

HOW TO REVISE IB HISTORY



From the IB graduates at



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Knowing how to tackle a history question even when it is right in front of you can seem tough, let alone trying to prepare for it before you know what it is going to be! How do you fit so much information into your head? How do you know what the examiner wants to see in the answer? How do you fit it all into a timed essay? It is certainly challenging, but good revision techniques can take a massive part of the burden off your shoulders! In this guide we will look at Paper 1 and Papers 2 & 3 in turn. We will focus on two things: ways to help you memorise the information you need with as little stress as possible, and ways to approach the different types of questions you will face. Structure your revision around these two things and you will be putting yourself into the best possible position for your exams!

Paper 1

How to approach it:

The first paper is designed to test your ability to interact with sources you may not have seen before. The real key to success is to understand the specific requirements of each section of the test. Divided into four sections, this test is easy to get a handle on, but hard to perfect, so practice away!

What the test wants you to do:

- The first section asks you to demonstrate the central message of a given source. The key here is comprehension. Just retrieve the information from the source (no background knowledge needed!). Focus on the author's (or often cartoonist's) intention, and what the source draws attention to. So in essence, this is a 'how does this source make you feel and why?' question.
- The point of the second section is to compare and contrast the perspectives of two sources. Usually the sources are only just long enough to include about six points of major similarity and difference, so it's like playing spot the difference between two pictures. Simply read through carefully and circle what you find!



- The third section is an evaluation of the famous O.P.V.L. (origins, purpose, value and limitations) of a source. This will usually be stated in the form “with reference to the source’s origins and purposes, assess the values and limitations of...” So do just that! Make sure you get in
 - at least one value and one limitation, and
 - connect the values and limitations to the origins and purpose (e.g. the source is a unique eyewitness record because the author was the only survivor)

Let’s look at an example of a good OPVL answer and then a bad answer in a paper 1, section III question:

Good: This personal letter from Pvt. Wilfred Owen to his mother, dated June 1, 1913, is a first-hand British soldier’s account of the western front of WWI. Owen’s letter was evidently written to communicate his current situation to a loved relative, and therefore contains many honest impressions of his experiences, but its usefulness as a historical source is limited because soldiers like Owen often felt compelled to reassure relatives of their safety regardless of the situation.

Bad: Wilfred Owen’s letter to his mother, when he was in WWI, is valuable because of what it tells us about life in the war from a soldier’s perspective. Owen was writing to someone he trusted, so everything he wrote in the letter is probably what he actually thought. But it is limited because he may not have trusted his mother... we don’t know how he felt about her, so we should be suspicious of the letter until we know more.





Spot the differences?

1. The second example does not explain who Owen is, or when or where it was written (other than in WWI). It also suggests that the limitation of the source is simply the opposite of its value (Owen trusted his mother, Owen may not have trusted his mother).
 2. The first example, however, has it all! It has the 'who, what, when, where' (origin) of the letter. It shows the purpose (to communicate his situation to a relative) and suggests a value (it contains honest impressions) and a limitation (he wishes to reassure his mother) which are both linked to the letter's purpose (it contains honesty and reservations because of his relationship with his mother).
- The final section of paper I is the long- answer question. This is the only part of the test where you are expected to display moderate outside knowledge and integrate it with your source work. For this section make sure you do the following:
 - Make use of all the sources that you are asked to use
 - Write a brief list comparing and contrasting these sources, using OPVL to decide how useful the sources are and what reservations you might have about them.
 - Write a thesis (argument- statement, see below) and then use the compare and contrast notes to support this thesis.

This is not a difficult paper to understand. To achieve a top- mark answer, you will need to practice answering source- questions so that you can get all the information you need in quickly, particularly for OPVL questions. Try to get all of the OPVL points for a single source into two or three sentences. That said, do not rush: there is time in the paper for all you need to do. The essential thing to avoid is rambling (a massive time- waster)! In a few words: short, crisp, and punchy!





Paper 1 top tips!

- Do practice tests! For Paper I above any other test, this will have a demonstrable effect on your mark with each passing attempt.
- Avoid rambling. Give a thorough answer, but do not feel you need to write down everything you know about a topic!
- Follow the requirements of each section: each stage is designed to test a particular skill! When doing practice tests, make check lists of the things each question asks your for, and cross them off as you do them



Papers 2 & 3

Papers 2 and 3 in IB History follow the same model; they are argumentative essay tests. The question is: how do you prepare for and write a good argument in a history essay, rather than just list points? The truth is of course: with a trusted framework, determined attitude and plenty of practice. We very much hope you are determined and practice, but we are sure that this framework will help.

You will find that, more than in almost any other IB course, historians display a massive variety of approaches to their subject, which can make it difficult to decide what you think 'works' in a history essay. Let's pause for a reality check: as IB students, you do not have to sort out the good, the bad, and the ugly of history writing. You just need to be able to lucidly describe the connections between a set of facts and your own conclusions in a way that seems credible to you and that will appease the examiner.



Your mission therefore is to:

- a. **Find** the facts relevant to your chosen topics,
- b. **Remember** them until exam day, and
- c. **Use** the facts to answer a question critically in an argument.



How to revise it

Know what types of question come up in the exam. Most IB history exam questions are comprised of three basic elements:

- a. **Active Verbs:** e.g. compare and contrast, analyse the causes for, account for the so and so, examine, discuss, to what extent do you agree, and so on.
- b. **Phenomenon:** e.g. the rise to power, the fall from power, the ability to maintain power, the effects of a policy, the overall character of a ruler, etc.
- c. **Subject:** e.g. Mao and Castro, Any two Civil Wars, Stalin, the League of Nations, etc.



Take a look at the questions about your topics on old exam papers and practice breaking them down. Identify their separate elements, and ask yourself what types of questions you feel most comfortable answering.

When you have a sense of what these questions might look like, draw up some of your own based on what you have



studied on your course. (Each with their own active verb, phenomenon, and subject). Now you have an idea of what you will have to tackle in the exam. Time to prepare yourself to answer these questions!

Research:

Hopefully you already have most of what you need to know written down in clear class notes. If you do not have good notes, start compiling some now. The trick to writing really helpful notes is putting information into an 'order.' Compartmentalise your knowledge. It may help to start out with a massive poster, subdivide it into your topics of study and begin to list information under these topics, which will help you to inter- compare.



For example, take a big sheet, give it the title 'Foreign Policy' and then divide it into 'Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, Mao, and Franco.' Then put information under these titles which you can relate across the topics, e.g. were the foreign policies expansionist? Were they military? What were the objectives? Who directed the policy? Were there any policy failure? Etc.

If you need more facts:

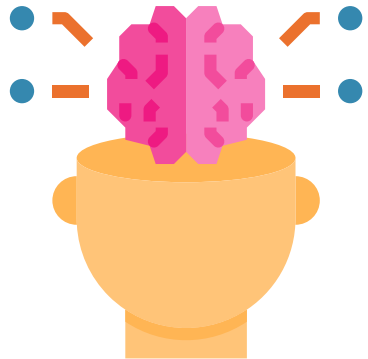
- If getting information from books, use the table of contents to skim through to the information you need. Do not read material that is not relevant to your study.
- If using the web, check encyclopaedic pages to give you an overview of a topic, and then take note of the reference (or 'footnote') for any fact you wish to use. Where did it come from originally? Some references contain hyperlinks to the original source, follow them and skim the source for the information you want using a word search (ctrl- F)
- You can also study in groups of friends, which will help you pool your knowledge. This is a great way to help you remember facts, as it is always easier to remember what you discussed with someone than a line you read in a book.



- Remember: if you hear a fact from someone else, ask them where they got it and follow them up. A simple way to check a fact is to go onto Google Scholar, type in a search item followed by 'Review' (e.g. German Referendum Results 1929 Review). A list of relevant articles will come up. Open the one that catches your eye and do a word search (ctrl- F) for what you want to know (e.g. Referendum Results) and you should be directed straight to the information you want.

Remembering what you've learnt

One of the most daunting tasks in history preparation is the sheer amount of stuff you have to keep in your head until exam day. The good news is that human brains are very good at storing information if you treat them properly. Do not try to 'cram' your head with facts at the last minute. You need to give your brain time to properly retain a piece of information, and you can help it do that by studying creatively:



- Always begin History revision early. Along with other information- heavy subjects like biology or chemistry, this should be one of the first subjects that you sit down to start revising before exams.
- Use what you know already. Get your class notes, any books or articles you are using, any text books or online articles together in one place when you start revising. You don't want to spend ages doing research only to find you already had the information in your notes!
- Be comparative! The more ways you use one piece of information in different narratives, the more likely you are to remember the piece of





information itself! There are different ways to do this, but physically drawing connections really helps. Once you have a group of facts start making diagrams out of them that help establish the connections between them. Also, make timelines! It really helps to contextualise data if you know what came before and after it, and how it 'fits' in history.

- Use images. Association is one of the strongest tools we have for learning new things. Collect a group of images that strike you, related to the topics you are studying (e.g. a photo of Nuremburg rallies) or of something contemporary that reminds you of a theme you are studying (e.g. a photo of protestors or a picture of fighter jets) and use them alongside your studies. The images will be most useful if you deliberately form strong connections between them and facts that are hardest to remember- so use them wisely.

What examiners want...

The examiner is not looking for the most complex answer. Generally, Examiners are fans of simple sentences and clarity. What they like to see (and will reward) is a clear idea that expresses judgement, based on an appreciation of what is being asked, and a reasonable explanation for that judgment. In essence, you need to show what you think and why you think it. Just remember not to use the words 'I, me or my' in your explanation.

Your job then, is to make your timed essay writing as clear as the thoughts in your own head. How do you do this?





The easiest way is to follow this structure, which we will look at in detail:

- Pick apart the question
- Gather your ideas, listing what you know
- Write a thesis statement (see below)
- Write an outline, supporting the thesis
- Base your essay entirely on this outline. Note that the thesis should be included in the introduction. Always!
- Once finished, pass your essay on to friends and teachers for comments. You should ask them specifically to identify your thesis statement and also to number your points. If they can identify all the points, and if they feel the points support the thesis, then the likelihood is that the examiner will too.

What is a Thesis Statement?

The thesis defines your essay. Just a one- or two- sentence answer to the question, everything later has to support this answer, so make sure you know what you are going to be writing (don't change track half way through your essay). So what makes a good thesis statement?

- Identifying the assumptions of the question. An assumption is an idea that the question relies upon.



For example the question: ‘Should law reflect moral values?’ assumes that there is a moral answer to the question, because the word ‘should’ implies a right and a wrong. In fact, a lawyer might say that there is no moral answer: that law does not need to reflect moral values, although many people would like it to.

- Allow space to develop your essay. Some theses are too specific, and leave you no room to argue, and others are too broad – without a sense of direction. The point is to lead into your essay. You should take stock of the facts you have at your disposal, and try to construct a thesis that will allow you to mention them all.
- This is, by far, the trickiest part of a history essay. Let’s take a look at some examples of an introduction to an essay on one question, one containing a good thesis, and one a bad thesis: (thesis underlined)

Question: “The failure to stop Hitler’s aggressive expansionism was the main cause of WWII. Discuss.”

Assumptions: Hitler’s enemies wanted to stop his aggressive expansionism, but failed to do so, perhaps because they were too weak. This aggressive expansionism would inevitably lead to war if unchecked. Other causes of WWII were not sufficient on their own, therefore without aggressive expansionism, the War would not have happened.

Good introduction: It would be a mistake to assume that the policy of appeasement was simply a failure to recognise Hitler’s potential, or that it betrayed a weakness to stop him. Hitler’s aggressive expansionism was tolerated by the Allied powers partly in order to secure a strong military German ‘buffer zone’ between Western Europe and Soviet Russia. In this way, it was the Nazi- Soviet non- aggression pact that represented the real failure to ‘contain’ Hitler’s expansionism, and the main foreign policy cause of WWII.

Bad Introduction: Without Hitler’s unique aggressive expansionism, there would have been no WWII. This is a historical reality which shows the crucial importance of the failure to stop his expansionism due to the policy of appeasement. There are of course many causes of wars like WWII, but few of them are as clear as the failure to stop Hitler’s expansionism, which was within the diplomatic and military power of his enemies.



Spot the Differences?

1. The good introduction makes it clear that the assumptions of the question are not correct. The first sentence outlines why this is the case: there are many perspectives on the foreign policies of the Allies, and the failure to stop Hitler is only one perspective. It gives an alternative explanation (that the Allies wished to contain the Soviet Union), and has a very clear argument to make: that the Nazi- Soviet non- aggression pact was the greatest foreign policy cause of WWII.
2. The bad introduction takes the question at face value. It states opinion (failure to stop expansionism as the main cause of WWII) as fact ('historical reality'). The only argument here is that failure to stop Hitler's expansionism is the clearest cause of WWII, which is very similar to saying that it was the main cause, which would be a re-statement of the question.



The Supporting Argument

This is the majority of the writing of a history essay, and is actually less work than getting an idea across in your thesis. The challenge of writing your supporting argument is to join up ideas to your thesis, and to join each paragraph together.

Let's look at how this can be done in two examples of good supporting points in an argument:



Thesis: The Suez Crisis was a massive overextension of British and French diplomatic power, although they maintained the military capacity to achieve all their aims.

Supporting point: ... British and French policy makers were correct when they estimated that Nasser's pan- Arab movement was not as popular as the Arab press widely reported. But the conclusion that a military intervention in Egypt would likely not be greeted with too much international hostility underestimated the role that third world countries and movements like pan- Arabism were beginning to play in the Cold War. The danger of military intervention driving pan- Arabism further towards the USSR was unacceptable to America in 1956. In this way British and French diplomats had overestimated their role in defining global situations.

Supporting point 2: Not only did the British and French overestimate their role in defining the conflict, but also their financial capacity to carry- through their own policies. American policy toward Egypt was backed by much greater financial influence than either the British or French. In the ultimatum that ended the crisis, President Eisenhower stipulated that if the British and French forces did not back down from the Suez, he would command the sale of all American- held British and French government bonds. This would have bankrupted both European nations, and consequently they were virtually without alternative to acquiesce to America's demands.

Spot the Connections?

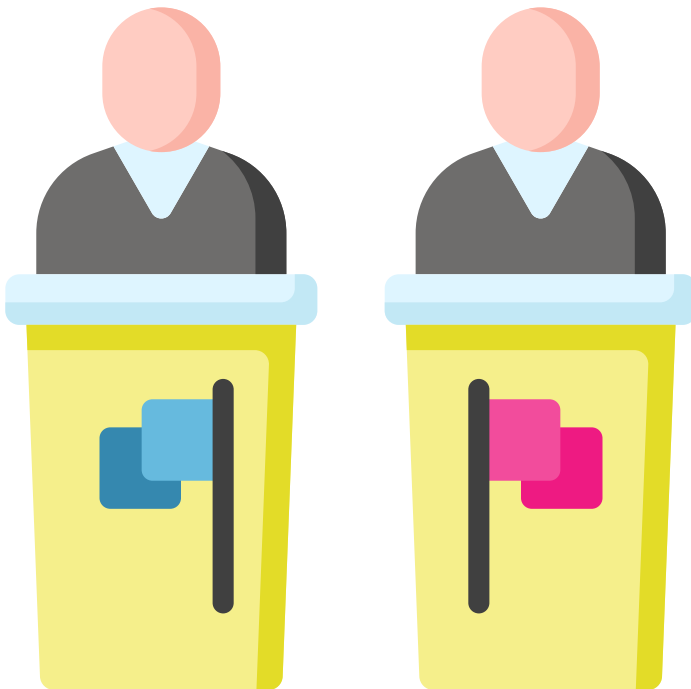
1. The first point (underestimating the role of American power in the Cold War) supports the thesis (that British and French diplomats overextended their power). It outlines what the diplomats thought about their role and in the last sentence states clearly and explicitly that this supports the thesis.





2. The second point begins with a sentence that connects it to the previous point. The sentence starts 'Not only' and then re- states the previous point in brief, and then concludes 'but also' and goes on to define the next point. The situation (the American Ultimatum) is then described, and the final sentence shows that the British and French were without alternative, thus supporting the thesis that they had overexerted their power.

And lastly: Historiography. Marks can be gained in Paper 2 and 3 for showing an appreciation of the wider debates about historical topics. Rather than memorise the names lots of historians, try to commit to memory the issues historians had major disagreements about and why. If you can add a name to the debate, that's great, but that is not primarily what the examiners are looking for.





Paper 2 and 3 top tips!

- Get used to writing a thesis. It is more important that you learn to do this, than that you simply write lots of essays. So, whenever you sit down to write a practice essay, always practice coming up with a thesis first! You can also write outlines with a thesis without writing the essay in full (a good time-saver). A clear thesis and outline is worth much more than an essay that has no thesis in it.
- Make sure you are memorising information in a way which helps you- with picture-association, group discussions, diagrams and so on
- Do not worry about memorising quotations. The only reason you should write a quotation in your essay is if you know it well already and it happens to exactly support a point you are making.
- Remember to identify the assumptions of the question. Whether you accept them or not, you should show that you have recognised that they are there.

I hope you have found this useful. If you'd like any more help with IB History, be sure to check out our Online Private Tutoring with our world class tutors.

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