

HSC Core Section: World War One

Usefulness and Reliability Question

The Question

The question will ALWAYS be written as follows:

Assess how useful Sources X and Y would be for an historian studying _____(specific topic area)_____.

In your answer, consider the perspectives provided by the TWO sources and the reliability of each source

Structure

You will be given TWO sources to write about and TWO pages to answer this type of question. The following suggestion is a guideline as to how to structure your response and is approximate re: length of each section

Source A -Usefulness ½ page

Source A- Reliability ½ page

Source B- Usefulness ½ page

Source B- Reliability ½ page

Perspective must be addressed in your response. It might be discussed in either the useful or reliable paragraph for each source or in both.

USEFULNESS

- **Remember that the Board of Studies expects the source to be useful! Do not spend much time finding reasons why the source is not useful.**
- You must decide on the usefulness of a source **in relation to the specific topic area** of the question asked. This is the part that comes immediately after the words ‘for a historian studying’ in the question (see above)

- If you imagine the topic of the specific topic area of the question as a completed jigsaw puzzle, then you must imagine that the source you are being asked to assess is a piece of this jigsaw. When you assess why the piece is useful you will be able to explain how it fits in to the jigsaw puzzle. This means you can therefore see the full picture of the issue raised in the question when each source is assessed for usefulness.
- For example, if you are asked about changing attitudes of soldiers as the specific topic area of your question, then a source written by a British soldier in 1914 which shows his attitude toward the war helps you to form part of the jigsaw puzzle. A source from a German soldier in 1917 will form another part of the bigger picture. Both are useful in helping you study and understand the specific topic area of changing attitudes of soldiers.
- **The key to getting a good mark in this question is that you make a judgement about how useful the source is in relation to studying the specific topic area of the question. You must back up your judgement throughout your response.**

When discussing usefulness, you must always look at two features of the source;

1. the provenance
2. the content

1. Provenance

It is wise to begin your response with an assessment of the provenance in judging the usefulness of the source re the specific topic area

- *Source A, which is a letter/ extract from a memoir/ novel/recent historian's opinion/ contemporary historian's opinion/speech / photograph/ poster/diary entry/ newspaper article... makes it useful for a historian studying _____(specific topic area)_____ because*
- *Source A is written from the perspective of (the position of the person, and possibly, their nationality) and would therefore be useful because.....(maybe they had access to information...)*

- *Source A was written in which would make it useful because..... (the date is always very important)*

2. Content

Once you have discussed the usefulness of the source in relation to the provenance you will discuss the usefulness of the content of the source. You will make a judgement on how the content of the source gives you a better understanding of the topic being studied and is therefore useful (to you putting together the full picture of the jigsaw puzzle).

- *Source A provides evidence about.....which is useful to a historian studying ___(specific topic area)_____*

Make sure when you are assessing the usefulness of the content that you **DO NOT describe or paraphrase the content of the source.** You must select issues raised in/by the source which help you to discuss the usefulness of the content (in relation to the specific topic area of the question).

Important point to note:

The relative weight of the discussion of the provenance and content will vary from source to source. This means that in some cases you will write less on usefulness of the provenance and more on the usefulness of content and vice versa. You might also write equally on each. You cannot decide until you have the source in front of you!

RELIABILITY

In this paragraph you would discuss what you need to be aware of when using this source (as a useful piece in your jigsaw puzzle) as evidence. There are certain factors that could be considered when judging reliability.

These are:

- Date
- Type of source
- Author
- Audience and therefore motive

When judging a source, there is no need to be absolute. For instance, you should not state that the source is either completely reliable or completely unreliable, and in fact it can be both of these but for different reasons.

Date of source

Begin your paragraph with discussion of the date that the source was written or produced. Often a source written at the time is considered reliable, but just because it was written then does not mean it is more reliable. In fact, sources written or produced after the event/time can be more reliable because the author may have had time to research or investigate an issue further. This is particularly true of historical works where the historian has had the benefit of extensive research. **However**, a source from someone who had no bias and who was there, could be considered very reliable.

Source A was written in and it would seem feasible that the author would have had time to gather a number of sources and different viewpoints on (the topic being studied by the historian) and as such it is reasonably reliable.

Continue your paragraph with discussion of the type of source (which you will find in the provenance) and how this affects reliability. Here are some points to consider regarding reliability when considering each different type of sources

Type of source

Memoir

- The intended audience was the general public and the author intended that their work be published.
- As most memoirs are written to give a favourable impression of the writer this could impact on the reliability
- As most memoirs are based on recollection and memory, this also could impact on reliability

Personal letter

- This is usually not for publication and therefore may not contain exaggeration although it depends on the audience of the letter.
- For example a soldier would write differently to his mother than he would to a friend.

Novel or Poem

- These genres lend themselves to exaggeration
- Novels are fictional so whilst they may be based on true accounts they are not necessarily true stories

Propaganda Posters

- These are usually government propaganda and therefore seek to persuade the public. Posters are a reliable example of government propaganda however, the content/image of the poster is not reliable because it is stylised/exaggerated in order to persuade the audience.

Photographs

- These could have been altered or staged, so it is important to know who took the photograph, for what purpose, where it was published and when it was published.

Newspaper articles

- These are usually seen to be presenting a personal perspective, one which is advocated by the editor of the publication or the journalist

- Therefore, issues to consider are whether it is sensational, presents only one side of the issue or has not been reliably researched

Historical works

- When written after the event these are usually reliable because the historian has the benefit of a great deal of research and scholarship

Government documents

- These do not just inform because they also try to persuade the public of a point of view that the government wanted the public to accept.

Source A, is a letter/ extract from a memoir/ novel/ recent historian's opinion/ contemporary historian's opinion/speech / photograph/ poster/diary entry/ newspaper article... which makes it reliable/somewhat reliable/have questionable reliability for a historian studying _____(specific topic area)_____. This is because...