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How Much Historiography Should Be Included in Essays?

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John Claydon provides practical guidance on a vexed issue.

One of the biggest problems that all history students face when they write essays is knowing when to refer to different historians and their views. This is especially the case in timed or examination answers when space is short. The problem exists because teachers and examiners, and even the historians who write books and articles, disagree themselves about what is appropriate. This article is intended to make you think carefully about the issue so that you can strike a sensible balance in the essays you write.

What we are dealing with here is historiography, literally the study of historical writing but more precisely the explanations and interpretations of historians. All historical topics have their own historiography, and most history books include a historiographical survey to help readers understand where the book fits in with previous research and writing on the same topic. For history students, therefore, coping with the historiography of the topic is not only a question of what to include in essay answers but what to read about the topic in the first place. Most students should have some knowledge of the views of leading current historians, for example John Guy on the Tudors, Barry Coward on the Stuarts, or Dennis Mack Smith on Fascist Italy, and it obviously helps to have read other authors too. Usually a textbook will be available, but its main purpose is to provide a detailed outline of the chronology of the period not of the historiography, and though there will be references to historians and their views there is not usually space for these to be fully explained. This is where the guidance of your teacher and of those series of books designed specifically to focus both on the content and historiography of a particular topic, such as *Access to History* or *Seminar Studies*, will be valuable.

Defining key terms

During the course of your reading you are bound to come across terms which categorise the broad approaches of historians, such as, for example, 'structuralist' or 'revisionist'. Few students are very confident about these terms, and many find them bewildering or even frightening, because they are rarely carefully explained. In fact they are difficult to define because they were usually devised, almost as terms of abuse, by historians taking a different view. You do, though, need to try to understand them because they help to outline the main interpretations of most topics.

Some terms are definitely worth getting to grips with.

Intentionalists essentially construct a case around the decisive impact of particular individuals or events.

Structuralists (or *Functionalists* as they are sometimes known) react specifically against the intentionalist approach and build up a picture of what happened through meticulous research, often at a very local level, and without any preconceived ideas.

Marxists work from the standpoint that economic forces are the main causal factor in historical change and development. This must be distinguished from the much cruder Marxist angle, used in the Soviet Union and by its supporters until well after Stalin's death in 1953, which employed whatever argument was deemed necessary to meet the requirements of Communist Party propaganda at the time.

Revisionist approaches are relatively recent, dating from the last quarter of a century at most, and challenge what had up until that time been accepted as orthodox or even definite interpretations.

Historiographical examples

The debate between intentionalists and structuralists is clearly highlighted in interpretations of Nazi Germany. The intentionalists suggest that the history of Nazi Germany was basically the deliberate implementation by Hitler of the programme he had devised before he came to power. The structuralists argue that, far from tightly controlling everything that went on, Hitler presided over a Third Reich in which there was a huge degree of independence at every level of administration, and where the guiding criterion was what individuals in any position of authority interpreted as Hitler's wishes.

Seventeenth-century English history provides a good basis for understanding Marxist and revisionist approaches. According to the Marxist interpretation, the basic explanation for Parliament's challenge to the monarchy lies in economic causes, essentially the thwarted political aspirations of the increasingly prosperous middle classes. So, the 'English Revolution', as the overthrow of the king in the 1640s was known, saw the end of the Middle Ages both economically and constitutionally. Revisionism in this context has shown that many of the issues were by no means as clear cut as had been thought. Revisionist historians argue for the existence of strong forces of conservatism in the ranks of Parliament in the middle of the century, and they suggest that the fall of the monarchy was the consequence of short-term causes that could not have been predicted, rather than the outcome of long-term, unstoppable forces. The impact of revisionism on seventeenth-century English history has brought out such an intense re-analysis of the period that a new synthesis yet again is emerging which can best be described as 'post-revisionism', and which has established several key areas of focus for further debate and research.

Using historiography

How can you make the best use of all this information and understanding in essay answers? Obviously many essay titles invite little or no detail on historians' views, but in an examination paper of three or four essay questions it would be unusual for a candidate to do well without showing an awareness of historiographical debate and interpretation, and clear and sensible references will always be rewarded. Some titles provide more opportunities for effective treatment of the historiography than others. Let's try to illustrate this by examining questions on Nazi Germany:

- A question on the rise to power of the Nazis is most concerned with demonstrating the link between electoral success and economic problems and with analysing successive election results, and there is no major historiographical controversy.
- If the question deals with the Nazi consolidation of power, there is an opportunity to discuss the intentionalist v. structuralist debate.
- A question dealing with opposition to Nazi control is most effectively handled by the candidate who is able to include not only that debate but also recent research on the astonishing willingness of many members of the German population to comply with the worst excesses of the Nazi regime.

Questions which deal with major historical controversies, such as the origins of either the First or Second World War or whether there was a revolution in Tudor government, need more precise reference to historians' views, and some examination syllabuses have questions specifically on historiographical issues which require discussion of the relative merits of different approaches to historical study and writing.

Even if you have relevant historiographical knowledge, it is not always easy to know where to use that information to the greatest advantage in your answer, and again it may be best to provide some pointers to help with this by giving examples:

- Sometimes a particular paragraph lends itself to discussion of two sides in a debate, and so references to historians are natural and straightforward.
- Some arguments are reinforced by referring to the evidence used by a historian or an historical approach. This can be very persuasively included in a conclusion to hammer home a point, providing you are sure this strengthens your case.
- If a significant controversy enhances the focus of an essay it might be worth introducing the salient features early on, perhaps as part of the setting of the context for your answer. This can be effectively done in the second paragraph, that is immediately after the introduction.

Avoiding the pitfalls

There are undoubtedly pitfalls which must be avoided when using historiographical material. Essays that are full of quotations from historians, or made up largely of one reference after another to different historians, are not likely to gain a high mark, because there is simply insufficient time to include that information as well as the necessary subject matter and your own views. Worse still, there is a tendency for students who learn quotations to be determined to fit them into their answers, frequently failing to answer the question as a result. There is no point either in quoting the author of a text book source, because the information will not be original and you need to be able to reconstruct the information yourself using relevant supporting evidence. It is certainly an error to quote the second-hand purveyor of an interpretation in a text book when the interpretation is a central conclusion of a notable historian whom you have omitted to mention. Another mistake is to go to the lengths of referring to a historian and his point of view just because you happen to know it, when in fact nothing of substance is added to the point or argument you are making.

So, to sum up, here are some final tips about historiographical references in your essays:

1. Don't be frightened to refer to historians and their views in your essays. All historical subjects have a historiography, and confident awareness of it will definitely enhance your answer.
2. In preparing to write an essay, try to make sure you identify which historical approaches and individual historians have contributed most to our understanding of the topic, and that you can paraphrase their views briefly.
3. Learning quotations is a poor substitute for understanding arguments, and being determined to get them into essays is generally not a good idea.

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