

A level History Coursework – case study

Dr David Brown is Curriculum Manager History at The Sixth Form College Farnborough and one of the Pearson Edexcel A level History subject specialists. In this case study he tells us a bit about the opportunities and challenges for his students in the coursework component, how he approaches delivering it, and finally some tips for teachers new to coursework. [@DBrownF6History](#)

The Pearson Edexcel History subject specialists are experienced teachers and examiners who can offer support on any aspect of planning and delivering our History qualifications. If you would like to talk to one of our subject specialists, including David about coursework or any other aspect of GCE History, please contact our subject advisor, Mark Battye, at TeachingHistory@pearson.com.

Interview by Ben Armstrong

What do your students gain from the coursework unit?

They gain a lot from carrying out the coursework properly. One key advantage is that it is a chance to develop proper history skills. They must think about planning out a lengthy essay and developing the ability to write a lengthy essay. They develop the ability to be able to engage with interpretations. They also get to respond to feedback and develop and refine their argument to create a coherent and well-executed piece of writing. The coursework skills that students gain are different to the skills which they need to write under pressure for an unseen question in an exam. The coursework requires them to read the work of academic historians, something which should be done for the externally assessed units, but which is often not because of the pressures of time.

I am often amazed at what my students can produce when they have the time to develop their argument, evaluate their work and develop their explanations, something that they cannot do in the same way with an external exam unit.

What questions do your students choose?

All the students at our centre carry out a coursework that is based on one broad topic of study – the causes of the First World War. In carrying out their research, students then develop their own enquiry within that topic, for example by focusing on the contribution of a particular country or factor. We find that there is a surprising amount of breadth amongst the enquiry titles that our candidates select.

What are some of the challenges of the coursework?

For students, there are several challenges. One is simply that the length can seem daunting at first. Another challenge is to understand and set out the debate by selecting an appropriate set of interpretations. This is a new skill for most students, as they are more used to handling shorter interpretations that have been presented for them. Making good choices from the outset is crucial to creating an effective coursework enquiry. There is also a high level of reading and vocabulary required. However, we usually find that with the time to reflect and develop the work, students produce a higher standard of written work than in an exam.

For teachers, there are different challenges. One can be managing many students in a large cohort. We have a cohort of about 180 students, and this means we must work hard to keep on top of things. Another challenge is knowing the topic well and having the resources to support students. If you don't have the resources, it is important to know where you can direct students to find resources. Also, teachers need to understand the mark scheme and how the bullet points relate to the different parts of the coursework, because only by understanding this can they ensure that they are guiding their students effectively. At the same time, teachers have to be able to balance the coursework, which is worth 20% of the qualification, with the other three components, which are worth 80%.

How do you meet the requirements of ensuring that students have enough resources to use as interpretations and for research?

We have collected a large range of resources which are available to our students. These have been arranged into a massive database which students can use when carrying out research. We include a wide range of different types of resources to allow students the opportunity to explore and find appropriate extracts for the coursework.

Amongst our extracts, we have a broad collection of academic books and articles which contain arguments on the causes of the First World War. All of these are suitable for use as interpretations and students have plenty of choice from which they can pick the three they wish to use. We include articles that have conflicting viewpoints within the collection, so that students can support or challenge their arguments.

The resource bank also contains articles which are about historians' arguments, for example book reviews, articles discussing how research was carried out, and reviews of how interpretations have changed over time. Whilst these are less likely to be chosen as extracts as they do not present their own arguments, we include them with our resources because it helps students to think about how historians carry out their work and to look for possible conflicting lines of argument or challenges to historians' arguments.

What methods and approaches have you found for teaching the coursework effectively?

One key method is clearly dividing the coursework into three sections so that students focus on the key areas. They prepare one section comparing the debate issues between their three interpretations, a section which looks at why the interpretations differ, and finally a section evaluating the strength of the interpretations.

However, one thing that helps is the order in which we cover the coursework. We begin in the summer term of Y12. By that point, we have already covered Paper 1, sections A and B, and Paper 2. We then work on the coursework, before returning to Paper 1 for section C and then studying Paper 3. I know some centres teach Paper 1 section C before the coursework, but we find that, by doing it this way, the skills they develop at analysing the interpretations help with learning to approach this exam skill.

We start with some general teaching on the causes of the First World War, including compulsory readings which we have selected to introduce students to the topic as part of the taught element. This is a way to help students to learn how to read and understand historical writing.

We then task students with doing their own reading from the wider resource bank. Because the bank is large enough, students have the opportunity to explore conflicting interpretations. From what they choose to read, they will select their three extracts. We aim to complete this by the end of the summer term. Over the summer holiday, they then write the first section of the coursework, laying out the debate in their selected interpretations.

At the start of Y13, we then approach the third section of the coursework – evaluating the strength of the argument. We do this before considering why the arguments differ, because we have found that it helps to prevent students from falling into the trap of making weak arguments about schools of historiography, or a historian being valid because the argument matches another historian. Instead, students focus on the validity of the evidence and the arguments presented, for example considering whether the key evidence is convincing or not. Then, having evaluated the arguments, we address the middle section of the coursework, by engaging with why the interpretations differ, including the concept of historiography.

Other useful methods that we use include showing an introduction to a historical work that is from Australian history, nothing to do with the First World War. We look at how the historian has indicated their area of research and the argument that they will be presenting. This helps students to see how historians identify the purpose of their work. It also shows how historians link their work to previous research, which gets students started on understanding the concept of historiography and how it forms the basis of historians' arguments. This is useful as a starting point for the skills needed for section 2 of the coursework.

We have also made short videos on key skills like footnoting which are useful to students when they are writing their essay.

Is there any advice that you would give to teachers who are new to the coursework?

1. Make sure you know enough about the topic. When students indicate their choice of interpretations, you need to know if they will work or not from the outset. If there are too many shades of grey and overlap between views, it makes it hard to assess the debate and limits students' ability to engage with their argument. If you want to explore new topics, make sure you have resources and understanding to support your students.
2. Key deadlines for each section really help. Not only will this help keep your students on track, but it also picks up on ones who are struggling. You can spot who needs support rather than finding late on that a student has not kept up.
3. When we consider the initial compulsory readings during the taught element of the coursework, we find it helps to have a lesson to discuss what they have read. We ask questions like "What did you understand?", "what did you find hard?", "what vocab did you struggle with?", or "what key quotes did you select?" Students have usually read several English books by the time they finish their GCSEs but are not necessarily 'history literate'. They have likely never read a substantial history book. Once we have supported them in reading the initial extracts, we find that most students become more confident in their engagement with interpretations and they make better choices from the extracts that they read.