

Using and understanding historiography is a useful skill, but it can cause problems for students. The following strategies are designed to help students use historiography effectively to enhance their own arguments:

### The essay model for historiography

The best essays are those that lead with a student's own opinion. Essay questions invariably require an answer to a command for evaluation. Typically, these stems include:

- How far...?
- To what extent...?
- How successful...?
- [*quotation*] To what extent do you agree with this view?

All of these essay stems require the student to make a judgement of some kind. Historiography works best when it advances the student towards this judgement. However, use of historiography can simply descend into providing a précis of the views of others. The objective is to make the student aware of the historical scholarship and key questions surrounding a particular period or issue, rather than simply recalling disjointed quotes. But how can this be achieved?

### Suggestions

- Match the quote to the argument. Students are provided with a list of quotes and a list of arguments relevant to their period of study. The task is to match the quote to the argument – ideally more than one quote should match the argument. Whilst a simple task, this does effectively encourage students to consider the proper role of historiography. This can then be extended by simply providing students with an essay and tasking them to find one quote from a historian that will support the argument in each paragraph.
- An effective extension to this task is to complement the collection of quotes with a collection of bare facts. Students are then to match arguments to both facts and quotes. This further reinforces to students that historiography is merely an extension of subject knowledge, both of which should be used in support of a student's own argument.
- Once students are used to considering the view of the historian, they can start integrating them into their own oral responses. Rather than simply asking for a fact that supports a particular argument in a class debate, students might also be asked to name a specific historian who would also support the view.

### The school of history approach

Students often make sweeping references to schools of history, such as 'revisionist historians' or 'Marxist historians'. Examiners reports often comment on the weakness of this approach. One way of dealing with this is to firstly get students to define their terms or schools of thought, then to associate particular historians with them and be prepared to justify their decisions. More effectively, students might be encouraged to avoid this over-generalisation entirely.

- Set an essay which requires analysis of historians' views. Split the class into three groups. Group one should answer entirely by means of historians' assertions. Group two should answer entirely with facts, and group three should answer entirely with the students' own assertions.
- A possible extension to this task is to ask students to combine the three different pieces of work into one effective essay.
- Research historiography online by finding a historical view from each decade/century, depending on period of study.
- Students could also produce book reviews. This does not require students to read an entire book, but instead extract a summary of different historians' views using sites like [www.historytoday.com](http://www.historytoday.com) which themselves include a good range of book reviews.
- Searching for a topic using Google Scholar can be very useful when looking at historiography, as it not only provides a reference to relevant books, but also lists how many other historians have cited this particular work elsewhere. This can be a very quick method in finding a range of historians' views on the same topic/period/event. Showing these search results to students can be a useful introduction to a more focused and effective use of historiography.