

Guidance on Edexcel AS History unit 1 essays

In AS unit 1 students must study two topics, each of about 50 years, which are linked by a coherent period or theme. This enables them to gain a broad overview of historical knowledge, with the focus, not so much on the acquisition of detailed information, but rather the ability to explain broader developments and changes. Breadth of study is achieved through chronological breadth across the period, and through considering a range of factors which influenced a particular situation or outcome. Students are assessed by traditional analytical history essays which present historical explanations, assess historical significance and which require substantiated judgement. Each answer is completed in 40 minutes.

Students must know their stuff!

To do well in this unit it is essential that students know the topics well. They must be familiar with the subject matter which is detailed in the specification. These are some useful tips to help build your students knowledge:

- **Students need to know what happened.** They are advised to read a range of books on their topics to help consolidate their overall knowledge and understanding of the period. Teachers can help here by suggesting relevant textbooks and, depending on the topic, there may also be relevant historical documentaries available. Watching historical movies or reading historical fiction can be a good way of developing further interest but students should be able to distinguish which parts are accurate and which are not. Try giving students 'mistakes exercises' containing deliberate errors and ask them to correct them, or put them in the 'hot seat' and get them to tell the class what they know about an event or person in one minute.
- **Students must be familiar with relevant historical vocabulary** and must be able to use it with confidence. So, for example, students studying Russia will need to know and use terms such as *vozhd*, struggle for power, New Economic Policy, 'socialism in one country', 'permanent revolution', triumvirate, Comintern, Sovnarkom etc. It's a good idea to go through relevant books highlighting such terms, and then testing students' understanding through quick tests or quizzes.
- **Students need to know when events took place.** It's very important that they know the order in which things happened as a story doesn't work if the events are in the wrong order. A suggestion for improving performance in this area is to do chronology exercises whereby students are given cards with one event on each card and then have to place these in the correct chronological order. Students also need to know the significance of key dates so that if they are faced with a question such as 'How far did the position of African Americans improve in the years 1945-55?' they are aware of the significance of the two dates in the question, ie what happened in these years?

- **But here's the catch:** just knowing about the topic does not get your students a good grade in the exam! Free-standing knowledge will only get them a Level 2. In the exam, students are presented with a choice of two questions for each topic and they are expected to create an analytical answer in response to one of those questions. This unit tests the application of students' knowledge to show understanding. This therefore means that students need to understand matters such as cause and consequence, why, and with what significance, in order to fully engage with the question.

Understanding the question

The unit 1 exam requires students to apply and synthesise their knowledge and understanding in order to reach a judgement. Students could be faced with several different question types, but the following examples are common formulations of essays.

To what extent was William's experience as Duke of Normandy responsible for the success of his campaign against Harold Godwinson in 1066?

How far was support from the Princes responsible for the spread of Lutheranism within Germany in the years 1517-55?

How far do you agree that terrorism in Palestine in the years 1945-48 was the most important factor in the creation of an independent state of Israel?

Although these questions are on different topics and cover different chronological ranges they invite a similar approach. Students need to consider the importance of the given factor, and consider other relevant factors and why they were important, before coming to a conclusion about which was the most important factor and why.

Students may also have to answer causation or 'why' questions such as:

Why were the weaknesses of the early sixteenth century Church so deeply resented in Germany in 1517?

Why did Britain's involvement in the slave trade grow so rapidly in the last forty years of the eighteenth century?

Why in the 1980s did moral and religious issues gain such importance in US politics?

Again, students can follow a similar approach to answering these questions by considering a range of different reasons why something happened before coming to a conclusion about which was the most important reason and why.

But students need to be careful, as not all questions follow this formula, for example...

To what extent did Edward IV restore royal authority in the years 1471-83?

How far do you agree that the Thirty Years War was primarily a dynastic conflict?

How accurate is it to describe African Americans as second class citizens in the years 1945-55?

Unlike the previous examples, these last three questions do not require analysis of causation. The first requires an analysis and assessment of change, the second and third require an analysis and assessment of key features. In these cases, judgements will be based on selected criteria. However, these questions require students to display the same analytical skills as in other essay types. They could write one or two paragraphs explaining why the statement in the question might be correct. They should then broaden their answer by considering a range of contrary evidence which challenges the question before reaching a conclusion of their own. For example, the last question above could be supported by reference to the Jim Crow laws, conditions in the south, voting rights, economic conditions and educational provision. The challenge could come from the impact of the war, the growth of the NAACP, and the success of its legal challenges to segregation, especially the two Brown judgements. In the conclusion the student should come to a judgement as to the accuracy of the claim in the question.

Questions that do not require analysis of causation but require a judgement need a different approach to planning. Students need to decide which criteria they will use to measure issues such as:

- To what extent?
- How effective?
- How successful?
- How far improved?
- How much change?

These clearly require a different planning strategy from a causal interaction. One way to plan such an essay is to create a scale of 'not very' to 'very' eg

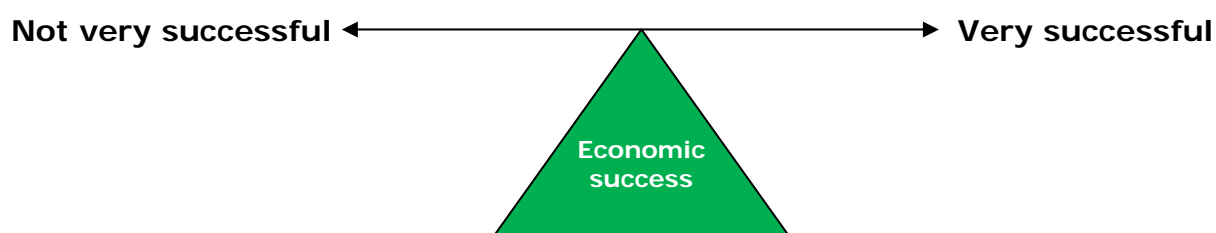
Not very effective ←————→ **Very effective**

or

Not much change ←————→ **Lots of change**

Students then need to identify the criteria they are going to use to measure success or change.

It might help if they think of a set of scales and place each of the criteria at the centre of the scale, eg:



Students can then place evidence either side of the pivotal criteria, depending on whether it supports or challenges success. They also need to decide how much weight to give the evidence in order to justify an overall decision about how much something changed or how effective or successful something or someone was against that criteria – this is evaluation which can lead to a high level response. This process can then be repeated for different criteria, allowing the student to reach a balanced judgement. They also need to decide which of their chosen criteria is most important in explaining how much change or success and why.

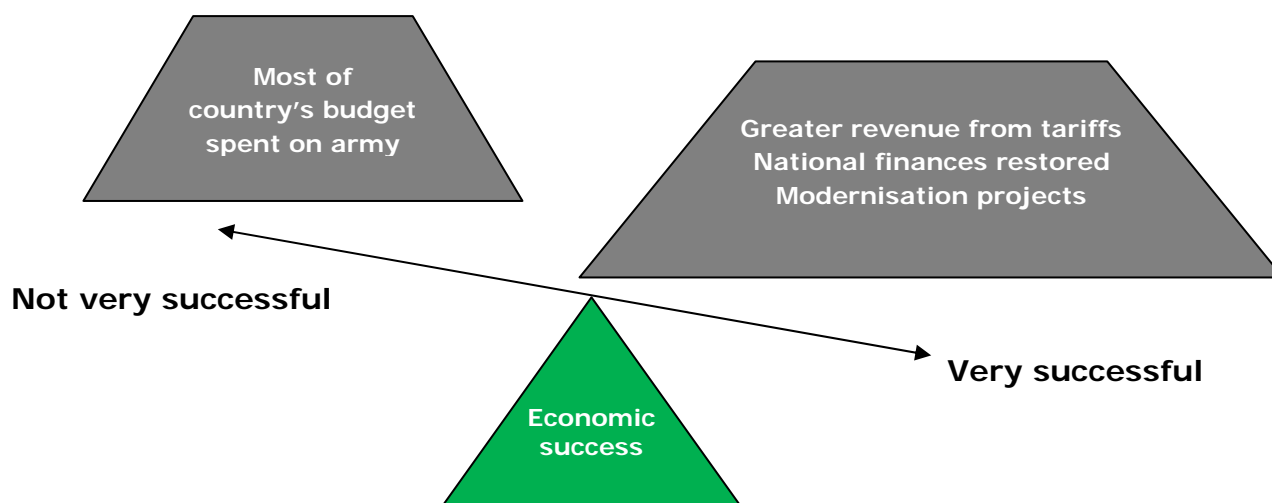
So, for example:

How successful was Chiang Kai-shek in restoring effective central government in China in the years 1926–37?

The question is focused on Chiang Kai-shek's restoration of effective central government in China in the years 1926–37, and requires a judgement on the extent of his success. Criteria which could be used to judge success could be economic success, domestic stability, foreign relations etc. For each of the chosen criteria students need to decide what evidence they can use in order to measure success, then place the evidence on the scale according to how successful.

So, for example, with economic success improved relationships with the rest of the world led to greater revenue from tariffs, the national finances were restored and there is evidence of success in terms of modernisation projects to improve communication across the country and the development of the nation's roads and railways. However most of the countries budget was devoted to the military which means that students would not place economic success to the far right of

the scale, but may still reach the conclusion that Chiang Kai-shek's economic policies were still successful. This process can then be repeated for other criteria in order to reach an overall judgement about 'how successful' and why.



It's a good idea to download all of the past question papers for your chosen topics and get students to identify the type of questions being asked, and then practice planning how they would go about answering each question. A good way of checking whether students understand the question is to give them a question and ask them to write down in no more than 20 words what the question is asking them to do. You could also get students to practise writing essay plans to various questions as this will serve them well in the examination where it is essential that they plan their answer.

Useful tips for students answering essay questions

- **Answering the question is the key to success!**

Students must answer the question set and not the question they wish had been set or the question they practiced the night before the exam. Stress to students how important it is to read the question carefully and make sure they understand what it is asking before they start to answer it. Then they must be able to develop a direct focus and explicit reference to the key elements of the question. If there is a stated factor they must address it, along with other relevant points. They must use dates accurately and they must reach a judgement on the question set. Try giving students a question and get them to write the introduction, conclusion and the first sentence of each paragraph and it has to make sense so that each sentence should link to the question.

- **The points made must stand up!**

Students must provide supporting evidence or else a point becomes simply an assertion.

For example:

In the years after the Battle of Bosworth, Henry Tudor made his rule stronger and was able to present himself as the true king of England.

Further development makes the point stand up.

In the years after the Battle of Bosworth, Henry Tudor carried out a series of actions that made his rule stronger. He backdated his reign, he went on royal progress, he married, he produced an heir to the throne. All these actions meant he was able to present himself as the true king of England.

Try giving your students some relevant claims or assertions and get them to provide supporting evidence to make the point stand up. For example: 'The collectivisation of agriculture brought significant long-term benefits to the USSR'. Here, students might point to the regime's new-found ability to provide a stable supply of food for the towns and for the armed forces, and they could provide evidence of how Stalin was able to use collectivisation to increase grain exports and thus fund his policies of industrialisation. They could also note that collective farms required fewer workers, which led to a massive shift of population from the countryside to the growing factories in towns and cities. And remember that evidence should be relevant, specific, and accurate.

Another exercise you could try with students is the 'Vicky Pollard defence' where students are given an assertion which they have to consider along with other relevant points to reach a conclusion. For example 'Stalin became the undisputed leader of the USSR because his opponents underestimated his abilities.' One student can explain the statement in the question. The next starts with 'Yes but

- **Try not to tell a story!**

Examiners are not looking for a narrative of events, but an explanation of an event or situation. So try to analyse, explain and evaluate rather than telling the story. And remember that a good conclusion does not simply repeat previous points! Students should try to evaluate and make a judgement in their conclusion eg which was the most important factor and why. A good conclusion should reflect the argument made and sustained in the main body of the essay.

One method of getting students to practise evaluation and reaching a judgement eg about the most important factor is through the 'cup final competition'. The aim of this exercise is to encourage students to explain

the importance of various factors, supporting their explanation with some well-chosen evidence. Get them to draw up a random list of reasons/factors eg for the fall of the provisional Government in 1917, such as:

Dual power
 Middle class politicians
 Continued the war
 No land reform
 The Milyukov crisis
 Lenin's return
 The June Offensive
 The Kornilov affair

These reasons can then be paired off and students then have to decide which of each pair is more important in explaining the fall of the Provisional Government, giving reasons for their answer.

Dual power **OR** middle class politicians... is more important because...
 Continued the war **OR** no land reform... is more important because...
 The Milyukov crisis **OR** Lenin's return... is more important because...
 The June offensive **OR** the Kornilov affair... is more important because...

The winning factor from each pair goes through to the next round and the same process is then applied until only 2 factors are left standing. Then students have to repeat the process for a final time to leave one winner which should be what they think is the most important reason for the fall of the Provisional Government. If students feel the outcome is not what they wanted or expected they can return to the first round to fix the outcome they are looking for. This exercise can work with any number of relevant factors and in the exam students will not have time to assess so many factors so you may feel 4 or 6 factors is a more manageable number. You could try doing it as a class exercise and get students to debate the importance of different factors before allowing the class to vote.

- **Good written communication can make a difference!**

Students must write (ie communicate) appropriately using language which is appropriate for an examination. This means using formal language that they would expect to see in a letter or text book. The following is an examiner's nightmare!

After Richard II had stuffed up at Bosworth Feald, Henry Tudor was able to claim the throne. HT was switched on about becoming king and was able to arrange getting hitched to elizabeth of York. EoY was a good choice because by marrying Elizbeth Henery would be able to join the 2 royal houses together and prevent further civil war. The two houses h8ted eachother and this would lead to peace in England.

Abbreviation of names must be avoided and students must also try to spell accurately and consistently and use appropriate grammar and punctuation. Practise giving students paragraphs such as the one below and get them to insert appropriate punctuation. You could also insert typos and see if they can spot them.

After henry won the battle of Bosworth field he immediately marched to London to secure the throne he took control of the tower of London some historians believe that richard iii had not killed his brother Edwards sons Edward and richard and that henry found them alive these historians believe that henry had them killed himself so that they could not challenge him for the throne henry did quickly arrange a marriage between himself and edward ivs daughter elizabeth so that he could join the royal houses of Lancaster and York together.

Mis-spelling of words used throughout the teaching course should be addressed, especially proper names (Mao, not Moa; Reagan, not Raegan; Lenin, not Lennin; Israel, not Isreal). And remember: if the answer is illegible then there is no communication! Quality of written communication can make the difference between a student achieving the bottom, middle or top of a level in the mark scheme. When you consider students have to answer two essays the quality of written communication can affect the overall grade they achieve.

- **Students should be familiar with the exam paper they will be sitting**

It sounds rather obvious but make sure students are familiar with the exam paper they will be sitting to avoid unnecessary mistakes or confusion on the day of the exam.

How long is each exam paper?

How many questions need to be answered?

What does the layout of the paper look like?

What has to be filled in on the cover page (centre number, candidate number, surname and other names)?

Where will they find the questions relating to their particular topics?

How many marks are awarded to each question?

How much time should be given to each question?

How much time should be spent planning their answer?

Where do they write in the exam paper?

Please note that there are two discrete sections in the unit 1 answer booklet - one for each response. Please make sure that your students are aware of the fact that there are specific sections in the answer booklet for each of their answers and that they must start writing their second answer in the space allocated for the second question.

Understanding the mark scheme

Finally, it's important that students understand the generic mark scheme and that they're able to identify the qualities which elicit a particular level of response:

	Level 5	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
Analysis	Analytical	Analytical	Attempts analysis	Simple statements	Simple statements
Focus	Direct focus/explicit issues	Well-focused/issues	Some understanding of focus	Implicit focus	Not focused
Balance	Broadly balanced	May lack balance	Imbalance	Imbalance	Imbalance
Supporting material	Accurate, relevant, appropriate	Accurate, mostly relevant	Accurate, implicit relevance/descriptive	Some accuracy/relevance	Some accuracy/relevance

This can be achieved through a discussion of the mark scheme and exemplification of different levels of response using the exemplars in the various Principal Examiners Reports. Students could be given sample essays as marking exercises or could peer assess each others' essays. Try to get them to think in terms of levels rather than marks or grades and ideally they should be able to identify their own level of attainment. If this is done early on in the course, in discussion with their teacher, then students can be set a realistic target level to achieve by the end of the unit, and this allows both students and teachers to measure progression in a realistic and meaningful way.