

Section 4: Interpretations

4.1 Interpretations: an introduction

What is meant by an interpretation?

First of all, it is important to be clear about what is meant by an interpretation. In the coursework it is the view or explanation of a named historian about an issue, factor or event. It is **not** simply a range of issues, factors or events as you would produce in a period study essay for Units 1 or 2, nor is it the evaluation of different schools of history, such as traditionalist or revisionist, structuralist or intentionalist. In fact, it is worth stressing here that **historiography** is not a requirement of this unit.

Using interpretations

Once you have found a range of interpretations, there are three possible ways you could use them.

- Describe the interpretation, simply summarise or **paraphrase** what the interpretation is saying.
- Explain the interpretation.
- Evaluate the interpretation.

A quick look at the mark scheme for AO3 (see page 12) shows that the high level marks and levels are reserved for the evaluation of the interpretations. It is also worth remembering that you will not gain credit for considering the provenance of the interpretations.

You may already have developed the skill of evaluating interpretations by named historians if you have started

the in-depth element of Unit 3 and the coursework requires the same approach. However you will need to show greater depth of knowledge and understanding in your coursework essay because it is a non-examined unit and you will have all your materials available when you undertake the task.

As with primary sources, your first task is to work out the view of the interpretation you are considering about the issue in your question (this is developed further on page 38).

Once you have done this, you should then think about what knowledge you have that supports or challenges the view in the interpretation (see page 38). If you do not have knowledge to support or challenge the interpretation then you will need to do some research.

Once you have your body of knowledge, you will be able to make a judgement as to whether you think the view in the interpretation is valid or not. The important element when you come to using the interpretation in your topic-based essay will be to link knowledge you have researched to the interpretation and this is best done through evaluative words so that you clearly show that you have assessed the validity of the view and have also satisfied the demands of the mark scheme.

Evaluative words and phrases

Words

However	Illustrates
Conversely	Confirms
Although	Endorses
Opposes	Refutes

Phrases

This is supported by ...

This is challenged by ...

The view is valid because ...

The view is questionable because ...

The interpretation can be criticised ...

The view can be exemplified with the example of ...

On the other hand ...

His argument rests on the premise that ...
however ...

Too much significance is given to ... whereas ...

The historian makes a generalisation that
excludes ...

There is sometimes no evidence to support a
claim, such as ...

Identifying interpretations

A

Read the following three extracts on the Final Solution. Write **I** next to the extract that is an interpretation; **F** next to the extract that explains the role of a factor or issue; and **S** next to the extract that explains the view of a school of history.

Extract A: Geoff Layton, *Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany*, page 263, Hodder Education

For intentionalist historians, Hitler is key to the Final Solution. For some he is seen as having been committed to the extermination of the Jews from an early stage in his political career. This commitment was followed by a consistent gradualist policy which led systematically from the persecution of 1933 to the gates of Auschwitz. In the simplest explanation, they suggest that the Holocaust happened because Hitler willed it.

Extract B: From Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (1996)

The men and women who peopled the institutions of genocidal killing were overwhelmingly and most importantly Germans, this was above all a German enterprise; the decisions, plans, organizational resources, and the majority of its executors were German. Comprehension and explanation of the perpetration of the Holocaust therefore requires an explanation of the Germans' drive to kill the Jews. Because what can be said about the German cannot be said about any other nationality or about all of the other nationalities – namely no German, no Holocaust – the focus here is appropriately on the German perpetrators.

Extract C: Adapted from Geoff Layton, *Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany*, page 244, Hodder Education

An important reason in the development of the racial war and genocide was the invasion of Russia. As with the attack on Poland, SS *Einsatzgruppen* moved in behind the advancing armies. These four special Action units were responsible for rounding up local Jews and Communist party officials. They were then murdered in their thousands in a series of mass shootings. The massacring represented a major escalation of Nazi racial action.

My progress

Select an interpretation, the explanation of a factor and, if possible, a historiographical survey of your question. Jot down the provenance/reference of the extract, for example the title and page number of a book where you have found the extract. Explain which is which so that you are clear on what is an interpretation.

Interpretation

Reference:

Reason:

Explanation of a factor

Reference:

Reason:

Historiographical survey

Reference:

Reason:

4.2 Identifying arguments in the interpretations of historians

One of your earliest tasks will have been to find different views or interpretations about the issue in your question in order to make sure that you have a valid question. Your debate might be a major historical controversy, such as the causes of the Second World War or whether the Holocaust was the result of long-term planning, but it might be less dramatic and be assessing reasons why Japan invaded Manchuria or why Thomas Becket was murdered. You will have done lots of reading and identified a number of different secondary sources. However, you should not be reading these sources simply to find out what happened, but to discover what the historian's view or interpretation is of the issue you are studying. Most books will contain the same information: what will be different is their view, interpretation or even just emphasis on different factors or issues. It is those that you need to identify because they will be what you will evaluate to meet the demands of AO3.

The first thing you will need to be able to do is to identify an argument. It is not simply a case of reading a secondary source to find out what happened. You need to read it with your question in mind and keep asking yourself what the author's view is about the issues in your question.

Having identified the view you should then summarise it in your notes, making sure you follow all the suggestions outlined on page 72 about keeping details of the source in case you need them for future reference.

Think about what evidence the writer uses to support their argument. Make a note of that.

Looking at the larger picture

There is one important word of caution. When you are identifying arguments in different secondary sources and want to use them in your investigation then

remember that simply 'cherry-picking' a word, such as 'powerful' or 'important', or even a short phrase, such as 'Bismarck was a master planner', does not really count as an interpretation. After all, the writer might have said 'The view that Bismarck was a master planner has been discussed by historians and is now seen as an outdated view' and you have simply chosen to focus on the other part of the sentence which offers a completely different view. You would also then find it very difficult to locate evidence from that secondary source to support the argument he was a master planner if actually the writer was arguing exactly the opposite. Therefore, make sure that you consider the whole passage so that you do have a clear and accurate understanding of the writer's view.

An example of the problems caused by failing to look at the larger picture given by the writer can be seen from the following extract about the Pilgrimage of Grace:

The common view sees the rebellion [The Pilgrimage of Grace] as the protest of a whole community – 'northern society' – against the breach with Rome and especially the Dissolution of the Monasteries, against new learning and the King's autocracy, complicated by the social and economic grievances of its various component parts ...

If you stopped there you would get the impression that the writer is arguing that the rebellion was caused by religious grievances, the claims of the king and was made worse by social and economic issues.

The next paragraph continues:

However, the Pilgrimage originated in a decision by one of the court factions to take the battle out of the court into the nation ...

In other words, the real view of the writer is that the cause of the rebellion was court faction, which is then developed.

Using interpretations

Now consider the following question and interpretation.

- 1 Assess the view that religion was the most important cause of the Pilgrimage of Grace.

Source A: G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation* (1977)

Thus the Pilgrimage originated in a decision by one of the court factions to take the battle out of the court into the nation, to raise the standard of loyal rebellion as the only way left to them if they were to succeed in reversing the defeats suffered at court and in Parliament, and in forcing the King to change his policy.

You should be able to summarise the view of the source about the causes of the Pilgrimage of Grace. For example:

Geoffrey Elton is putting forward the view that the rebellion was due to court faction. The faction had lost its influence at court and had decided that the only way to regain its influence was through a rebellion which would defeat their opponents and force the king (Henry VIII) to change his policy. The source is arguing that the rebellion was due to high politics at court and not due to religion.

However, in evaluating an interpretation you will need to go beyond explaining what the extract is saying about the issue in your question. You will need to consider whether the view offered in the source is convincing. Where should you begin? The following table might help you start the process.

Argument in the source	Knowledge I have that supports the argument	Knowledge I have that challenges the argument

My progress

Now find an interpretation for your own topic.

Jot down the provenance/reference of the extract, for example the title and page number of a book where you have found the extract. Then complete the table below.

Argument in the source	Knowledge I have that supports the argument	Knowledge I have that challenges the argument

4.3 Applying knowledge to support or challenge interpretations

The use of secondary sources (interpretations) in your topic-based essay carries the same weight as the use of primary ones. As with primary sources, the higher marks are reserved for their evaluation rather than just using them to support or illustrate an argument. When you use primary sources you could either consider the provenance of the sources or apply own knowledge to them to test the validity of their view. However, with secondary sources there is a crucial difference; you should test secondary sources mainly by applying contextual knowledge to them. Evaluation of secondary evidence should always be approached in a different way from the evaluation of primary sources. Historians are of course part of their time and may well be influenced by all sorts of considerations from personal experience, political views and academic circumstances. However, the main way to assess their arguments is by looking at their arguments and the evidence they use to support them. Assessment of secondary sources should not be based on speculation about the intentions of or influences on the historians. If, say, an avowedly Marxist historian puts forward a view that has been influenced by his or her political views, then the evaluation should focus on why the view and the evidence may not be strong evidence on the basis of contextual knowledge. Otherwise, evaluation becomes mechanistic and formulaic. Not all historians writing in the USA in the 1950s were unreliable because of the Cold War and not all Soviet historians' work is 'wrong' because of their background. The strongest evaluation is supported by knowledge.

This raises the important question of how to apply knowledge to test evidence. You have done this with primary sources in Unit 1. You may also have been doing this with secondary sources in Unit 3 in-depth topics. The same principles apply when you use knowledge in coursework to assess sources:

- The knowledge that you apply to the secondary source must be accurate and relevant to the issue.
- It must be linked to the secondary source to show it supports or challenges the view in the source.
- Large amounts of knowledge should not simply follow a source with no comment suggesting whether that knowledge makes the view of the source more or less valid.
- The link between the secondary source and your knowledge should come through an evaluative word or phrase.

However, as this is not an examined unit and you will have all your books and resources available to you when you write this up it might be expected that the quality of own knowledge you apply to test the view of the source is better than that used for the Unit 3 examination when you do not have your books available.

Although it might appear rather mechanical, it is a good idea to build up a working list of evaluative words and phrases. These might range from 'the view is valid', 'the view is wrong', to words such as 'however', 'although' and 'indeed' (see page 36).

Finding and evaluating interpretations

A

Consider the following question and the interpretation that a model student has found.

- 1 How much support was there for the English Church on the eve of the Reformation?

Source A: A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (1964)

Anti-clericalism had reached a new intensity by the early years of the sixteenth century, attitudes towards monasticism were muted and support for monasteries commanded little support outside the cloister. Clerical power and influence in society was more apparent than was the case in practice. The clergy were beginning to lose their intellectual and educational dominance. They might stand in a favourable position to wage any conflict against the growing threat of the laity and of the State, but their leaders lacked inspiration, unity and loyalty to the supranational concept of Christendom. The English Church remained too full of conflicting self-interest to bring about its own reform.

Having worked out what the view of the source is about the issue in the question, consider the two following attempts to evaluate the view Dickens offers.

Response A

Dickens argues that the English Church on the eve of the Reformation was in a weak position. He puts forward the view that there was little support for monasticism, while clerical influence was also on the decline. He explains this decline as being due to the loss of the educational and intellectual dominance of the clergy. He suggests that the leaders of the clergy were not inspirational and were divided, suggesting that they would be unable to defend the Church should it come under attack. Dickens firmly believes that the Church lacked popular support.

Response B

Although Dickens has argued that the Church lacked popular support, with both monasticism and clerical influence in decline, his view is not entirely accurate. While he is correct to see the numbers entering the cloisters dropping as the monastic ideal lost its appeal, he is far from correct to argue that there was a decline in clerical influence or appeal. Dickens' view ignores the 1520s when laymen entered the priesthood in numbers only ever exceeded in the previous decade and there was little evidence of clashes between priests and laity. It is very unlikely that large numbers of men would join an institution that was in decline and under serious attack from the laity.

- 2 What is the difference between the two responses?

- 3 Which of these responses simply describes Dickens' view? Which one evaluates Dickens' view?

- 4 What evaluative words are used?

- 5 Identify where the own knowledge is directly linked to the source.

My progress

Select a secondary source relevant to your own question. On a piece of paper write a paragraph that evaluates the source, bringing in relevant and accurate own knowledge.