

A LEVEL

Teachers' Guide

HISTORY A

H505

For first teaching in 2015

Unit 3: Some important principles and things to consider

Version 1

In 2016 and 2017, the OCR history subject advisors wrote a series of blogs explaining some key principles and things to remember when teaching, planning and revising Unit 3 of our History A Level. This resource brings together these blogs into a coherent one-stop place for teachers and students alike. The first section explains some key things to remember for the interpretations depth studies element of the unit. The remainder of the resource outlines important points consider in the thematic part of the unit, including an explanation of the skill of synthesis.

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1. The key requirements of Unit 3 depth studies

Here are five key points that are useful for you to remember:

i) The depth studies share content with the themes

The principle of detailed knowledge of a particular issue or event being embedded in a longer study was championed by HE representatives when we consulted on the structure of the new A Level. It's entirely up to you whether you teach the thematic content first and go back and revisit the depth studies, or whether you embed them in your teaching. Some teachers prefer to treat them separately as they form separate sections of the exam; others find the coherence of embedding them beneficial. The particular topic you've chosen may suit a particular approach.

We're often asked how detailed students' knowledge needs to be for the depth studies. The straightforward answer is that no greater depth of knowledge than that found in a standard A Level textbook is expected. But the crucial point is, as always, how this knowledge is used.

The depth study should be giving students the historical context to understand why it is possible for depth study elements to be interpreted in different ways. It is useful to turn the specification content into a series of debates.

To take the depth study on **Malcolm X and Black Power** as an example, the specified content is:

Malcolm X as a civil rights leader:

- Aims and motivations, methods, extent of success, and nature and extent of change in these over time
- Reasons for the rise of Black Power
- Development of the Black Power movement and impact on other civil rights groups and approaches, such as Non-Violent Direct Action
- Extent of success of the Black Power movement and its impact on civil rights for African Americans
- Relationship of Black Power with other civil rights causes, including women and workers.

So the debates that this content raises, relating back to the themes, could be:

African Americans	Trade Union Labour Rights	Native American Indians	Women
Why did the Black Power movement emerge? What were its aims and motives? What was its impact on the Civil Rights movement? How successful was it in improving the position of African Americans?	What was the impact of the Black Power movement on the Labour and Union movement?	What was the impact of the Black Power movement on Native Americans? How far was it responsible for the emergence of Red Power?	What was the impact of Black Power on the position of women?

The ideal outcomes

If students can use their knowledge flexibly to engage with these issues, they will be prepared for the examination. Remember, questions can be set on one depth study aspect (e.g. the impact of the Black Power movement on women's rights) or more than one aspect (e.g. the impact of the Black Power movement on all four groups).

ii) History not historiography

In the exam, students will always be presented with two passages giving different views on an issue. They'll be asked to evaluate the interpretations and explain which are more convincing in explanation of a particular issue by applying their contextual knowledge. This is not a historiography paper, and no analysis of the passages' provenance is required. For example, it may be true that Historian X 'was writing in 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War and was a Marxist, and worked at Berkeley, and supported the sit-ins, and campaigned for Bobby Kennedy, and was an underground resistance group member' but that alone does not make their interpretation any more or less valid or convincing.

It is purely the content of the passages that should be evaluated; there is no need to know the names of individual historians.

iii) Building on earlier units

These skills are a development of the interpretation question at AS, but even if your students did not sit the AS exam, there is consistency of approach with Unit 1 where primary sources are evaluated for what they say about an issue. Thus a sound structure would be:

Para 1: Explain the interpretations in the passages and place them in a wider context.
 Para 2: Apply knowledge to test Interpretation A, showing its strengths and weaknesses.
 Para 3: Apply knowledge to Interpretation B, showing its strengths and weaknesses.
 Para 4: Reach a supported and balanced judgement about which view you find more convincing.

In order to do this effectively, it is really important that students...

iv) Develop an evaluative vocabulary

Students – and sometimes teachers – can be reluctant to criticise historians. But they'll need to for this part of the exam: evaluation, by definition, means attaching a value, and if they use appropriate knowledge to justify their evaluation (rather than asserting), an evaluative vocabulary will be invaluable. Get students used to justifying why this interpretation is:

- right/wrong
- valid/invalid
- limited
- incomplete
- strong/weak
- insightful
- only partially correct
- unconvincing.

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It's a good idea to go through the sample answers available from OCR highlighting evaluative words with students. Also, this will greatly help students to:

v) Reach a conclusion

Ultimately students need to say which passage is more convincing, and following the advice above should lead them to do so. The absolute key thing is that we're interested in which passage they think is more convincing *about the issue in the question* not just the more convincing per se.

2. An overview of the thematic aspect

Most of our A Level history centres are about to start teaching Unit 3, historical themes. Its approach is unique to the OCR specification, and so many teachers new to our specification won't have taught thematic history at A Level before. This unit is worth 40% of the overall grade, so here are five key things to remember to help make it a success:

i) Helicopters not trains...

A staple line from our INSETs, but this analogy works. In their answers, students will *always* need to give an overview of the whole period, picking out patterns and trends – imagine they are in a helicopter hovering above, rather than a train going from one event to the next. These two essay openings sentences demonstrate the difference:

Train: The first major war of this period was the Revolutionary War. There were some important generals, especially Napoleon Bonaparte.

Helicopter: Generalship was always important in war in the period 1792 – 1945 but its nature changed; by the end they were managers of large scale coalitions rather than battlefield leaders.

ii) Synthesis is key

As the 'helicopter' approach suggests, synthesis is the key driver for the thematic essays. The [AS/A Level History A](#) mark scheme shows that a **fully developed synthesis supporting a substantiated judgement** is expected in the best answers. Synthesis simply means the ability to draw out and use evidence from over the period to support an argument. If the argument being made is that lack of unity was a major reason for the failure of opposition in Russia then an example of synthesis might be to compare the divisions of 1905 with the divisions of the whites in the Civil War. There should be regular comparisons and links throughout the answer, and although there isn't the expectation the whole period should be covered in every paragraph, every paragraph should still be making links.

iii) Wear your knowledge lightly...

Accurate knowledge is definitely necessary to support the synthesis, but remember that students will have only 45 mins per essay. So knowledge must be selective and applied flexibly: long examples will restrict the essay's ability to cover the period and show synthesis. It is well worth keeping this in mind in your teaching: consider what candidates are never going to be asked to do (e.g. give a detailed account of every war between 1792-1945 or every Tudor Rebellion in chronological order or the life story of Martin Luther King).

iv) ...but do answer the question set!

'Pre-learned' answers about the period in general won't score highly, and unfortunately some students have fallen down there in the past. Students should read the question carefully and spend five minutes planning. Which thematic factors are they going to discuss (usually three or four), where are the all-important links, turning points etc. Crucially, every question will require a judgement (it's part of the assessment objective): answers must build up to a substantiated conclusion about the issue in the question ('Thus African American leaders can be seen to be only truly important at times when the Federal government was weak'.)

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v) There's plenty of support available

Visit our [CPD hub](#) – you can download last year's pack for free, and book on to a comprehensive INSET programme for this autumn. Join one of our regional history networks (we're having a GCSE focus in autumn, but you can also still ask about A Level), or post on our [social community forum](#).

3. What is synthesis?

This blog focuses on one particular skill, synthesis, vital for the thematic aspect of Unit 3. Synthesis is defined in the dictionary as: *'the combination of components or elements to form a connected whole'*.

The thematic unit

I think it is important to remember that the topic is designed to be thematic. As a result, answers should also be thematic. The skill of synthesis is going to be displayed best in the stronger answers. My colleague Mike wrote a blog on ['Five key things to remember for A Level historical themes'](#) and the skill of synthesis is but a part of this.

As a whole for the thematic essays what our assessors are looking for is:

- an answer that is focused on the precise question set
- a convincing argument – that is one that is supported
- coverage of the period – **BUT Assessors are aware that candidates have only 45 minutes per question and therefore cannot cover everything**
- comparisons across the period and explanation of the comparison – it is not enough to simply say something is similar or different. In what ways and why is it similar or different; there must be explanation
- the last point is what is meant by synthesis, a high level skill
- a thematic approach because that makes it easier to make comparisons than a chronological approach.

Synthesis and the generic levels

If we look at the generic levels for this unit (an example can be found on page 13 of this [sample assessment material](#)), the skill of synthesis begins to appear in level 3, but is undeveloped. It is really in level 5 and 6 where the explanation and development of synthesis becomes key and this blog is really just highlighting that one aspect. Levels 5 and 6 require better focus, analysis BUT also: 'a developed synthesis' at level 5 or 'a fully developed synthesis' at level 6. So some synthesis will take a response to level 5, although very weak synthesis would be left in level 4 as the mark scheme for level 4 states 'to reach a synthesis'. Synthesis is the crucial difference between this paper and the essays on Units 1 and 2.

'But how do we apply that to a history essay?'

Unit 3 of the [A Level](#) requires students to answer **two** thematic questions from a choice of three. The course is arranged thematically, and as a result we expect answers to be thematic in nature. It's really important to distinguish this from period study essays, though many of the skills are similar. A period study essay, say, from example:

'The growth of the police state was the most important reason why Stalin was able to consolidate his power.' How far do you agree?

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On the face of it doesn't look massively different to:

'The Western Rebellion, more than any other rebellion, presented the most serious threat to Tudor government.' How far do you agree?

Ok – the topic is different and I could easily have used a Russia and its Rulers question, but the question stem is the same.

The key is, though, with the first you could conceivably provide a paragraph on why the growth of the police state was the most important and then some further paragraphs on other factors, like Stalin's political skills or economic policies, and then a conclusion.

For the Western Rebellion, what we wouldn't expect to see would be ways in which the Western Rebellion was the most serious threat to the Tudor government and then a chronological run through of all the other rebellions that were either a greater, or lesser, threat.

We are not looking for a chronological run through of important events from X to Y. **We are looking for responses where the candidate shows the ability to draw out and use evidence from over the period to support an argument.** There should be regular comparisons and links throughout the answer as well as explanations of the ways in which the events are similar/different. Each paragraph should deal with a theme related to the issue in the question, within each paragraph, higher-level answers will display synthesis - **the bringing together of material from across the period.**

What does this look like?

The following paragraph (using a fictional question regarding the causes of Tudor rebellion) makes comparisons and links between the rebellions (some could argue that these rebellions were not religious and that is fine) and similarities and differences are explained. We would consider this a good example of synthesis in action!

Religion was important as a cause of rebellion in the period between 1536 and 1569. The three major religious rebellions were all attempts to return England to its religious past and restore some form of Catholicism, seen most clearly in that the Pilgrims, the Western rebels and the Northern Earls all carried the banner of the five wounds of Christ. However, although they all wanted to restore the catholic faith, there was some difference in their causes with the Pilgrimage of Grace a response to the dissolution of the smaller monasteries, whilst the Western rebels wanted the 1549 Prayer book abandoned and traditional services restored which was very similar to the Northern Earls who re-established mass in Durham Cathedral and burnt English service books and bibles.

What does this not look like?

The next paragraph has examples from across the period when religious rebellions took place BUT there is no attempt to make any links between the rebellions and to explain the similarities and differences. It is just a list of religious rebellions.

The main cause of the Pilgrimage of Grace was religious. The Pilgrims wanted monasteries restored and attacked many Protestant writers and complained about men such as Cromwell and Cranmer who had brought in the religious changes in the 1530s. The Western Rebellion was also about religion. The rebels wanted the abolition of the new prayer book and the restoration of the religious position as it was at the death of Henry VIII. The rebellion of the Northern Earls was also religious; the rebels restored mass in Durham cathedral and destroyed the new prayer books.

How does this compare to the legacy specification?

It is important to remember that the depth of synthesis in the new A Level is not the same as on the old. It is, however, vital for the higher levels. A lot of the skills and approaches acquired on the previous specification are, of course, the same. It is also worth noting that the new A Level allows 45 minutes for each thematic answer, whereas the old provided 60 minutes. Why is this important? Well, if you're looking at legacy questions and any associated answer, please do bear in mind these differences!

Other things to consider

Overall, we're looking for answers that are focused on the demands of the question, supported by accurate and relevant factual knowledge, that reach a supported judgement about the issue in the question and demonstrate evidence of well-developed synthesis from across the whole period.

A sample response

If we look at that question of: *'The Western Rebellion, more than any other rebellion, presented the most serious threat to Tudor government.'* How far do you agree?

Then consider this response:

The Western Rebellion of 1549 did present Edward VI's government with a serious challenge, particularly given the context within which it took place. However, in order to assess whether it presented the greatest threat of all Tudor rebellions issues such as the numbers involved, its aims, support and location must be analysed. Given the problems that the government faced in 1549 with widespread unrest and the threat from overseas it was certainly a threat, but as it did not aim to overthrow the Tudors, unlike the dynastic rebellions of Henry VII's reign, it was not the most serious challenge.

Although the Western Rebellion was unable to raise the largest force of the Tudor rebellions, with the Pilgrimage of Grace raising some 40,000 and Kett 15,000, it was still a military threat as is evident from the number of battles, such as Clyst Heath and Sampford Courtenay, that it took government forces to finally defeat it. Other rebellions that required military force, such as Simnel or the Cornish rebels of 1497 were defeated and dispersed as a result of one battle, but the Western rebels proved a much more resilient force and therefore could be seen as the greatest threat.

The threat was even more serious because of the timing. The rebellion occurred at the same time as Kett's rebellion and trouble in some 25 other counties in eastern and southern England. This, along with the government's campaign in Scotland and the threat of invasion from France meant that military resources to put the rising down were limited and this allowed the rebellion to develop. This was certainly more serious than the situation in 1536 when, despite the offer of foreign help to the Pilgrims, the government did not face other unrest. However, although the rebellion was during the minority of Edward VI, the Tudors were more secure on the throne than Henry VII had been in 1487 when Simnel invaded with the help of Irish soldiers and German mercenaries paid for by Margaret of Burgundy. As Henry had only just seized the throne and there was much support, particularly in the north for the Yorkists, the situation in 1487 was a greater threat, coming just two years after Bosworth than that in 1549, as in 1549 the Tudor dynasty had been on the throne for over fifty years.

The rebels in 1549, unlike those in 1487, 1491 and 1553 did not aim to overthrow the monarch and this meant that 1549 was less of a threat to the government. The rebels in 1549 wanted

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the government's religious policy to be abandoned and Catholicism to be restored, whereas Simnel, Warbeck and Northumberland all aimed to overthrow the monarch. Simnel and Warbeck aimed to bring about a 'Yorkist' restoration and had the support of a number of nobles, which was not the case in 1549 when noble support for the Western rebels was absent. In 1553 Northumberland aimed to place Lady Jane Grey on the throne and initially at last had the support of the Privy Council, whereas in 1549 the Western Rebels lacked support from outside the region and did not have the sympathy of the ruling elite or the nobility, with the result that unlike 1487, 1491 and 1553 it lacked credible leadership.

Although the rebellion was a long way from London, which unlike Essex and Wyatt made it less of a direct threat to the capital, it did mean that it took longer for royal forces to reach the area and gave the rebels the opportunity to build up their forces. However, the rebellion was less threatening as not only did it fail to march towards London and threaten the capital as the Cornish rebels had in 1497 until they were defeated at Blackheath, but the rebels were unable to take the county town and regional capital of Exeter. In comparison The Pilgrimage of Grace was a far greater threat as it took the regional capital in the north, York, and this was repeated in 1569 when the Northern Earls took Durham and in 1549 when Kett was able to seize Norwich. Exeter remained loyal to the government throughout the siege to which it was subjected by the rebels, suggesting that they lacked both the numerical strength and support that had enabled the other rebels to take regional capitals. In comparison to both Wyatt and Essex it was also far less of a threat to the capital and therefore the government, remaining as it did in the West Country. Wyatt was able to reach Ludgate within the city and only Mary's speech at Guildhall saved the monarchy from a more serious fate, whilst Essex's rebellion actually took place within the capital.

However, it might be argued that the tradition of unrest in the region made it a serious threat. The area had risen in 1497 in protest against taxation to fund a war against Scotland, asserting its independent nature and how little integration there was with the rest of England. This tradition can be seen in 1549 as the Cornish rebels argued that they did not want the Prayer Book in English as they did not understand it. Despite this apparent divide from the rest of the country, the rebellion was no different from other peripheral regions, such as the north which felt excluded from the growing centralisation and therefore in the Pilgrimage demanded a parliament in the north.

The Western Rebellion, although it proved difficult to suppress was not the most serious threat to the government. In terms of direct challenges to the Tudors the dynastic rebellions were a greater threat, particularly those during the reign of Henry VII when the regime was very insecure, there was still much sympathy for the Yorkist cause and there was recent evidence from Bosworth that the monarchy could be changed by force.

So here, the answer is consistently focused on the question, a range of themes are considered and there is direct comparison across the period. The opening paragraph offers a view and this is sustained through the essay with the conclusion coming back to the argument that the dynastic rebellions were a greater threat. Synthesis is present throughout and comparisons with the Western Rebellion are constantly made.

So what is synthesis?

In essence, students should be making comparisons across the period **and** providing explanation of the comparison. It is not enough to simply say something is similar or different. Students need to be able to demonstrate in what ways and why they are similar or different.

There must be explanation, this is synthesis, and this is crucial for success in this assessment.

4. How best to answer turning point questions

In essence, what many teachers are wondering is summed up by this one query from a Head of History in York – ‘I’ve seen a turning points example which went through different turning points with one paragraph on each turning point, considering themes within each paragraph. Does this sound to you as though it could work without it easily turning to chronology?’ Let’s call that approach (a). The alternative, of course, would be to do the reverse: to structure the answer around themes, and consider turning points within those. We’ll call that approach (b).

So, which approach is right? The answer, as with everything in history, is inevitably that there is no single correct way, but that there are strengths and weaknesses. This blog will consider some of those.

Two points to consider

1. Turning point questions are marked using the same mark scheme as all other Unit 3 thematic questions, and so the key skill of synthesis (read both blog posts by my colleague Grant Robertson, [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#)) is still required.
2. Turning points are entirely a construct of the historian. For Douglas Adams’s ‘time is an illusion. Lunchtime doubly so’, we could have ‘history is subjective. Turning points doubly so’: turning points need to be analysed, explained and justified, and not simply listed and taken for granted.

Whereas the first of those two points would strongly seem to encourage adopting approach (b), the second could arguably be seen to favour approach (a). (It might be worth pointing out at this stage that the answer is not simply to avoid turning point questions altogether: students answer two from three questions, and there could easily be two turning point questions set for their topic. We also don’t think that turning point questions should be seen as any more or less difficult than the other question types for Unit 3.)

Approaches (a) and (b) in action

Let’s consider the question ‘*How far do you agree that the abdication of Nicholas II in February 1917 was the most important turning point in the development of Russian government in the period from 1855 to 1964?*’

Under approach (a), the student will start (hopefully!) with the abdication, and analyse that as a turning point. Subsequent paragraphs will be on other ‘turning points’ e.g. the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, the 1905 Revolution, the October Revolution of 1917, Stalin’s rise to power or Stalin’s death in 1953 and replacement by Khrushchev by 1956, and a conclusion reached about which is the most important. And that would be fine – at least in theory - and with some ifs and buts. Is the student on a train rather than a helicopter (sorry for trotting that analogy out again), in effect writing a Unit 1 or 2 period study style essay – in other words, where is the synthesis? Well it could be there, of course: if having established for a given turning point its relative importance, they also compare with other turning points, in order to maintain the helicopter’s eye view. We’ve seen this done well, but also it can become messy or repetitive, and control of the material is lost. More often, however, synthesis simply isn’t present.

Whereas approach (b) leads more naturally into synthesis. The abdication is considered in terms of its importance for the sub-themes of aspects of Russian government such as (e.g.) reform and repression, the fate of opposition, changes in ideology, the one party state and the absence of democracy across the period. The rest of the essay takes those sub-themes as the basis for its structure, and considers continuities and changes arising from certain events for each. This naturally leads to a conclusion that answers the question, allowing a developed synthesis supporting a convincing and substantiated judgement (just as the [mark scheme](#) requires).

A good opening paragraph

We've recently been demoing sample answers at our network events (if you haven't seen ones for your topic, and you'd like to, please email us at history@ocr.org.uk), and I've been using this opening paragraph as an example of an effective approach to turning points. It's for German Nationalism, and you can tell what the question is, and the approach the essay is going to take from the opening sentences:

It would be difficult to dispute the importance of Bismarck's appointment as minister president of Prussia in 1862. In less than ten years Germany had been unified and there is little doubt that he had a profound impact on the events of 1862-70. However, although he had a considerable impact on the political and military development of Germany, he had far less impact on either its cultural or economic development and therefore, although his appointment was a significant turning point it was not the most important in all areas of German development.

In conclusion

So my advice to that teacher in York was that either approach can satisfy the mark scheme's requirements, but she was correct to have the concern that a turning point by turning point essay runs the risk of an overly chronological, and synthesis-free, analysis. It can be a valid approach, but it is probably not the most natural one for this task, especially given that students have probably only 40 minutes writing time for their essays. It is a thematic unit and it may be simpler to let that fact dictate the approach to turning point essays too.

Further information

We have a number of candidate style answers and examples from previous series that are available on the website and if you have any further questions, please do email us at history@ocr.org.uk or phone at 01223 553998 and we can send these through to you. You can also follow us on Twitter [@OCR_History](#)



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