

Sèvres October 2021

The 'how useful' question in  
history: focusing on  
expectations

# So what are our expectations? Let's ask Karl Marx's great great great great grandson



Document B is a cartoon about the League of Nations. As a cartoon it is probably rather biased. The cartoon shows a picture of a bridge with a stone missing. This makes it quite useful...

Conclusion: if you are like Dave Marx, you will probably take a deep breath before marking a DBQ. You will expect a range of vague, speculative and half-baked ideas to jump out of the paper and smack you in the face!

# In a nutshell

## What we want

- DBQs will reflect a synthesis of historical knowledge and source analysis. There will be a continuous cross-reference of the document to a broader context.
- Document analysis is forensic: the writer is able to demonstrate the significance of the date, the provenance, the nature of the document, its content and the intended audience.
- The writer will include ideas about style and tone in his/her analysis
- The writer will understand that each historical document emerges from a very specific political or cultural climate. Focus will therefore fall upon the historical context in which the document was created.
- The writer will rigorously and systematically expose the limitations of the document, through reference to contextual knowledge. This particular skill reflects a developed capacity for conceptual thought.

## What we get

- Documents are viewed in isolation –with little importance being attached to the historical context and its significance.
- Answers will tend to be formulaic ( superficial analysis of date, author, content etc. in terms of utility), but with little depth due to an inability to assess utility in relation to either the question or the historical context of the document.
- A lack of confidence is often evident in DBQs. The writer is unable to delve deeper in his/ her analysis and relies on a one-dimensional strategy. This may result in little or no focus being placed on the limitations of a primary document.
- Content of document may be para-phrased, but with little evidence of careful selection. Students may not therefore grasp the significance of content in relation to the question on utility
- Lack of use of own knowledge reveals a lack of understanding of how an historian uses a document. The students may find it difficult to define what is meant by usefulness

# Aims of this session

- 1. Methodology: Getting our students to reflect on the most fundamental questions about history and the nature of historical sources, before they do a DBQ
- 2. Structure: getting to approach document analysis, planning and writing in a structured manner
- 3. Phraseology: providing students with the academic vocabulary which will help in the production of a coherent response.

Step one: Ask these questions to your students: *What is history? And what do historians actually do?*

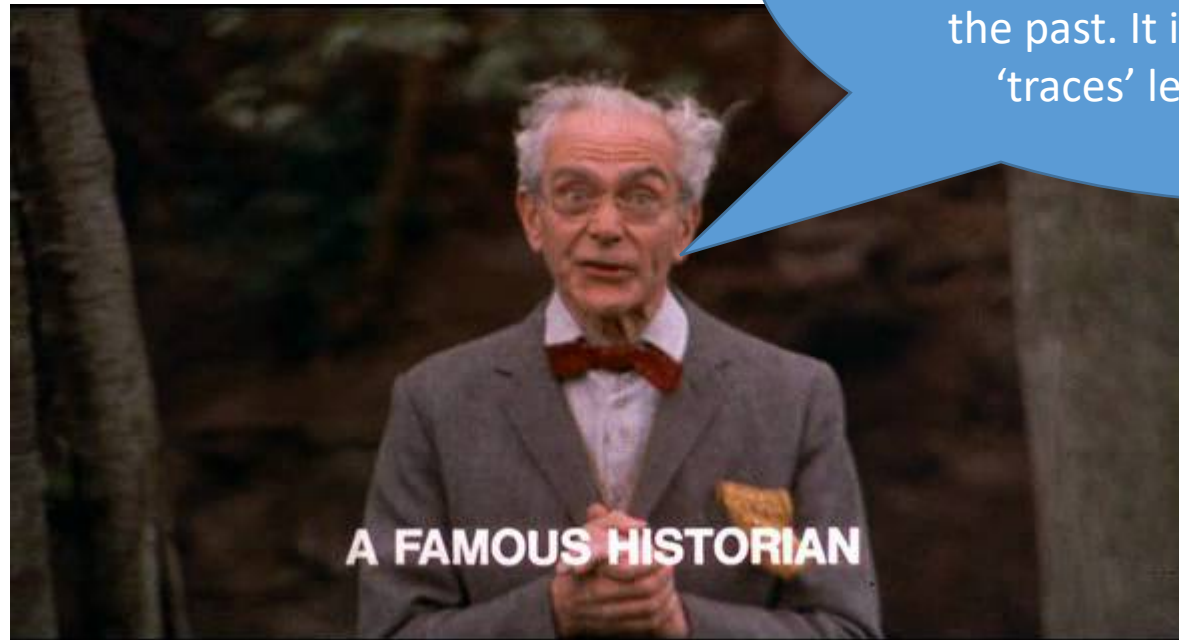
- Example: Get in to groups of three. You are going to write a definition of words which will appear below.

The Past

History

# Answers

The past is EVERYTHING which has ever happened.  
History is not the same as the past.  
History is an interpretative study of the past. It is 'CONSTRUCTED' from 'traces' left over from the past



Historians spend a lot of their lives working in archives, sifting through traces left over from the past. It is by no means a precise science. Sometimes, it feels a bit like this...

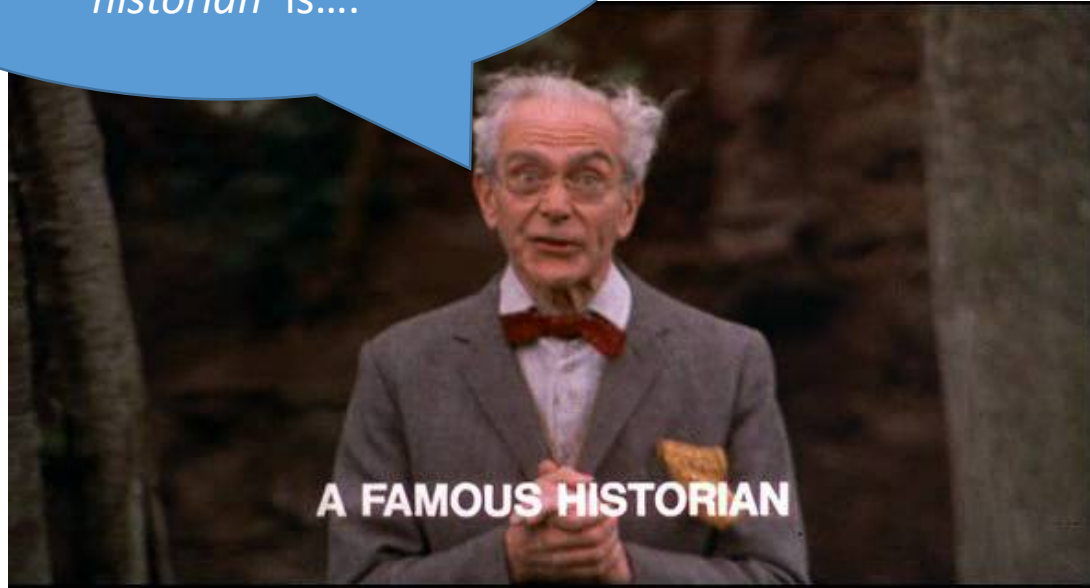
## historians actually do?



Everything on the rubbish tip is 'detritus' from the past. So too are most historical sources. The historian has to carefully select sources which are useful to his examination of the past. Can you think of sources from the past which have been unintentionally preserved (and can be termed 'detritus') and examples of sources which have been intentionally created to be preserved for future generations?

# How would a historian actually know if a document from the past is useful?

Get your students to do this:  
complete this sentence: an  
alternative way of saying 'how  
useful is source A to an  
historian' is....



- *How useful* means how might this document deepen an historian's understanding of the past.
- *How useful* means what are the limitations of the source? What doesn't it reveal about the past?
- *How useful* requires us to ask: What else would an historian need to know to deepen his understanding of the past?



# Structure: Content, Provenance, Purpose, Date

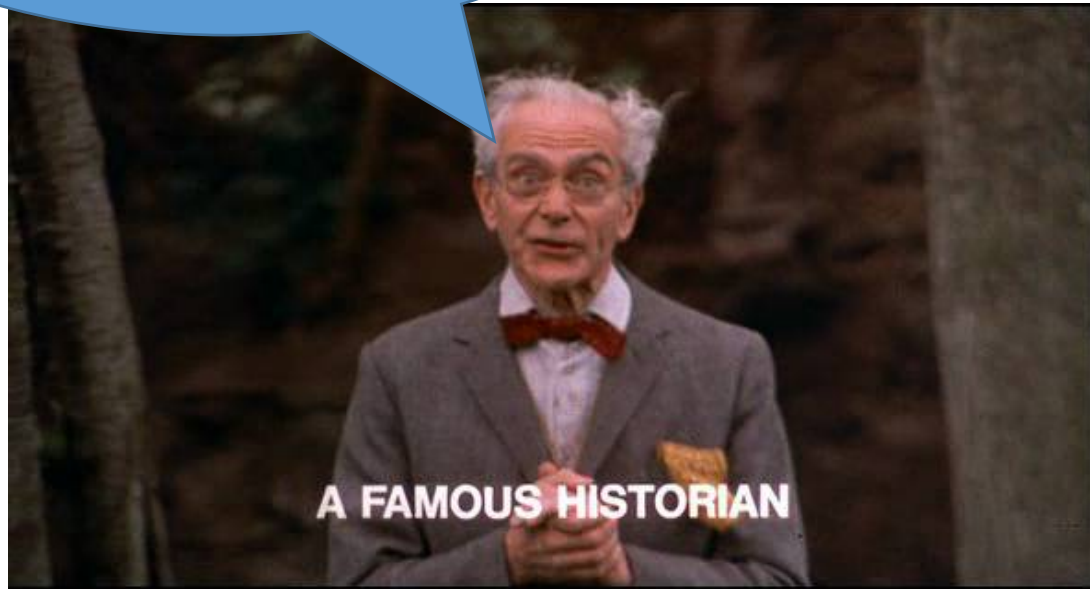


CPPD =Dodgy acronym  
time

 alamy stock photo

# Ask your students: How would a historian know if a trace from the past is useful?

Now ask your students to write a checklist of the questions an historian MUST ask himself when judging the usefulness of the source.

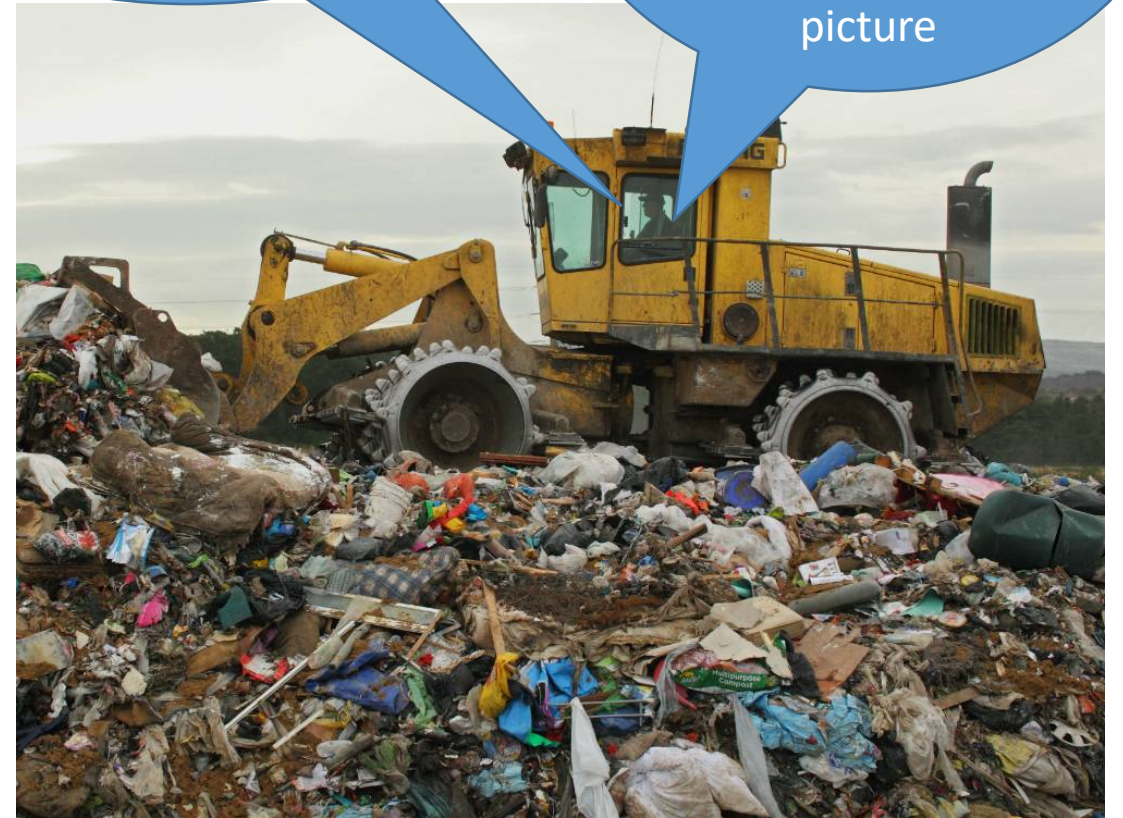
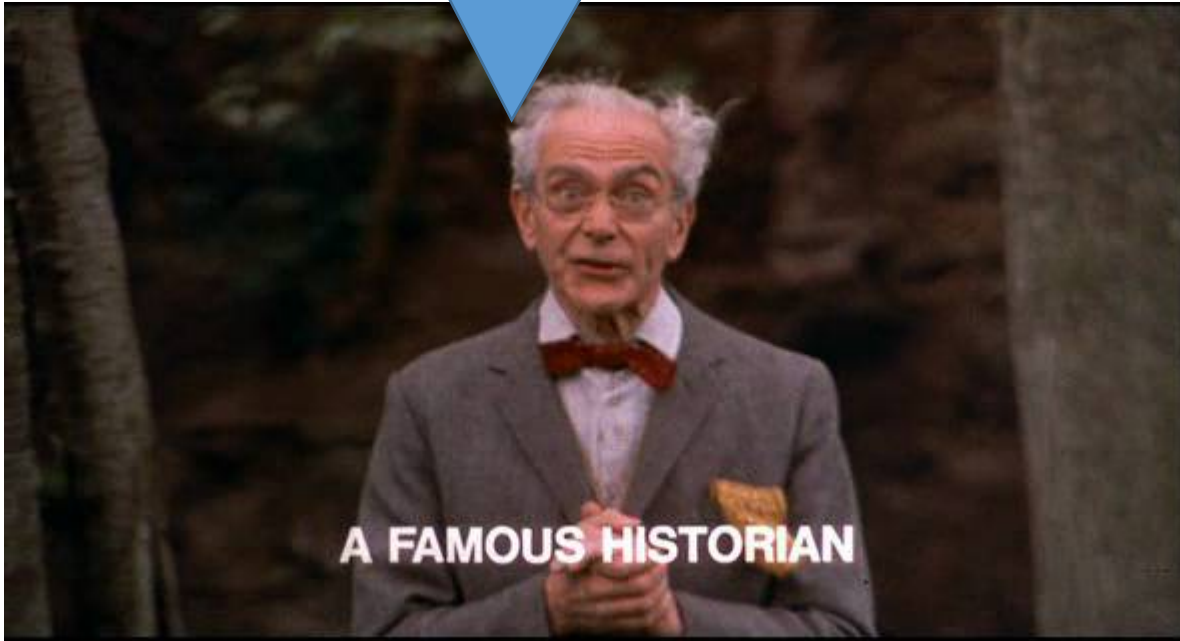


- 1. **C**ontent: what does this source tell me? What inferences can I make? What information is missing from this document?
- 2. Provenance: who is the author of the document?: why might this be significant? How might this limit its usefulness?
- 3. Purpose: what is the purpose of this document? How does this enhance or limit its usefulness?
- 4. Date: when was the source created? In what way does this make the source useful or limit its usefulness?

Ask your students: Imagine you were in an archive sifting through traces from the past in order to examine the Victorian attitudes to the poor. You find a particularly interesting source. What would your response be?

Response A: Yippee!  
This source is 100%  
useful to me. Now I  
know  
EVERYTHING!!!!!!

Response B: This  
source is very  
significant, but it is  
only useful –to an  
extent...it doesn't  
give me the big  
picture



**Ask your students: A or B? Vote now! Be prepared to explain why you chose either A or B.**

# Conclusion: What do we mean by usefulness?

- No source is 100% useful. EVERY source has its limitations. This is because no source provides us with the whole picture of the past (remember: the past is everything that happened. History is an interpretation of the past, constructed from traces)
- In order to judge usefulness we need to consider the strengths of the source AND its limitations.
- We do this by considering 4 key questions... (what were they again?)

# Phraseology: Getting our students to write a model answer: 4 useful techniques

- 1. The Heavy scaffolding Technique (see handout)**
2. write your own model 8 mark DBQ answer
3. Get students to identify all of the features of the answer (phraseology, structure, order of points, balance of document analysis and own knowledge etc. etc.)
4. Take the sheet away from them and get them in groups to try to replicate your answer from memory
5. Watch them squabble amongst themselves as they try to remember the academic phrases, which give the answer its flow.

# Phraseology: Getting our students to write a model answer: 4 useful take-away techniques

- 2. Write a model terrible answer (see handout) and get students to deconstruct the key features

# Phraseology: Getting our students to write a model answer: 4 useful techniques

- 3. Provide a template for making structured inferences from documents



How is it *limited* in its usefulness when studying the Treaty of Versailles?

What is useful about this for someone studying the Treaty of Versailles?

What suggestions/inferences can be made?

Label the source with what you can see...





# Phraseology: Getting our students to write a model answer: 4 useful techniques

- 4. Provide students with the vocabulary which facilitates a well written response (see handout)