

Using a source

Three questions, in this order, before you write anything about it.

THE SOURCE

“Attendance again poor this week. Many of the older boys are kept at home for the harvest. I have spoken to their parents without effect.” — from the log book of a village school, written by the headmaster, 1889.

Nature

What kind of source is it?

A log book kept by law, week by week, not written for anyone else to read.

The kind of source tells you what it was for — and what it was never trying to do.

Weak: “it is a primary source.” That is a label, not an argument.

START THE SENTENCE

Because this is a private record rather than a public one, it has no reason to flatter..

Origin

Who made it, when and where?

The headmaster of the school, in 1889, writing about his own pupils.

He was there. That makes him well placed on attendance — and badly placed on why families made that choice.

Weak: “he was there so it is reliable.” Being present is not the same as being right.

START THE SENTENCE

Writing in 1889 as the headmaster himself, he could see the empty desks, but not...

Purpose

Why was it made?

To record the week for the school managers and the inspector.

A record written for an inspector may understate a problem the writer would be blamed for.

Weak: “it is biased.” Every source is. Say which way, and why that matters here.

START THE SENTENCE

Since it was written for the inspector, he may have played down...

Useful

What can this source tell me about my question?

A source can be useful even when it is unreliable — a piece of propaganda is poor evidence of events and excellent evidence of what its makers wanted believed.

Reliable

How far can I trust what it says?

Ask who made it, why, and what they could actually know. Never answer “it is biased” and stop — every source is, and saying so earns nothing.

Why historians disagree

Four reasons. None of them is that one historian is careless and the other is right.

They had different evidence

One historian wrote before an archive opened. Another had access to it. The disagreement is about what was knowable, not about care.

They asked different questions

One is writing about politics, another about ordinary lives. They emphasise what their question makes important.

They wrote at different times

What a period finds worth studying changes. A book from fifty years ago reflects the concerns of fifty years ago.

They were writing for different readers

A textbook, a museum caption and a research monograph make different choices about certainty and detail.

TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SAME CHANGE

HISTORIAN A

“The change was driven from above: without the new law nothing would have altered.”

HISTORIAN B

“The law only recognised what ordinary people had already forced into being.”

HOW TO ANSWER ON THEM

Say what each one argues

In your own words, in one sentence each. Do not quote the whole thing back.

Say where they differ

Name the point of disagreement. Usually it is emphasis, not fact — both may be describing the same events.

Use your own knowledge

Bring evidence neither of them mentions. This is the part that separates a top answer.

Decide, and say why

Which is more convincing about this question — and what would have to be true for the other to be right?

An interpretation is not the same as a source. A source comes from the time; an interpretation is somebody looking back and deciding what it meant.

The history paragraph

Four moves. The third is the one most answers skip, and it is the one that carries the marks.

1. Point

One clear claim that answers the question asked.

The railway mattered most because it changed who could travel at all.

2. Evidence

Specific and dated. A name, a number, a year — not “many people”.

Third-class fares were capped at a penny a mile from 1844, which put travel within reach of a labourer for the first time.

3. Explain

Link the evidence back to the point. This is the sentence most answers leave out.

Because the cost fell below a day’s wage, travel stopped being something only the wealthy did.

4. Weigh it

Say what the other side of the argument is, and why you still hold yours.

Industry moved more goods and more money — but goods had moved before, and people largely had not.

THE WORDS THAT DO THE LINKING

To develop a point

which meant that · so that · this led to · as a result · consequently

To bring in the other side

however · although · on the other hand · whereas · despite this

To weigh and judge

most importantly · the strongest reason is · above all · ultimately

To link factors together

this connects to · without this · reinforced by · which depended on

WHAT LOSES MARKS

- ✗ Telling the story instead of answering the question
- ✗ “This shows it was important” — without saying why
- ✗ Listing three factors and never comparing them
- ✗ Evidence with no date, no number and no name in it
- ✗ A conclusion that repeats the introduction
- ✗ Writing everything you know rather than what was asked

The seven concepts

Every question you will ever be asked is one of these seven, however it is worded.

Cause

Why something happened.

Usually several causes at once — long-term conditions and a short-term trigger.

“Why did...” · “What were the reasons for...”

Consequence

What followed from it.

Separate the immediate from the long-term. They are often opposite.

“What were the effects of...” · “What followed from...”

Change

What was different afterwards.

Say how much, how fast, and for whom. Change is rarely even.

“How far did ... change?” · “In what ways did...”

Continuity

What stayed the same.

The half students forget. Most of life usually carries on unchanged.

“How much stayed the same?” · “To what extent did ... remain...”

Similarity

What two things had in common.

Compare like with like — the same question asked of both.

“In what ways were ... alike?”

Difference

How they were not alike.

Difference of degree is still difference. Say which kind you mean.

“How did ... differ from...”

Significance

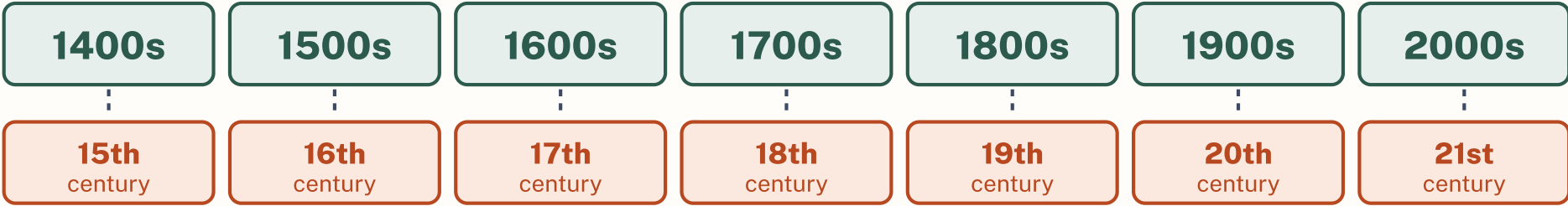
Why it is worth studying at all.

Significance is decided by later people, not by the event. It can rise and fall.

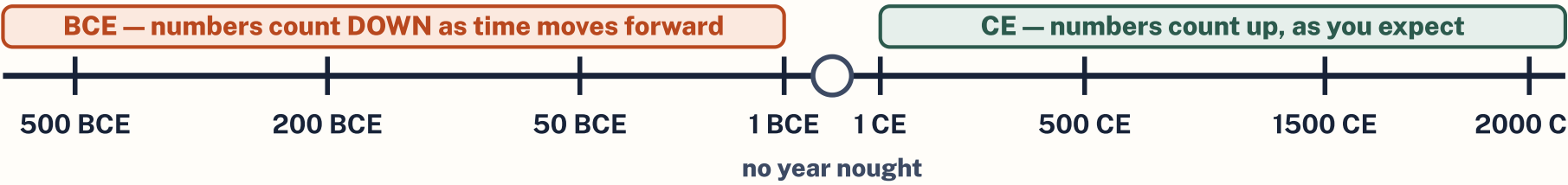
“How important was...” · “Why is ... remembered?”

Chronology

Dates, centuries and the words for talking about time. The off-by-one catches everybody.



The digits and the century name never match — the century is always one higher.



So 200 BCE is later than 500 BCE, and the gap from 50 BCE to 50 CE is ninety-nine years, not a hundred.

Decade

Ten years. The 1930s means 1930 to 1939.

Century

A hundred years — and always one ahead of the digits, because there was no year nought.

BCE and CE

Before Common Era and Common Era. Numbering runs backwards before the year 1.

Period

A stretch of time historians have named afterwards. Nobody living in one knew they were.

Turning point

A moment after which things could not go back to how they were.

Chronology

The order events happened in. Get it wrong and a cause becomes a consequence.

The 1800s are the nineteenth century. Off by one, every time — because the first century ran from the year 1 to the year 100.