seemed like the most natural thing in the world. And quite recently, it was regarded as common sense that gay men should not be allowed to work with children. This seemed like the most self-evident truth to millions of people. These things looked natural, obvious and self-evident. They looked like common sense.

I hope you can see that common sense is often a type of poison to society and the mind. It stops people thinking. When people say they have a 'common sense' solution, what they mean is this: 'This is what I believe, and I don't think anyone should challenge it with stuff like evidence or critical thinking.' In life, solving the problems of small businesses, factories, hospitals, farms, schools, international trade, car mechanics, families, or whatever, requires us to be able to gather evidence, and find a way of using it that solves real problems. So how can we embark on an alternative to 'common sense' that does not end up in endless, pointless, pretentious philosophising? This project, and this booklet, is part of learning how.

1. Working out a Topic (But not Setting a Question!)

A good essay discusses an important topic, and asks intelligent, interesting questions about that topic. We can leave the exact question until a little later (ch. 4 to be precise). It is important that a topic is not simply 'any old thing that you happen to have heard of as the deadline approaches'. It is also important not to 'describe' a topic – to tell a long story about it (a narrative); instead, students need to establish why a topic matters, in terms of the big intellectual issues it raises, and the impact it had on history. So in this section, we will focus on the first of those two things: finding a good topic. Then I will focus on how to start researching it. This all happens before we have a specific question.

Task 1. Pause for a moment and reflect. What sorts of things interest you? Are you really interested in technology? Do families fascinate you? What about warfare? Are you really interested in music, culture or the performing arts? Does sport take up a lot of your time? What about money – do you think it makes the world go round? Or does God seem like the biggest thing to you? How about civil rights or the environment? Are cities more interesting than the countryside? Are women's lives more interesting to you than men's? Do you have a gory interest in surgery, or a social interest in racism or homophobia? Start a dedicated slim A4 notebook for the project (slim so it is light enough to carry around all the time, A4 so the pages are big enough for you to add things to them, and a separate book so that the pages stay together, and remain separate from your other school tasks). Over the course of a few days, jot down topics that catch your interest, whatever they might be. If possible, do not use a computer. [1]

Task 2. Ask yourself: why are you interested in that? What is it about that topic that captures your attention? What problems or issues or aspects of life or types of evidence about it really interest you? Whenever you identify a topic in Task 1 above, leave a space after it in your notebook. Write, 'I am interested in this because…', and keep topping up the answers as they come to you.

Task 3. Next, reflect on what historical periods or themes you have heard of or studied would interest you most. They could come from any subject you have studied to date (even the sciences! Chemistry has had a big impact on the world in the last 200 years; so have sociology and many other disciplines), or a museum/exhibition visit, or a novel you have read, or a film or TV show you have seen. Jot these down over a period of a few days, so you get a broad picture of potential areas of enquiry. So, if you are interested in racism, for example, you do not have to do simply the Civil Rights Movement in the USA – plenty of times and places show racist thinking, and you will be able to say more about, and more interesting things about, a topic to do with racism that is not quite so famous or obvious. Pay particular attention to topics (or aspects of topics) that have not been 'done to death'. It will be especially hard to say something interesting about topics that drown in history books and A-level essays already.

Task 4. Discuss with your teachers and class colleagues where your interests in task 1 and your motivations from task 2 cross over in the historical periods in task 3. For example, you might be really interested in sport, and racism. So, you might want to write about racism and sport in British football in the 60s and 70s, or South Africa during Apartheid.

[1] If you want to know the reasons why a computer does not function as effectively as a notebook, they are: A) by handwriting your work, you remember more of it, and think more about it while you are doing it. Most of us can type without thinking. B) By keeping a notebook, you see your previous notes and thoughts each time you add to it, so you become more familiar with your 'realm of thinking' than when everything is dumped in a document. C) It remains as a physical presence in your life (in your bag, on your desk, wherever), so it reminds you what you are doing, encourages you to invest in it, and means you can take notes as thoughts arise. If you are worried about losing it, photograph the pages on a phone and automatically save the photos to Dropbox or Google Drive.

"It is important that a topic is not simply 'any old thing that you happen to have heard of as the deadline approaches'. It is also important not to 'describe' a topic – to tell a long story about it (a narrative); instead, students need to establish why a topic matters, in terms of the big intellectual issues it raises, and the impact it had on history."

2. Doing Your Research: Reading Around the Topic

Now you have worked out what interests you, you need to develop a research strategy to refine your topic further. You need to know not just what you are interested in, but what historians are interested in, related to your area of interest. However, not all research is equal. We need to think about:

- what different types of things we need to read at different stages of the project
- where to find them
- what to avoid & what to embrace
- how to conduct a search

Do not be disheartened. It takes a few hours to do this, but if you do it right, you will be good to go right through your project without crisis.

2.1 What we need to find

Books, right? But which ones? You need to focus your reading into three stages, spread throughout the project.

1. 'Big picture' or survey books. First of all, you need introductory books that give a survey of the very big picture of the society you are writing about. You might be interested in the introduction of surgery in Britain in the eighteenth century, but if you read a very specialist book on this first, chances are you will be left confused (I would be). You need to start out with very general books on Britain in the Eighteenth century. A quick search of Cardiff City Libraries shows they hold books like *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* or A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783. You probably also need a very general book on the history of medicine – maybe like *The Cambridge History of Medicine*. Do not worry; you do not have to read them all – you are just looking for 2-3 books at this stage. We will discuss what to do with these books in ch. 3.

2. General Topic Books. This reading for this step is a month or so into the project, but you can list them from the start. Once you have located some general surveys of the time you want to write about, you are ready to find books on 18th-century medicine. You will have a much clearer idea of the context, so now you will want to fill out a more detailed picture. Things like *The Illustrated History of Surgery* or *Women Under the Knife: A History of Surgery* might be useful**.** *The Early History of Surgery* looks spot on for this imaginary project. (All these books were found in Newcastle City Libraries.)

3. Specific Case Study Books. Not everyone progresses to this final stage – it is a question of where you want the project to go, how much work you want to do, and what grades you are aiming for. But this type of research would be done after 1 and 2. But now you might be ready to look at very specific case study books – so in this case, pieces about individual surgeons, or specific procedures (maybe surrounding cancer or childbirth, for example). These are more likely to be in university libraries – things like: *Breast Cancer in the Eighteenth Century* (in the University of Manchester Library).

2.2 Where to look for materials

There are lots of places you can go to look for materials. The first place is your school or college library – but you will find that you rapidly need to go beyond this resource. Try the following:

1. The biggest library in a nearby big city. Libraries like Manchester Central Library or Southampton Central Library will contain much more material than your local branch library, and will be good for the 'Type 1' reading highlighted in 2.1, and maybe for the 'Type 2' reading as well. They will have online catalogues to search, and you can use these catalogues from home or school to build up a list of potentially interesting books. You can usually order books from central county or city libraries to your local branch library (if they are in the same local authority), but that means that you lose out on the 'chance finds' that come with visiting the shelves and exploring yourself. If you find a book you are interested in, but nearby libraries do not have it, ask about 'inter-library loan' and 'document supply' at your library. Not all libraries offer it, but many will source a book from elsewhere in the country for a small fee of £1 or £2.

2. University libraries. Many (not all) university libraries will let members of the public visit to use them. It can help if you have a letter from your teacher, and if you go alone/with one other person. Do not go in a big group, as these libraries tend to be quite quiet, serious places, and their gatekeepers appreciate quiet, serious-looking visitors! If they let you in, you will not be able to borrow – but you can often consult books inside the library. Again, they have online catalogues to check before you go. Do not be afraid to ask for help – you will often need it. Exeter University Library will, for example, allow members of the public to come and consult their holdings – but not borrow. Every university librarian has a 'horror story' of some riotous member of the public that spoilt the tranquillity of their domain, so the more seriously you present yourself, the more likely you are to make them forget that story and let you in. Photocopying can be difficult in university libraries – you often need a special card to do it. But a digital camera or smartphone should enable you to capture a lot of pages. Do this in a quiet part of the library, out of sight, and make sure your device is on silent!

3. JSTOR. Many schools and colleges subscribe to JSTOR, which is a database of hundreds of thousands of academic articles about 20 pages long. The number of results can be overwhelming – click on 'advanced search' to start narrowing things down by subject or key word.

4. Google Books has a huge amount of material digitised, much of it from serious scholars.

5. Google Scholar can point you to much useful material, especially in the form of long articles in academic journals. Much of this is behind a paywall – but much of it is not. Use the stuff that is not, especially for your ' specific case studies' reading, noted in 2.1.3.

6. Amazon – but you do not necessarily need to buy the book! Click on 'View inside this book' to see what it contains. Sometimes, whole chapters of the book are there. Both Amazon.co.uk and abebooks.co.uk can be valuable marketplaces for cheap second-hand books if you do decide to buy any.

2.3 What to avoid & embrace: becoming a critical researcher

Becoming 'critical' is a big part of the intellectual development needed to solve problems. Being 'critical' does not mean folding your arms and saying, 'That's rubbish!' This is the everyday meaning of 'critical'. In an academic setting, being critical means evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of what you find (and your own ideas), and being open about the criteria you have used for judging those strengths and weaknesses.

- **Avoid general Google results**. Commit to books. The quality control is not there on Google, and there is a lot of generic junk online. There are great things online, but very rarely is there any quality control. But if the Google results refer to published work, that could offer great clues for further reading.
- **Avoid material that is too old**. It is possible that a book written in the 1940s will be useful on understanding the colonisation of Africa, but there will be much better, much more recent material. Try to focus on material from the last 20 years or so. Some works achieve the status of 'classics', and so, although they are old, they are still often used. Discuss with your teachers if you find books you think might be in this category.
- **Embrace reputable authors**: materials produced by historians that you can check out on Google. In particular, historians associated with universities tend to be most reliable. There are exceptions – you can discuss any you find with your teacher.
- **Embrace reputable publishers**: materials produced by any publisher with 'University Press' in the title, or by any of the main non-fiction publishers, like Pearson, Penguin, Harper Collins, Longman, Routledge, or Ashgate, are all rigorously checked for accuracy before publication. This does not mean that any publisher not on this list is 'bad'. For example, Cullompton is a tiny publisher, but it specialises in books on crime and policing. However, there are publishers that are more problematic; for example, the USA abounds in publishers who pursue particular religious or political or social agendas, and only publish work which conforms to these agendas. Google the publisher – what sort of publisher are they? You do not need to reject a book that comes from a non-academic publisher, or one you do not recognise. You just need to be on guard for material from very politically-motivated publishers.
- **Embrace university course outlines**. Often, you can find courses on your topic at universities around the world. They will recommend reading – these tips can be very useful. For example, if you are researching the history of surgery, Harvard University has an introductory course on… the history of surgery! The reading list for this will contain the names of important authors and books on the subject. Google 'course outline + your topic', 'reading list + your topic', or 'course + your topic' to see what is out there.

2.4 How to Conduct a Search: The Art of the Key Word…

The key thing to accept is that you need to build a book list, piece by piece. A book list (or bibliography) is not a 'one off' event. You will have to run several searches; some will reveal dozens of things, and others hardly any. Do not be afraid of the list ballooning into something massive: you are not going to read it all. Instead, once you have a big list, score each thing on it – 1: Must read; 2: Should read; 3: Will read if I have time/want a really high grade/am really interested in the topic. Then work your way through your 1s, then your 2s, then your 3s. You may only get through your 1s – that is fine.

City Libraries

When you start your search in city libraries, use simple words. So if you are interested in Renaissance art or women in the Russian revolution, start with:

- Renaissance then Renaissance art then the names of important artists then the names of authors you have found to see if they have written other books. Then see if there are other books around shelfmark that cover it, but do not show up in the catalogue. Browsing surrounding shelves is always a good idea.
- Russia then history Russia then women Russia then Revolution Russia then Russian Revolution. Then see if there are other books around shelfmark that cover it, but do not show up in the catalogue. Browsing surrounding shelves is always a good idea.

Practical tip: if you are making a big trip to a central library in a town some way away, take a digital camera or smart phone. Turn the sound and flash off, and photograph the pages of books so that you can read them at your leisure later on. Make sure you photograph the publication details page (near the beginning of the book) so that you know all the details of the author, title, place and date of publication. Save as a PDF file – they take up much less space than JPEGs.

University Libraries

If you make it to university libraries, you will find their holdings are much bigger. Searching with 'Renaissance' at the University of Birmingham library, you get 6,795 'physical items' (books, to you and me). That is too much. 'Renaissance art' produces 1,005 books. But university libraries have subject categories – usually (not always) in a column on the left hand side. Birmingham University Library offers a category called 'Art, Renaissance' – 396 books. That is a lot, but it will not take long when I sort them by date to find the ones from the last 20 years. Finally, 'Renaissance art politics' as search terms produce ten books. That is very useful!!

Task: Using the guidance above, develop a bibliography (book list). Look at the table of contents, skim the chapter headings, scan the index, read the first ten lines of a couple of chapters. Score each book 1 for 'must explore in greater detail'; 2 for 'should explore in greater detail'; and 3 for 'will explore in greater detail if have time/want a high grade/am into subject'. Look now at just the books scoring 1, and filter the list again into your top 5 books, and explain in a few words why each one is on your list – what does it contain, which function does it fulfil (introduction/big picture; or topic book; or detailed case study)? Show both the big list of all your number 1 books, and in particular the critical list of your 'top 5' books with their justifications, to your teacher. Ask for his/her opinions. **You do not need to read the books yet, and you do not need to take notes – that is the subject of the next chapter!**

2.5 Doing Your Research: Finding Primary Sources

Here, you can breathe a bit. Finding primary sources is getting much easier all the time, and it is certainly much easier than doing the first research step! Primary sources can be found in:

- Quoted in history books (these tend to be fragments of sources, but they are often the most useful, and easily accessible).
- documentary sourcebooks.
- in collections at the back of many textbooks.
- And online in huge quantities!

I am going to focus on documentary sourcebooks, then the web.

Documentary Sourcebooks

The key search terms will be 'documents + your topic', 'sources + your topic' or 'sourcebook + your topic'. Let us imagine that you are interested in the Vietnam War. Using the website of Leeds City Libraries, I type in 'Vietnam documents' into the catalogue search. I can see there is a book of first hand reports and interviews with soldiers called, *Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*, and a book of international relations documents called, *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating* Volumes of the Pentagon Papers. These are going to contain very rich material! If you are interested in diplomacy and international relations, one will be useful; and if you are interested in how GIs responded to the war, you will find the other more engaging. But even better, why not explore why these two groups explained the war so very differently? If you find some excellent material that is not on your specific topic, it might be worth adapting your topic to focus on it. Discuss that with a teacher before you do, though.

Online Sources

The internet has a breath-taking number of digitised sources. Sometimes, whole books from the past are digitised – a particularly large resource for these is Project Gutenberg. For example, if you are interested in the US Wars against the Native Americans, a search of 'Custer' at www.gutenberg.org reveals some really interesting books from the time, like *Tenting on the Plains and Memoirs of a Cavalryman* that would offer interesting perspectives from the time. These would be excellent primary sources.

But for most topics, simply searching with 'name of topic + sources', 'name of topic + primary sources' or 'name of topic + documents' will yield excellent results. So if you are interested in art in the Renaissance, a Google search of 'Renaissance art sources' brings up a lot of sites for history courses at universities. Using these, I quickly found 'Vads – the online resource for visual arts' which has images of hundreds of Renaissance works of art. This would be very useful for putting together a project on art in the Renaissance. When I searched for 'Michelangelo + primary sources', I was presented with a collection of his poems, contracts for work he did, meetings discussing what to do with his work, and early attempts to tell his life story. These would all be very interesting in a project on art in the Italian Renaissance. Once you have a good bibliography of secondary sources, and some clear ideas about primary sources, have a discussion with your teacher and see where you are up to. Present your ideas to him/her, and see if s/he can suggest any improvements. You are now ready to start doing your reading, and taking notes.

3. Reading and Taking Notes: Strategies that Work

The quantity of reading involved can often seem very daunting beginning a large research task like this. And of course, you already know how to read, so it might sound stupid or patronising to suggest that how we read needs to be rethought! But given the amount of materials that have to be read in a project like this, and the limited amount of time that students have (and the need to do other things, like play sports, see friends, do weekend jobs, and so on), it really does pay off to think about what you are doing, and challenge some unproductive habits. A lot of research has been done into the subject of research and note-taking, and all of it concludes that a lot of the time, people are wasting their efforts with both tasks – which is hugely frustrating. Grades suffer, and quality of life suffers. We all spend too much time taking useless notes when we could have better notes, and be out with friends.

Thinking about stuff like this – how we work – can often seem like a massive waste of time. 'Why should I think about pretentious stuff like this, when I could be doing the actual work?' Well, the truth is, thinking about thinking, and thinking about working, may seem pretentious at first glance, but they are massive timesavers on the one hand, and they boost grades on the other.

Efficient reading that yields good notes and spare time for us to do the things we enjoy is reading which is planned in stages. There are 5 key stages. I will explain them briefly here, and then in more detail:

1. Pre-reading – hopes and fears for the reading in front of you.
2. Skim read – scan every line of the introduction, and each page of the whole of the chapter you want to read (without a pen in your hand).
3. Evaluation – does it do what your pre-reading wanted it to do? Does it do something better than that, or worse than that?
4. Re-read – this time, read the text properly (without a pen in your hand).
5. Take notes using the 'note-taking' suggestions below.

3.1 Pre-Reading: assessing your goals

When we set off somewhere, we have a destination in mind. When we open the fridge door, it is because we want something from the fridge. We know this. But often, when we read, we view it like some special activity that requires no thought – as if we open a history book for a laugh, or because we have nothing better to do. This wastes our time – just like walking out of the front door with no idea where you are going would waste your time. I hope you do not sit in your kitchen opening the fridge for no reason; so please, do not open a book without having some idea of what you want to find in it. Just becoming conscious of what you want from a text speeds up your reading and understanding of it. Weird, but true.
So: before you read, jot down on a blank piece of paper what you want from the thing you are about to read. We want different things from different texts at different points in the project. For example, you might want:

- ***A general overview of the topic*: *key dates and names*** – what happened, when, and who was involved. E.g.: 'When did the Renaissance start and finish?' or 'What were the major battles of the Eastern Front in the Second World War?'
- ***A detailed case study of a particular aspect of your topic***. E.g.: 'What role did artists in Florence play in the Renaissance?' or 'Why is the Battle of Kursk so important in World War II?'
- ***A sense of what different historians think about the topic***. E.g.: 'Do art historians talk about different things in the Renaissance compared to political historians?' Or, 'Why do British historians talk so little about the USSR's role in the Second World War? What do they emphasise instead?'
- ***The impact of your topic over a longer period***. E.g.: 'Did Florentine art affect art in other places, later in the Renaissance?' or 'Did Soviet tank battles affect the course of the Cold War?'
- ***What types of evidence historians have used for your topic***. E.g.: 'What did women think of the Renaissance? What did aristocrats think about it?' or 'Are there any diaries from Soviet soldiers on the Eastern Front?'
- ***A particular example of a type of behaviour, attitude or thinking***. E.g.: 'How did Protestants view Renaissance art?', or 'How did men and women describe the Soviet government in the war?'

The reasons for reading can be personal to you. It does not matter what they are – just the act of jotting them down makes you pay more attention to what you read. Do not worry about what your reason for reading is; just make sure you have one!

3.2 Skim Read: getting the big picture

Identify about 20-30 pages, or a chapter, that you think looks promising. Scan every line of the introduction. Then scan each subsequent page of the chapter – generally, the first and last sentences of paragraphs are enough. **Make sure you do not have a pen in your hand while you read**. Do not check what things mean, and do not worry if you do not understand – skip anything that causes problems. This should take about 10 minutes. This is crucial: if you do not 'get it', let it go and move on.

3.3 Evaluate: testing for usefulness

Now close the book, and jot down your views from memory of how well the piece met, failed to meet, or exceeded the objectives of your pre-reading check list. Maybe it is too soon to read that piece – put it aside for later in the project. Maybe it is off topic. Maybe the second half looks useful, but not the first half. If it (or part of it) meets your objectives in (1), then commit to a re-read of the bit that matters.

3.4 Re-read: topics, evidence and conclusions

If you have decided that some or all of this chunk of writing delivers on what you want right now, read that bit again – ideally, no more than about 20 pages at a time. Make sure you do not have a pen in your hand. Do not highlight or underline (doing this traps you forever in what you thought in one particular moment, and gives you a false sense of security – underlining stuff and understanding stuff are not as similar as the two words would make it appear at first glance!), and do not take notes. Pause to think about what the author is saying. This is like 'surfing a wave' – you are not really 'in control', because the book is going to take you where it wants, but you are evaluating, thinking and guessing what will happen next. Thinking is key here – do not worry if you are puzzled or confused. This is a sign you are thinking. It is fine. This should take about an hour. Then close the book.

3.5 Take notes: saving time and increasing effectiveness

Taking notes is a really important life skill. Take too many notes, and you might as well just copy the book out – you have too much stuff. Take too few, and you might as well not have read it, because you will forget. Here is a step-by-step guide. If possible, use a pen and paper – better, a dedicated notebook for this task. Try to avoid taking notes on a computer – this is because it is too easy to take them, so we do not have to think about taking them; and they get lost in documents, whereas in a specific notebook for a project, you see the notes you have already taken over and over.

1. Write down: the author's name; the title of the book or document; the date of publication; the place of publication and the publisher (if it is a book); the web address and the date you looked at it (if it is a webpage).
2. **From memory**, what were the main issues the author wanted to discuss in the chapter you have just read? What did they focus on?
3. **From memory**, what were the main types of evidence the author used? (Diaries, memoirs, pictures, economic statistics, newspaper articles, etc.) And who wrote that evidence in the first place? (Nurses, journalists, civil servants, politicians, soldiers, etc.)
4. **From memory**, what were the main conclusions the author reached or the main points s/he had to make? Did they offer any evaluations, or make any statements that stick in your mind?
5. Now, pick up the text again, and find just one quote that illustrates each of the things in 2, 3 and 4. Copy this quote into your notebook, and **make sure you record which page/s the quote comes from. This is important for referencing – discussed in 10.1.**

Now, whenever you look at these notes, you will have a quick summary of what really matters about the book or document. This will enable you to *think* about your problems. Too often, people view information gathering and thinking as two completely separate tasks, but they are not. Thinking is like juggling: if you have too much material to handle, you drop it and fail at the task. If you have too little material, no-one is impressed – you are just throwing something around. You are looking for the 'Goldilocks spot': not too hot, not too cold, just right. Remember: you can always go back and check the source. Photographing what you have read with a camera/smart phone can help keep a permanent record for checking.

Task: Run through the reading task as set out above. Jot down your initial 'question'; your initial evaluation of whether the piece addressed the question (or, if it did not, what it did address); and your final 'important notes'. Show them to a teacher, and discuss any improvements that could be made in note-taking. Remember: do not bombard your teacher with detailed notes! This should be do-able in one page of A4.

"Efficient reading that yields good notes and spare time for us to do the things we enjoy is reading which is planned in stages."

4. What's the Question? What's the Problem?

Finally, we actually get round to defining a question – after we have a rough topic, and we have done some basic reading around it. In general, it is best to organise the question around the topic you are interested in, rather than investigating a topic because you have this or that question fixed from the start.

4.1 Refining your Topic and Developing a Question

Once you have done a bit of reading – maybe about 80-100 pages or so, from three or four different books – and taken the important, filtered, notes suggested above, you will know a lot more about the topic, and you can start to formulate the question of the essay more clearly. You will come back and do more reading later (especially, Type 2 and Type 3 reading, explained in section 2.1), but for now, we can start to narrow the big topic down into an appropriately-sized area of investigation for a 3000 – 4000 word essay.

Identifying a Problem and Developing the Question

An essay is asking you to do something. It is asking you to identify an intellectual problem to be solved, and then organise a way of solving it, using research and evidence. An essay is not asking you to tell a story or explain 'exactly what happened'. Working out what matters intellectually in an essay is a tricky task, and requires a fair amount of 'background thinking time' – reflecting on the problem while you are going about your life, and letting it 'tick over' in your mind. The specific 'intellectual problem to be solved' in the topic is called the *problematic*.

In fact, the *problematic* is rarely one issue or debate – it is usually a family of related problems.

Devising a Problematic, Example 1: Race and Sport in America

So, if you have decided you want to write about black people, racism and sport in the USA, there might be a range of issues or debates or ideas arising from that:

- What was the short, medium and long-term impact of black sports-people on ideas about race?
- Does focusing on sports-people typically exclude women? Is this fair, given their role in the civil rights movement? Have female sports-people been unfairly ignored?
- Do historians all agree on the importance of sport? Is sport trivial in their writings?
- How many black people got actually got to play professional sport?
- If not many black people got to play professional sport, why have they attracted so much attention?
- How did TV companies respond to black players? Did audiences agree with the TV companies?
- Did black sports-people show more, or less, interest in the civil rights movement than other black people? Were some sports more likely to contain activists than others? Did their wealth and fame detach them from wider political processes? Was it different in different sports?
- Was the USA one place, where black sports-people were treated the same, or was there a lot of diversity across the country? Was California the same as Detroit, and was Detroit the same as Tennessee?
- Which is the most important period to write about? Is there a lot of material on the 1960s, but hardly any on the 1970s? If so, do I want to write about the area where there is a lot of material (and risk duplicating that material)? Or do I want to write about the area where there is not much material (where I will have more opportunities to show off my originality, but will probably have to research more)?

Devising a Problematic, Example 2: The Scientific Revolution in the Seventeenth Century

If you are writing about the medical discoveries of the seventeenth century (for example, that the blood circulates around the body, or the functions of the liver and kidneys), there might be a range of issues or debates about that, like:

- What were the short, medium and long-term effects of the medical revolution?
- What was the dominant way of thinking about medicine before these discoveries? Why were some people unhappy with it? Are you surprised by who supported it, and who did not?
- What role did technology play in the discoveries – like microscopes and scalpels? Was it more about technological change, or changes in thinking?
- What types of people engaged in scientific thinking? What social class were they from? Why were so many from Britain and France, and so few from Spain and Italy?
- Was medicine more or less controversial in religious terms than other types of scientific investigation (for example, theories of gravity, planetary movement or light waves)? Why?
- Why were people so anxious about dissecting human bodies? What religious beliefs did they have about the human body? How did medical knowledge affect these beliefs?
- Who read the new medical knowledge, and what were their reactions? Did it pass most people by, or were ordinary people affected?
- Did medical professionals use the new medical knowledge, or ignore it? Why?
- How did the state relate to these new discoveries? What changes did people make to the ways science was organised?

Questions like these lie at the heart of every essay, and help build the *problematic*. So first and foremost, we are looking for a problem (or family of problems) to focus on. Now you have your topic, and you have done a bit of reading about it, spend a few days thinking about what issues or problems might crop up in that topic – keep a notebook, or speak notes into your mobile phone and jot them down at the end of the week. What issues are at stake in your topic? What debates exist? What types of evidence? What sort of people are included and excluded? What role does geography play? What are the short, medium and long-term impacts?

4.2 Dos and Don'ts of Framing the Problem (and, eventually, Asking a Question)

There are some intellectual dos and don'ts at this point – but also some dos and don'ts that the exam board has highlighted about what matters. So, remembering that we need a problem to solve, we can go about devising a suitable problem, and then ask a question about it to develop our 'problematic'. Remember: find the problem(s) first, then work out a question that puts the problem(s) front and centre. Now you have your topic and your problematics, run them through the 'Dos and Don'ts' list, and ask yourself if there is anything you would like to change.

Dos

1. **Do consider problems of effects, significance, importance and consequence as well as causes**. It is fine to be interested in the 'causes' of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. But what were its effects? For whom? When? Where? Over what timescales? Did it impact more on Cold War politics, or Islamic theology?

2. **Do look for the impact on history writing**. It is important to think about your topic in the context of the study of history. So, ask yourself: have historians disagreed about the topic I am writing about? If so, why? What are the strengths and weaknesses of interpretation? How to analyse historians' works is discussed in in chapter 9.

3. **Do look for intersections**. If you are investigating a topic, like medicine, or China, or religion, or warfare, draw up a list of other interesting themes too. Most topics will intersect with whatever it is that you're interested in: women, childhood, the working classes, the aristocracy, religion, the arts, warfare, sexuality, income & wealth, politics, trade, industry, economics, agriculture, race & ethnicity, education, family life, housing, leisure, diseases & the human body, technology & discovery. This is not a complete list, but it is a good start. How about:
   - What was the significance of the Great Leap Forward in China for women?
   - How did the slave trade change family life for enslaved people?
   - What was the impact of the Norman Conquest on the standard of living of ordinary English people?

   Mix up your topic with another – warfare and women; architecture and warfare; medicine and money; race and politics, and so on. This gives you an instant intellectual dimension where you can offer value-judgements based on the evidence you find, and your interpretation of it.

4. **Do look for complications**. Often we talk as if everyone in the past was one coherent group of people, like the home end at a football stadium. They were not – they were very diverse, and this diversity is the engine of history. So look for differences like:
   a. Personnel. Who was involved in what you are interested in? Did all the different types of people involved have the same opinions? Do the same actions? So did women read and respond to Martin Luther's ideas about religious reform differently to men, for example? (Answer: no!)
   b. Location. Where was this happening? Did people in Paris have the same views of the French Revolution as people in the Gironde? (Answer: no!)
   c. Timescale. History is a process, not an event. So while we might say 'the' Russian Revolution, in fact lots of different things were happening, in lots of different places, with lots of different people, over quite a long period of time. This is true whatever we are talking about – 'the' rise of the Labour Party, or 'the' colonisation of Africa. Was the problem the same at every point in the process? (No.) Could breaking it up into time periods help you? (Yes!)
   d. Competing Explanations. Why did this thing happen? What were its most important consequences? Why do historians disagree about this? This could be because some historians are Marxists and some are feminists. It could be because some historians were writing during the Cold War, while some wrote after the fall of the Berlin Wall.
   e. Different Types of Evidence. Historians disagree for lots of different reasons. But sometimes it is because of the evidence used – coal production statistics will always show something different to diaries, for example. Reflect on the different types of evidence people use, and it becomes clear: the views of the CIA leadership expressed in policy documents on the Korean War will be very different to the views of conscripted servicemen in their letters home. It is not that one is right and one is wrong; they are just different sources. They will never agree.

5. **Do look for big philosophical themes**. By this I mean large concepts – almost philosophical ideas. You might be really interested in how military technology shaped the Napoleonic Wars. Or you might be interested in how Native Americans resisted being put into reservations. Or you might be fascinated about why so many people were tortured over religion in the Reformation. But hidden inside these themes are more general questions that go well beyond your little topic, like: how does technology shape warfare? Is colonisation ever possible to resist? What is 'resistance' anyway? Why do people kill for religion, and is it the same as killing for politics? Brain storm as many of these 'deep and meaningful' issues as you can.

6. **Do look for alternative explanations**. We need to challenge assumptions that we see. So: Martin Luther King is viewed as important. But black people are still at a terrible disadvantage today in the USA, so can we really say that he succeeded in securing his 'dream'? American colonists wanted 'freedom', but women, poor white men, Native Americans, slaves and indentured labourers were all excluded from that, so can we really say the American Revolution was a quest for freedom? Challenge the words and conclusions we find.

Don'ts

1. **Don't focus on individuals**. This leads too often to biographies. Focus on phenomena and processes (political, social, cultural, scientific, religious, industrial, etc.), and if you wish, explore how individuals impacted on them. So 'The Dissolution of the Monasteries' is a better topic than 'Henry VIII' (although you would have to involve Henry in a discussion of the monasteries); 'Controlling Diseases in Victorian England' is a better topic than 'Florence Nightingale' (although you would have to discuss Nightingale to understand the role of hospitals and nursing in infection control); 'The Colonisation of the American West' or 'The US Army in Politics' are better than 'Colonel Custer' (although he might make a useful contribution to both).

2. **Don't compare two similar things or people**. So avoid Hitler/Mussolini comparisons; Holocaust/Great Ukrainian Famine comparisons; Martin Luther King/Malcolm X comparisons; and so on. There are two reasons for this. The first reason is that it means you are reduced to making an 'either/or' decision (and the world is just more complicated than that). Secondly, researching either the Holocaust or the Great Ukrainian Famine could take the rest of your life, so understanding just one of them properly will be difficult enough. Do not spread yourself too thinly.

3. **Don't tell a story.** 'How did Manchester develop as the heart of the Industrial Revolution?' lends itself to a long story, or a list of events. 'This happened, then that happened, then this was invented, then that was built' – this is not good! When you are telling a story, the focus on significance slips out of sight. However, 'Why was technological innovation possible in Manchester but not elsewhere?' is an excellent question! You would have to make lots more evaluations and judgements in the second question – you would be critical. One is a story, the other is a problem. You should be able to give someone a page of your essay, or a draft of your plan, and from that, they should be able to work out your question. Every part of the essay needs to *be solving a problem or refereeing a debate*. If you find yourself telling a story, stop and complete the following sentence: 'This is important because it shows…', and then rearrange that section or paragraph around the completed sentence.

4. **Don't overlook continuities**. It is too easy to assume that people's own beliefs about how much the world was changing at that time are true. Most of the time, most things stay fairly similar for quite long periods, but people often write as if their world was in constant change. So why do scholars overlook this? What blinds us to the continuities? We talk about the Civil Rights movement in the USA as a success, but black people were the poorest in US society in 1950, and they are the poorest in US society today. The British coal industry was the most inefficient in the rich West in 1900, just as it was in 1980. Superficially, there was change, but underlying trends remained the same. Look for underlying trends of continuity – they often produce very interesting arguments and debates.

5. **Don't ask for lists.** 'Why was Apartheid established in South Africa?', could be answered with a list of many reasons. But 'What were the most important justifications white people in South Africa used for Apartheid?' could not. Look for questions that have judgements as a key part of their answer, like 'most important'. Then you will have to make an argument justifying your conclusions.

6. **Don't ask 'How significant was…?'** This is a very common question type, because it appears to address the exam board's insistence on understanding 'significance'. But it is a false friend. Firstly, the answer is limited: you can only conclude very, fairly, or not very. Your thinking space is closed right down. Secondly, given that the thing you are asking about is likely to be fairly famous or well-known (if not, it would be hard for you to study), the answer is almost always going to be very. 'How significant was the Great Reform Act?' – given that so many historians have written so many books about it, chances are, it is very significant, and so your thinking space gets closed right down again. It would be a brave (or foolish) student that argued that the topic of their essay was of no significance. However, 'How significant were women in the campaign for electoral reform in the 1820s and 30s?', is an excellent question – you will have to come up with solutions to a problem. 'How significant was x for y?' demands an argument, and allows you to say 'not very significant'. But 'How significant was x?' leaves you with almost nothing to say.

7. **Don't write about things where there is an easy or obvious moral conclusion**. So essays about how awful the Holocaust was, or the slave trade, or the standard of living in industrialising Manchester are not useful. Just enumerating the injustices that group x inflicted on group y closes down your thinking space, because your conclusion is predetermined from the start. Working out why things happen, and what the short, medium and long-term effects are, is a far more fruitful task, intellectually speaking.

4.3 Formulating your final question

Now you should be ready to draft some questions. See if you can come up with 3 or 4, and run them through the 'dos and don'ts' – see if you can spot any problems or want to make any adjustments. Discuss them with your teacher to evaluate which is best. For each question, give some indications of what the sub-issues or sub-questions (the problematic) might be.

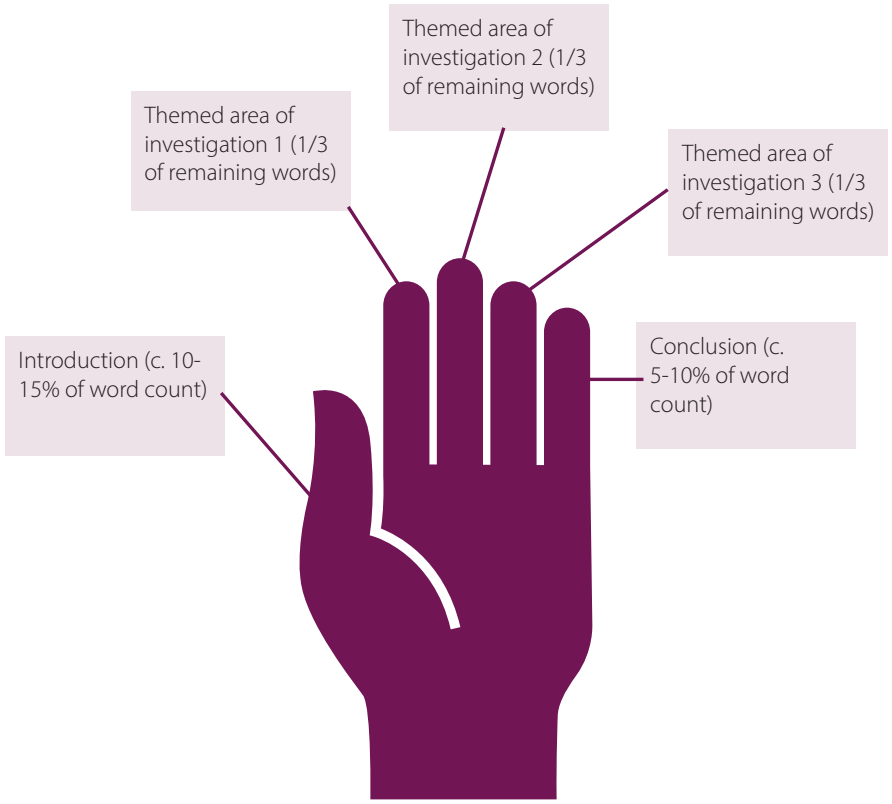
Task: Write down your topic. Work through the 'dos and don'ts' and develop a list of questions, issues, debates and problems that your topic contains. Now try to develop 3 questions that will allow you to talk about these issues, questions, debates and problems. Make sure to include some value judgment in there, or try to relate two things (women and warfare; economics and religion, and so on) in your particular area. Discuss these questions with a teacher to decide on a final question. But keep your list of sub-issues to hand!

"An essay is asking you to do something. It is asking you to identify an intellectual problem to be solved, and then organise a way of solving it, using research and evidence."

5. Planning the Essay

Once you have a range of readings under your belt (beyond the first 4 or so 'chunks' that you scanned to prepare for chapter 3), a question, a problematic and the sub-issues, you are ready to start planning your essay. At this stage, it would be reasonable to expect that maybe 6-8 'chunks' of 20-30 pages of relevant material, annotated as recommended in chapter 3, will have been read. You are now ready to sketch out a plan for the essay. The following model is tried and tested – it is not the only model available, but it works.

5.1 The Classic Model: The Five-Part Plan



You do not have to follow this model, but it is a good one, because:

- It guarantees you have breadth, but not so much that your work is shallow.
- It guarantees that you have depth, but not so much that your work ignores the bigger picture.
- It makes you decide to *leave things out*. An essay is not an encyclopaedia, and needs to leave out plenty of the wonderful materials you have so diligently read. This hurts, but it has to happen. You should take time to explain what you are leaving out, and why.
- It makes you organise your ideas and data across what you've read (mixing small amounts from different readings in each section), and not according to what you've read (book 1 for section 1; book 2 for section 2 etc.)
- **Not every section has to argue the same thing**. You can consider completely opposing views in different sections. If you have a three-part plan, you always have an answer to your argument, because three parts will always give you a majority. If you ask, 'Is the world flat or round?', you could have sections 1 & 3 arguing it is round, 2 that it is flat; all three arguing flat; 1 arguing flat, 2 & 3 arguing round. You always get a majority answer. It is possible to do this with four and five parts – but you have to focus more, and you have to make sure you are not being too superficial or broad.

You may not want to organise your essay into two halves, one for and one against any particular proposition. This 'for/against' type of essay plan may prevent you from developing your own argument, and may confine you to concluding with 'a bit of both'. Doing so much work, and coming out with, 'well…a lot of stuff was happening, so it is all a bit complex' is just not worth it. We need to have clear arguments about real issues and debates, so ensure that however you plan to structure your essay, you achieve this.

5.2 Useful three-part divisions for planning essays:

Here are some useful ways to think about dividing up the thematic areas of investigation for exam and coursework essays. You can mix and match these categories – you do not have to stick to all three as they are grouped together here.

The basic A-level division is often, 'social, economic and political'. It works, but it does not require a huge amount of thought. There are plenty of other ways of organising your evidence. **Remember: you need to have an argument in each section that answers the question, and shows how it answers the question. An argument is not a claim: it is a patient explanation of why the evidence you have found points to the ideas that you think are most important.**

Simplest divisions – here you are allowing the evidence you have collected to dictate your plan. There is nothing wrong with these divisions, but they do make it harder to show your capacity to unite evidence from different sources and on different topics to focus on problems that you have identified.

- Chronological divisions – e.g. late 14th century, early 15th century and 1490s.
- Geographical divisions – northern industrial towns, spa towns and ports; Germany, France and Italy; lakes, fields, valleys.
- Personalities, peoples or individuals – Jan Standonck, Erasmus and Thomas More; Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, Francis of Assisi.
- Scholars – Smith, Johnson and Jones.
- Short-term (1-2 years), medium term (3-8 years) and long-term (8-50 years) effects.

"Remember: you need to have an argument in each section that answers the question, and shows how it answers the question. An argument is not a claim: it is a patient explanation of why the evidence you have found points to the ideas that you think are most important."

More complex divisions – these will make you impose more of an *intellectual* order on your materials, so you will be pulling in bits from here and there, by mixing materials from lots of different sources, and organising them around key themes:

- Movements or social sectors – Sunni, Shia, Sufi; Jews, Protestants, Catholics; military leaders, industrial workers, agricultural workers.
- Environments – factory, home, street; castle, cloister, field.
- Evidential categories – imagery in churches, reports in trials, images in popular woodcuts; statistical data, diary reflections, newspaper reports; children's text books, government policy documents, debates in parliament.
- Subdisciplinary approaches – economic history, colonial history, gender history; religious history, military history, cultural history.
- Historiographies – the Marxist approaches of the 1960s, the post-modernist challenges of the 1980s-90s, the anthropological approach; conservative historians, left-wing historians, non-academic historians; feminist historians; economic historians; American historians. **A big don't**: try not to divide historians into 'historians' and 'revisionist historians'. There was never an 'original' set of historians, and academics are always changing their views on things. Putting every single historian into one of two boxes is way too limiting, and stops you properly analysing their work. If you want to know about a historian, Google them; often you can find reviews of their work on JSTOR and these might give you a clue about what their agenda or approach is.

5.3 Plans Within Plans: Planning Each of the Sections of your Essay

It can be helpful to think of a section/chapter of your project as a mini-essay, and plan it out that way. So it too will have a mini-introduction, different sections on different aspects of the subject of that section, and a mini-conclusion. Once you have your three or four areas, begin the process all over again, and plan each as you planned the whole. It is a good idea to add word counts here – 400 words on x, 200 words on y, 400 words on z. This helps you focus when you write, and get down to the business of arguing and evidencing.

Task: Using your notes and your 'problematic', devise a plan on the 'hand' model – or several plans, if you wish. Then give a brief plan of each section – what will you include and exclude? How will you pull things from different books into the same section? Discuss with your teacher which plan would be best. Do they have tweaks to suggest? Does your discussion reveal a better way of organising it?

6. The Introduction: Make or Break

Now you have a plan. It is time to start working on the essay. Introductions to essays, and mini-introductions to sections within them, are 'make or break' sections of your work. Starting with a bad introduction is like Churchill starting a speech with a burp. If he had done this, I do not think that his speeches would have had the same effect!

Your introductions need to do three big tasks:

6.1 Explain your topic, and why it matters

Explain to the reader why this question is being asked; why the topic is being approached; why it matters.

- 'Education is one of the key features of modern states. It is one of the most hotly debated political topics, and uses a lot of resources. This has been true since the 1870s, when national education policies became the norm. The reforms of the 1870s have shaped the British education system ever since, and in many ways, today's debates are reruns of those of 140 years ago.'
- 'Religion was at the heart of everyday life in the sixteenth century. It was not just a question of faith: it was a way of organising everything from family life, to agriculture, to welfare systems. Therefore, if a government wanted to change religion, that potentially meant interfering in areas of people's lives where government had not previously intervened.'
- 'The Battle of Iwo Jima was in many ways a futile battle. The island was strategically useless to the Americans, and they could have sailed around it. However, the battle had a very significant impact inside the USA. It helped shape the idea of the heroic GI; it helped convince Roosevelt and Truman that the nuclear option might be necessary; and it changed the ways the US military planned to invade the Japanese mainland.'

6.2 Explain your problematic

- 'There are three main areas in which politicians conflicted over education in the 1870s. The first of these was over the Anglican Church, which was hotly contested in Scotland, Northern England and Wales. The second area of conflict was over how schools should be financed, because…'
- 'The royal government in London insisted that English language Bibles were placed in all churches. This was to be a very significant move, because it enabled people to challenge political authorities with Biblical texts they could understand. This political problem was deepened because…'
- 'The image of the GI battling to capture Iwo Jima transformed the status of the soldier in domestic US politics. This was one of the first uses of 'embedded' army photographers in forward positions, and the images they captured were used to…'

6.3 Explain your plan.

- It is sometimes helpful to think of your plan as the '**Three Whiches**'. You will explain which section will tackle which evidence/case studies to solve which problem(s).
- In order to tackle these problems/resolve the question of/understand the impact of…, the first section will discuss/analyse/provide evidence of _____, in order to show/challenge/undermine/reinforce x and y. The second section will turn to….
- 'Section one will look at the Elementary Education Act of 1870, more commonly known as the Forster Act. I will use evidence from parliamentary debates about this act to show why so many Tories opposed it. The second section explores…'
- 'The first section will use popular woodcuts from the 1540s and 50s to show how ordinary people depicted Protestant missionaries, and establish whether their attitudes changed over this time in visual imagery. The second chapter will look at the popular songs of the time, because Duffy, a major historian of the Reformation, has argued that x, but these songs seem to show y…'
- 'The first part will look at how the Battle of Iwo Jima was presented in US newspapers and magazines. This evidence shows that there was not one single image of the GI, which disagrees with the conclusions that Johnson has made.'

Task: Draft an introduction to your essay that outlines these three points in 300-400 words. Remember: this will almost certainly need to be re-written as the essay evolves, and you reach dead ends or find new interests as your research deepens. But it clears the mind to prepare one.

7. Handling Primary Sources

As you start to flesh out your plan, you will need to think about how you justify your arguments and discussions as you move through your essay. The key way that you should do this is through using primary sources. Primary sources are items of evidence that come from around the time you are writing about, and which refer to the things that you are trying to explain. Most students are familiar with a range of primary sources: government documents, speeches, newspaper articles, books, diaries, letters, and such like. But do not think that primary sources are only found in written form: anything from the time can be a primary source, from a building plan to a poster, a hymn to a TV show, a mug to clothing, a photograph to a piece of jewellery. All of these things can be used to show how people thought and behaved, and why they did what they did. All of them are suitable for inclusion in historical work.

Evidence from historians and others will be discussed in the next chapter.

7.1 Analysing Primary Evidence

When handling a piece of primary evidence, it is important to ask some questions about it. Some of the questions are basic, but some are more sophisticated. You need to answer the basic questions for yourself, but may well not discuss all of them in your essay. Instead, you might summarise the answers to the basic questions, and spend more time discussing and explaining your answers to the more sophisticated ones.

7.1.1 Basic Source Questions

The answers to the basic questions need to be noted, but they will not usually form the centrepiece of your discussions. The basic questions are these:

1. Who produced the source? The type of person or organisation produced it is often as important here as the actual individual. So, knowing the author was a monk in the Spanish Inquisition might tell us more about the source than knowing that his name was Diego Vasquez.
2. When it was produced – especially if that matters. So a source about 'eliminating the Jews' written in Vienna in 1938 means something very different to one about 'eliminating the Jews' written in Poland in 1943, because one was written before the Final Solution was even imagined as a possibility, and one was written in the middle of the Final Solution. One is a metaphor; the other a policy.
3. What its goal was – was the source intended to inform, persuade, celebrate, entertain, undermine or simply keep a record? What other goals might a source have? How does the language show this?
4. Who the intended recipient was, and what the producer of the source's relationship to them was – a source intended for public discussion in a democracy is very different to a source intended for the eyes of close allies only; a newspaper article is very different from a plantation accounts book.
5. What was the historical context of the source – a British government source written about Germany in 1944 would be very different to one written in the Cold War ten years later. In 1944, Germany was an enemy, and in 1954, Germany was a key ally.
6. If the source was produced a long time after the event (for example, like many descriptions of the Norman Conquest), does this matter? Is this the only source we have?
7. How sure are you of 1-6? It is fine to speculate, or push interpretations to the limit, or make intelligent guesses, but be clear in your writing if this is what you are doing. Be critical of your own interpretations.

7.1.2 Advanced Source Questions

The basic questions tend to give raw facts about a source. It is important to know the answers to those questions, but they often do not give us the most room for discussion. Many source analyses get stuck at this point, just using the source to extract information – raw data. This would be a very restrictive use of the source, because most readers could probably work this out for themselves, and it is frustrating to have someone tell you something you can see for yourself. Also, this usually does not help you build an argument through an essay. Instead, readers want to see you thinking about the source, and interpreting it for them so that the reader can see how the source backs up your arguments (or answers to the question). This interpretation should remain critical: evaluate openly how confident you feel about reaching the conclusions you have, and if the source could be (or has been) analysed in a very different way. Explain why your way is the most appropriate, acknowledging any weaknesses in your answer.

Here are some more questions that might open up some interesting features in a source:

1. **What assumptions are revealed in the language that the source uses?** Here you are thinking about the ways that the source assumes, for example, certain types of gender relationships, or political norms, or religious beliefs. The source might not make explicit statements like, 'Women are…', 'Socialism is…' or 'Allah is…' – they might frame things so that the assumption becomes evident through interpretation. If a diary entry of a working-class man said, 'I had a huge argument with Mary today about her getting a job. She feels it will help with the children, but I don't think she realises how tongues will wag', then the most important thing here is not that this man had a row! But he shows us his attitudes towards working women (maybe he is neutral – he does not criticise working women directly), and towards his ideas about social status and gossip.

He reveals something indirectly about attitudes to working women, and tells us something about how social pressure worked – but he never intended to do this. Your interpretation releases this information.

2. **What is missing?** What is the source silent about? This can tell us a great deal. For example, if historians say that hostility towards the aristocracy was a major cause of the French Revolution, but evidence of grievances from peasants in the *Cahiers de doléances* in the 1780s never mentions the aristocracy, that is very important evidence in itself, because it may show that historians may be wrong. Silences matter.
3. **How does the author of the source present him/herself?** Maybe s/he does not, or maybe we do not even know who produced it. But often people give clues as to who they are, what their personalities are like, what their worries are, what their goals are, without being explicit. Journalists, for example, often present themselves in their writings as bulwarks of democracy – even when they are following celebrities around, or distorting evidence. 'Self-image' can be very informative.
4. **How does the author of the source describe or 'frame' the problem s/he is addressing?** For example, are they casual about it? Or do they regard it as an urgent crisis? How well do they seem to understand what they are writing about?
5. **How does the author of the source describe or 'frame' the person/people s/he is addressing**? For example, are they deferential or obsequious? Are they confident and forthright? Are they in 'negotiation' mode? Do they think the person they are addressing is inferior, superior or the same as them? Do they make assumptions implicitly or explicitly about their readers, or about the people they are discussing?

A major 'don't' with source analysis: bias. It really is wasted ink simply to point out bias – that the NSDAP were biased against Jews, or that sources from within the KKK are not reliable indicators of what black people were like. All sources are biased in some way – this guide itself will have biases and assumptions in it. Instead of pointing out bias, find something that the source does usefully. So, an NSDAP doctor's opinions of the Jews will indeed be biased against the Jews. But it might tell us something very reliable about medicine in Germany in the 1930s, or the views of that doctor himself, or how much variety there was in National Socialist opinion. Look for what a source can reliably tell you, rather than all the things it cannot.

7.2 Connecting Evidence to Arguments

As you start to reflect on your evidence, and you jot down potential lines of enquiry, you should also be thinking:

- Where does this connect to the problematic? How does it help answer the question?
- Where does this impact on the historians I have read?
- Is this evidence of the same type they use? Does this matter?
- If it is the same type of evidence, does it reinforce their arguments, or call it into doubt?
- If is not the same type of evidence, can it be compared to the evidence they used?

7.3 The Case Study as Evidence

This is not really a primary source analysis, and is covered in greater detail in section 9.3. But sometimes, we need to discuss events, or processes, to show what we are talking about, and in substantial detail. For example, a particular political crisis, or interaction between two people, or the developments in a particular town, might exemplify the thing that we are talking about better than a particular source. In this case, it is really important to do two things in order to present events as evidence:

1. Firstly, you must set up the problem once again for the reader. Something like this might work: 'The conditions which were typical inside a working-class person's house can best be understood in the evidence James Kay Shuttleworth collected during the cholera epidemic in Manchester in 1832. Shuttleworth was a young, non-conformist doctor fresh out of medical school, and his approach broke with tradition in medical practice. It was one of the first general surveys of living conditions, and revealed to the middle classes how working-class people were living. He personally surveyed 1,109 dwellings, and found that in 14% of them….' Here, you are using detailed information from the past, but not primary sources.
2. You need to remind the reader how the case study helps solve the problem(s) highlighted in that section. 'Shuttleworth's experiences were widely discussed. This means that it is incorrect to assume that the conditions of the poor might have been hidden from the middle classes in the industrial revolution. In fact, the publications of Shuttleworth's descriptions sold very well. So we must look for another explanation as to why the middle classes refused to help. Ignorance is an unsatisfactory explanation.' Note how you can come out of the detailed description of a situation (maybe a detailed description that you have assembled from several books) to relate it back to the argument. Doing this stops your work becoming narrative in style, and keeps it in the *critical* zone.

Task: Take a substantial piece of primary evidence, and evaluate which of the questions are helpful. Note down which ones seem awkward or difficult to answer, and try to pinpoint why answering them seems to bring up a 'blank', or feels weird. Gaps, silences and confusions can be really useful because they show that you are thinking about your source, not just reporting on it, so note them down too. Jot down your answers to the questions, noting where you are confident, and where you are taking a risk with your interpretation.

8. Building Blocks of the Essay: Developing your Argument, Building a Paragraph

8.1 Basic Elements of a Paragraph

Evidence on its own shows nothing. For example, the simple fact that John stabbed Dave does not tell us that John is violent or dangerous. Dave might have been attacking John, for instance. John might be completely peaceful except when attacked. We need interpret evidence in certain ways, so that the reader can understand how it helps solve all or part of the problematic, how it should be interpreted, how it relates to the conclusions or observations of other scholars in the field, and how it relates to your argument. A typical paragraph in the middle of your essay will go something like this:

Step 1: Explain to the reader what you are discussing – which issue, topic, or problem. Explain why it matters. Explain how it relates to what you discussed in the previous section/ paragraph (whether it supports or contradicts the argument you made there).

Step 2: Explain what sort of evidence would help solve the problem established in step 1, and if other historians you have read use it or not. If they have, explain what sort of conclusions they have drawn from it.

Step 3: Introduce your evidence with one of the 'Useful Phrases for Opening Paragraphs and Introducing New Evidence' below (please personalise these phrases, and aim for variety).

Step 4: Analyse the evidence using one of the 'Useful Phrases for Analysing Evidence and Ending Paragraphs' below (please personalise these phrases, and aim for variety).

8.2 Useful Types of Phrases for Opening Paragraphs and Introducing New Evidence

As you start each paragraph, or each section, you need to explain what that section will do, and how it relates to what came immediately before it, and how it will help answer the question. You should try to find your own ways of saying the following types of things – do not repeat these in every paragraph!

- An alternative way of showing the importance of this conclusion is to look at evidence from people's diaries at the time. There is not much of this evidence available, and not many historians use it, but it shows… For example, one farmer wrote:
- However, historians taking a Marxist approach, like Sorel, have come to very different conclusions. Instead of looking at evidence from x, they have focused on y. For example,…
- Johnson's argument, however, shows something a little different. She focuses on … because she feels that…
- Evidence from slave-holding cultures, however, challenges this sort of conclusion. The account books of Southern Plantations show… We can see this in…
- This type of argument is supported further by an exploration of religious iconography…
- As discussed above/earlier, this problem is still a contentious one, partly because the evidence is so contradictory. Evidence from x seems to show…, while evidence from y implies…. Turning first to evidence from x, …

8.3 Useful Types of Phrases for Analysing Evidence

You must always analyse and appraise all the evidence that you use, thinking about the questions in chapter 7 (but you do not need to answer all of them every time! Just the ones you consider important). So when you use primary evidence or case studies from the time you are studying, you must always follow it with analysis. Please develop your own style and formulations for saying these, but classic analytical phrases are:

- This evidence shows that… + whole or partial answer to the question/issues/problematic highlighted in your intro.
- This image suggests that… + whole or partial answer the question/issues/problematic highlighted in your intro.
- Evidence like this can be interpreted in two ways. It could show that…. Alternatively, if we viewed it as something more like a personal reflection, it would mean that….
- This data reinforces the argument that + whole or partial answer to the question/issues/ problematic highlighted in your intro.
- This speech undermines the Johnson's argument that…+ whole or partial rejection of another scholar's argument.
- The language in this source shows how… + the question/issues/problematic highlighted in your intro.
- Interestingly, this evidence omits mention of _____, and this is important because + whole or partial answer to the question/issues/problematic highlighted in your intro.
- There are several ways to interpret evidence like this. If you regard it as a piece of propaganda, then it would imply…. However, if we view this more as part of a debate, then it might mean…

8.4 Useful Types of Phrases for Ending Paragraphs

You need to bridge from paragraph to paragraph, and especially from section to section. Please develop your own style and formulations for saying these, but classic analytical phrases are:

- So while the evidence from religious paintings seems to confirm this idea, an exploration of evidence from the economy would seem to undermine it. [followed by new paragraph on economic evidence]
- This conclusion can be further reinforced by turning to the case study of medical practice. [followed by new paragraph on medical practices]
- Johnson's argument is, however, not without its critics. [followed by new paragraph on Johnson's critics]
- The conclusion from economic evidence in the early Renaissance is not entirely convincing, so to explore this issue further I will use similar evidence from the sixteenth century. [followed by new paragraph on similar evidence from sixteenth century]

Task: Plan out a couple of paragraphs from the middle of one of the sections you identified in your overall essay plan. Write them up, showing how you can move from presenting a problem to identifying evidence to solve it to analysing the evidence (one or two examples from different sources) to show how it solves the problem to summing up and moving on.

"We need interpret evidence in certain ways, so that the reader can understand how it helps solve all or part of the problematic, how it should be interpreted, how it relates to the conclusions or observations of other scholars in the field, and how it relates to your argument."

9. Developing Your Argument Using Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are sources not written at the time you are writing about, but by historians (and other scholars) since. Typically, secondary sources are historians' own attempts to interpret both primary sources, and other secondary sources. Historians are always agreeing and disagreeing with each other. The trouble is, they often do not say so directly. The reader has to work out what one historian's conclusions are (or the thing(s) that they emphasise most), and then do the same with another historian, and then compare them. This requires a lot of independent thinking.

It is perfectly possible to score the highest grades without coming up your own arguments or theories or claims. You do not need to discover some amazing thing about the past. It is perfectly reasonable to discuss the ideas of others – in fact, it is to be encouraged! Be on particular look out when reading secondary sources for areas where there are *similarities and differences* between scholars in what they either state is most important or what they focus on, and *how choosing different types of evidence can produce different types of conclusion*. These can be great clues for how to build up a problematic, or an issue to discuss, debate and referee.

9.1 What not to do with historians' words

There is one thing that needs to be borne in mind when reading secondary sources: **They are not evidence. They indicate only that a certain historian has focused on certain things and come to certain conclusions.**

So when you quote the words of a scholar (or someone else with a view about the past) this does not prove anything about the past itself. It proves only what someone thinks about the past *a long time after it happened*.

So steer clear of phrases like:

Hobsbawm states that 'nations were invented to suit the needs of their inventors, the middle classes, and in order to manage the poor.' This shows that nationalism has always promoted inequality.

This source does *not* show this. It shows that, 'Hobsbawm *argues* that nationalism has always promoted inequality'. Working out what scholars are arguing is hard – they typically write in quite subtle, technical ways, so it is hard to see when they are making their own claims. Do not be disheartened by this: it is usually safe to assume that if a scholar states it, and it is an opinion or a conclusion, then they are arguing it. And if one scholar talks a lot about one thing (say, religion and the Spanish colonisation of Latin America) and if another scholar talks a lot about a different thing (say, gold exports and the Spanish colonisation of Latin America), then one is *arguing* that religion is most important, and the other is *arguing* that economics is most important. Very often, a historian's *focus* is their *argument*.

It can be very useful to distinguish between what an author *shows* (with their evidence) and what they *argue*, which is anything they say about the evidence.

9.2 When to quote a historian's words directly

Sometimes, it is tempting to weave an essay out of a patchwork of quotes from historians. After all, they are experts in the field, and it can feel safe to quote freely from them, because then you are unlikely to be wrong.

This is true – you are unlikely to be wrong. But you are also unlikely to be thinking very much, and you are unlikely to be making your own argument. And that means that you are unlikely to be scoring very highly, because you need to show not only that you have a lot of facts, know a lot of sources, and have done a lot of reading, but that you can take all of this, and use it to solve a problem on your own.

So in general, we only quote a scholar directly in two circumstances:

1. When a scholar has said something so complex or so important, in such an elegant or precise way, that it would be foolish to say it any other way. At all other times, we put it in our own words, and include a footnote reference at the end of the sentence (after the full stop) indicating that this idea is borrowed.
2. When we are disagreeing with someone. If we think someone is wrong, we must be just and fair to them, and that means quoting the words in which we think they say the wrong thing, so we do not unfairly paraphrase them.

9.3 When to reference a historian: arguing from Case Studies

While we might reserve quotes from historians (and other scholars) for 'special occasions', there are lots of times we might reference a historian (footnote their work). Very often we will be arguing from case studies, rather than evidence. This means that we will be summarising the work of a historian, or several historians, in order to furnish a detailed set of actions that people took in the past, and draw conclusions from those actions. This type of summary is very useful in an essay – though make sure you always explain why it matters, and how it helps answer the problematic.

So, your essay might be on the Battle for Iwo Jima. Perhaps you are interested in showing how different Iwo Jima was from the Battle of Peleliu, and so you read the relevant chapter of Derrick Wright's book[2], *To the Far Side of Hell: The Battle for Peleliu*. Now, Wright's whole book is about that battle, and you only want the information from it. So you need to discuss Wright's book, but you do not want to quote from it. You want to show that you have looked at Wright's evidence, but you do not want to bring all of that evidence into your essay – after all, it is not your topic. So you might write something like this:

The Battle of Iwo Jima was unique in many ways. This becomes clear if it is compared to the Battle of Peleliu in 1944. The Battle of Iwo Jima was characterised by the use of much new weaponry, like flame throwers, and had a much bigger impact on the general public. But Derrick Wright shows that Peleliu, and the battles running up to Peleliu, were characterised by very out-dated weaponry, by completely different tactics, and hardly any publicity on the home front. He demonstrates that Peleliu was militarily more important than Iwo Jima, but less noticed on the home front. This absence of publicity is important, because it shows how significant the media war was. In many cases, it was more significant than the 'real' war.

So here, you are relying on the conclusions of another historian's research – something that should always earn a citation (footnote reference) but which does not need lots of quotes. It might even be necessary to include more information from a work to build up a really detailed, convincing case study. **You can list several historians in one footnote, if you are pulling in information from several sources at once.**

Whenever you use a case study, make sure you follow it up with an explanation of why it matters, and how it helps solve the issues highlighted in the introduction to the essay, and the mini introduction to the chapter or section. Further guidance on this is offered in section 7.3.

Task: Write one of the paragraphs where you are going to discuss how different conclusions can be reached, or have been reached, by different historians. Develop the paragraph as a whole following the guidelines set out in chapter 9, and use the different historians' own words and/or ideas to show the disagreement or difference in emphasis or difference in evidence chosen. If you notice clusters of historians focusing on/arguing for a similar thing, discuss them as a group. Offer a view on how you could reconcile or referee or evaluate these different views/emphases, based on the research you have done. Discuss this finished paragraph with a teacher.

[2] Derrick Wright, To the Far Side of Hell: The Battle for Peleliu (Marlborough, 2002), pp. 34-36, 48, 59-69. [These numbers refer to the pages, or runs of pages, in which you found the information]

10. Writing a Conclusion

Each section/chapter of your work needs a short concluding paragraph, and the essay as a whole needs a conclusion of about 300 words, broken into a couple of paragraphs. The conclusion is a crucial part of the essay, because it brings everything together for the reader. A conclusion needs to do several things:

1. **Remind**. It needs to explain very briefly how each section of the essay helped resolve some of the issues in the problematic. 'The first section showed why historians have disagreed over the economics of the slave trade, using evidence from account books and shipping registers. This disagreement is important, because it undermines the certainty of many popular explanations for slavery. The second part of the essay…'
2. **Strengths and Weaknesses**. It needs to offer some evaluations of any particularly difficult areas, or areas where doubts remain, or areas of particular certainty. It could do this by referring to the debates amongst historians, or to different types of evidence. 'The doubts which remain about the roles that women played in the US anti-slavery campaigns before 1867 are very extensive. The disagreements that historians have shown seem to depend on the regions of the USA that they focus on. The role of women seems clear in the North-Eastern states, but in the South, it was religious leaders and slaves themselves who seemed to be most influential. Women's anti-slavery voices there are much rarer.' Or alternatively, 'Historians have pursued two very different ways of explaining anti-slavery campaigns in the USA. Some, like Johnson, have emphasised economic factors, while others, like Smith and Abrams, have focused on the moral opposition. However, the overwhelming quantity of evidence that I have found shows that the moral considerations dominated most of the public discussions that took place, while economic factors were mentioned only rarely in the press or in Congress.'
3. **Final Answer**. Then you need to explain how, on balance, the three (or so) different parts of the essay helps provide an overall answer to the question. It is important here to recognise any contradictions or areas of doubt. It could be that the first section supported the idea that women were particularly important in the anti-slavery movement in the USA; the second section undermined the idea that women were very important; and the third section supported the idea that they were important. So, you have some contradictions; but on balance, the weight of evidence supports the proposition. You need to explain how and why you are making the judgement calls. 'It seems that the evidence is not entirely consistent. As section two showed, black male preachers themselves played a much greater role than women in the South. Their influence, though, was mostly confined to the South itself, while Northern women's campaigning was widely reported in Southern newspapers. However, the sheer number of women involved in politics of the Northern states, and their roles in leading political families like the Stuyvesants and the Beechers, place them overall in the driving role of the anti-slavery movement when it was most impactful.'

Note: nothing new may go in the conclusion. If you find yourself introducing something new, and it is important, go back to the body of the essay and make sure that there are several paragraphs that focus on it.

Equally, if you find yourself reaching a conclusion at the end that is not spelled out clearly in a section of the essay, go back and spell it out clearly. Each of your essay sections should itself have a very short, clear conclusion that does this in brief. If there are not several paragraphs on whatever it is that you are discussing in your conclusion, delete it from your conclusion or go back and add it to the essay.

Task: Write a draft conclusion to your work.

11. Presenting Your Work – some suggestions

How work is presented makes a massive difference to the reader. Work which is poorly presented shows that the writer has not made much effort to put themselves into the reader's shoes. At the very least, run spell check and grammar check in Microsoft Word. But there are other things the author can do to make their work more manageable for the reader, and they fall into three main areas:

- Formatting – this helps the reader navigate your work, and recognise the different parts of it.
- Graceful English – this helps the reader understand what you argument is, and allows them to see the research and thinking that you have done more clearly. It also helps you persuade the reader of your argument, and show the 'shades of grey' in your thinking more clearly.
- Referencing – this helps the reader see where you got your information from, and helps you avoid accusations of plagiarism or copying. It also highlights the breadth and depth of your research.

Each of the three areas can be approached with a checklist. Ask yourself: have I checked that I have done each item in the list?

11.1 Formatting

This is all about making your work easily readable. It is not very interesting for writers, but helps the reader considerably. Here are some items for you to run through as a checklist. When the project is nearing completion, spend a couple of hours checking your project follows the 'dos and don'ts' here.

1. Font: Times New Roman throughout. This is a clear, legible, professional-looking font.
2. Size: 12pt for main body, 10pt for footnotes. This makes it big enough to read.
3. Line spacing: double line spacing for the body of the text, single line spacing for footnotes. An A4 page of closely typed materials is very, very hard to read or annotate with marks. Give you teachers space to insert marks and comments.
4. Quotes: Quotes should never be in italics. Quotes should be 'in single inverted commas' if they appear in the run of a sentence. Quotes of over two lines should be on a separate line, indented (block the quote with the mouse, click the indent button in menu), with no quote marks and single line spaced, like this:

> If I were including a quote here, and the quote were quite long, I would indent it. I would also single-line-space it so that the reader could see that this was a singular piece of text, and not part of my own writing. The reader would not have to try to sort out my words from somebody else's in a long piece of prose. It would also show my readers at first glance that I was using a lot of evidence[3].

5. Paragraphs: Leave a blank line between paragraphs, and do not indent the first line of paragraphs. **There should be no paragraphs of less than 6 lines, and no paragraphs of more than 2/3 of a page of double-line-spaced text.** A paragraph is for grouping information together into a rounded package that a reader can manage before moving on. If in doubt, go online and look up the rules for paragraphs.
6. Italics: only two things are put in italic font: the names of books, magazines, journals and newspapers; and foreign words that are not proper nouns. So the *Daily Mail*, not the 'Daily Mail'. And *laissez faire* economics, but Ministère de l'Economie. **Do not put quotes in italics**.
7. Chapters: start new chapters on a new page. Have a clear, bold font for the chapter heading/name.
8. Footnotes & bibliography. These are complicated, and have rules and regulations all of their own. These rules might seem petty and pointless, but they help your reader know exactly where you got your information from, and make your document look professional

11.1.1 Footnotes and Bibliography

Footnotes

You insert footnotes after full stops. In MS Word, click on Insert, then footnote. It will automatically number them.

- **If you refer to, or borrow from, more than one author in a sentence or section of sentences, group the authors into one footnote.**
- **If you refer to, or borrow from, lots of pieces of the same book or books, insert the footnote at the end of the whole section that you are writing, and in the footnote, list all the pages used: pp. 32-38, 63, 189-191, 200. Do not insert lots of footnotes in a row which all refer to the same thing. Cluster.**

For a book, the first time you mention it: Firstname Surname comma *Full Title of the Book in Italics* open bracket Place of Publication comma Date of Publication close bracket p. [to signify the page you got the information from or pp. to signify the pages you got the information from] full stop.

Example:

[11] Matthew Taylor, *The Association Game: A History of British Football* (Harlow, 2008), pp. 26-29.

For a book, the second and subsequent times you mention it: here, we use a shortened form to save words: Surname, First Part of Title, page number(s). Do not use ibid. or op. cit. They really do not help the reader at all, and they do not show off the breadth of your reading either.

Example:

[14] Taylor, *The Association Game*, p. 19.

[3] And of course, there would be a footnote.

For a primary source: Who wrote it, its title, its date, the place you got it from (if a book, then see above; if a website, the URL of the website and the date you consulted it).
Example:
[12] Martin Luther, 'The 95 Theses', 1517. Accessed at http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/luther95.txt, on 17.12.2014.

For any other type of source: for articles, newspapers, films and such like, you can download guidelines for how to reference them from the MHRA free here: http://www.mhra.org.uk/Publications/Books/StyleGuide/ – chapter 11 is the one you want.

Bibliography

Your bibliography lists all the secondary sources you consulted, and any books containing primary sources, in alphabetical order by author's surname. It is formatted slightly differently from a footnote: the author's names are the other way around; there are some comma/full-stop swaps, and there are no page numbers.

Surname comma Firstname full stop. Full Title of the Book in Italics open bracket Place of Publication comma Date of Publication close brackets full stop.
Taylor, Matthew. *The Association Game: A History of British Football* (Harlow, 2008).

For any other type of source: for articles, newspapers, films and such like, you can download guidelines for how to reference them from the MHRA free here: http://www.mhra.org.uk/Publications/Books/StyleGuide/ – chapter 11 is the one you want.

11.2 Graceful English

Graceful English is hard. Nothing says 'I have not really bothered with this' than really ugly English, with lots of nonsense sentences and bad grammar. No doubt you have experience of reading some books which seem very clear, and others that just seem confusing for no reason. This is because of differences in English. Good English wins the reader over onto your side.

There are several strategies you can use here – they all require a bit of work, but not much.

1. Good English scrap book. Start to collect useful phrases in the back of your A4 notebook. If you spot an author changing the subject in a really easy-to-follow way, copy the phrase down. If you spot an author presenting evidence in a really elegant way, copy the phrase down. And so on. Build up a portfolio of: introduction phrases; changing topic phrases; discussing evidence phrases; disagreeing phrases; concluding phrases.
2. Pretentious English. Do not ever use the word 'shall' ('this essay shall argue…') – use 'will'. Do not say things like 'put forth' (that phrase does not exist). In short, do not try to make your work sound grand or intelligent by using strange or clunky phrases. Try to use clear, direct English. Look at an academic writer you admire – borrow phrases and vocabulary from them. You want to avoid writing in 'street English' – but the cure for that is not to write in weird la-di-da English.
3. Clichés. Try to avoid writing in clichés – they irritate the reader, and are usually there to cover up when an author cannot be bothered to explain something properly. So, 'the government was slammed in the press', 'it was a dangerous secret but word got around', or 'the moral difficulties speak for themselves' all use lazy clichés so the author does not have to bother with a proper, clear explanation of what is happening. What responses did the press make and why? How did the secret spread, and amongst whom? What is the nature of the moral difficulties, and was it clear at the time?
4. Contractions. Ban them. Contractions are words pushed together with an apostrophe, like can't, won't, he's, should've. Write all words out in full.
5. The 'Huw Edwards' Test. Huw Edwards presents the BBC news. He speaks very slowly. Make two copies of your work. Give one to a friend, and hold one yourself. Ask your friend to read the work out loud Huw Edwards slow. Do not interrupt your friend, except to remind them every few sentences to slow down (tell them you are going to do this! Most people race over words when they read – this defeats the object). Where your friend sounds perplexed, your teacher will be perplexed. Where your friend stumbles over words, your teacher will stumble over words. Where your English sounds weird, your English is weird. Draw a wavy line under all the problem areas on your copy when you hear them, and then, in your own time, go back and revise them.
6. Four punctuation basics. Grammar sounds really boring, but can make or break a sentence – and it can also make you look careless, or attentive (that means, get you marks, or lose them). There are four main areas where people make mistakes in writing over and over: the comma, the full stop, the apostrophe and the semi-colon.
    a. The Comma. The comma indicates a pause in reading – so if you are doing the Huw Edwards test, and you notice someone making a natural pause and there is no comma, maybe one is needed. But commas change meaning; they are not just decorative breath marks. Brush up on the rules of using commas here: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_06.htm

    And practice using them here: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_45.htm#commaexercise

    Then comb your essay, and ask yourself – does it need a comma here or there? Or, have I put commas in pointless places?

b. The full stop. The biggest problem with full stops is that people use commas instead of them. This is called a 'comma splice' or 'run-on sentence'. You can find an explanation of them here: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_07.htm
And some excellent practice exercises here:
http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_47.htm#commspliceex.
Look at each comma, and see if it should be a full stop. And look at each full stop, and see if it should be a comma.

c. The apostrophe. Plural words do not typically have a comma in them – the Nazi's, the word's, the missionarie's. Only words showing possession or origin have commas: Wales's oldest church; the government's policies; Mark's greatest fears. Plural owners are signified with a comma after the s: the boys' bags were stolen; the ministers' indecision caused a crisis. Check out the rules here: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_10.htm
And practice some exercises here:
http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_52.htm#apostrex1 and here:
http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_53.htm

d. The semi-colon. By and large, unless you can name the rules for using it, do not ever use it. It is often added for the most pretentious and erroneous reasons. Pretentious language is bad enough – pretentious punctuation is worse. If you want to master the rules, you can do so here: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_05.htm
And you can practice them here:
http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_44.htm#semicex

11.3 Pictures

Visual evidence can be very useful – but make sure that it is evidence (with accompanying introduction and explanation), not illustration. A student discussing Lenin, and then inserting a picture of Lenin, is wasting space. It does not matter what Lenin looked like. However, if you are writing about people's behaviour during Lenin's speeches, pictures of the crowds while he was speaking could be great evidence.

Insert pictures last. Microsoft Word does not handle pictures very well, and they tend to jump around. If they do this, put the pictures in an appendix of images. Make sure that your pictures have numbers and captions MS Word will insert captions for you, if you click insert>captions.

The small print

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