HELPING HISTORY STUDENTS COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY:

DEVELOPING A 'CAN DO' MENTALITY

PART 2:

The Thinking Task – Helping students with 'how to' identify and construct arguments

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a) Introduction – the importance of not writing too soon

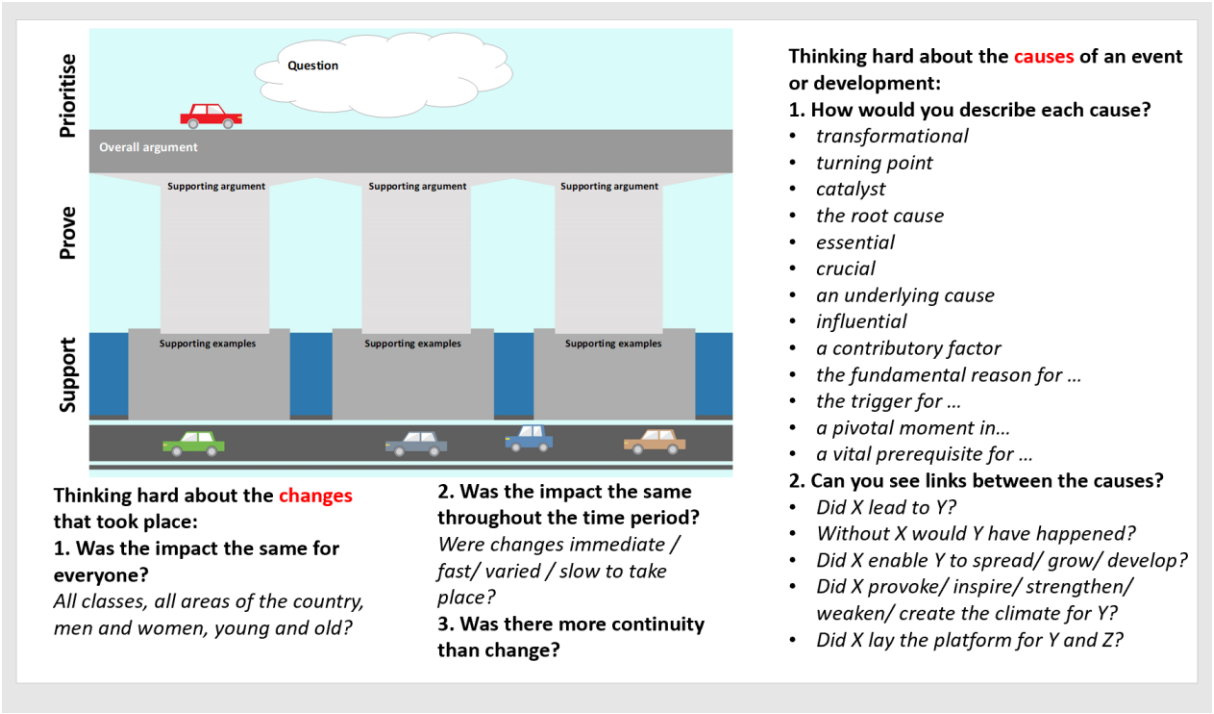
There is currently a lot of focus within the history teaching community on how to help students build knowledge of the key historical events. In addition, many departments have produced tools that help students structure their written responses and improve their historical vocabulary. However, moving from knowledge building tasks straight into written tasks is problematic as it misses out a vitally important stage in communicating 'good' history – the argument construction phase. Getting students to 'think hard', discuss and debate before they write is crucial. Sometimes teachers can rush or miss out the 'argument construction' phase and, as a result, students produce work that is rich in facts and historical detail but fails to build a case and sustain an argument. If we want our students' writing to demonstrate complex thinking and present coherent, nuanced and well thought through historical explanations we need to provide challenging activities and question prompts that will help them develop these abilities. Students also need to be explicitly aware of this phase of learning i.e. that they are creating arguments as a stepping stone to effective communication and see the difference it makes to their writing (and to their grades!). Otherwise students will not move easily beyond relatively low-level writing.

In addition, we need to help students see that history as a subject revolves around the construction of arguments. We need to make sure our students can recognise disputing voices and also identify the ways in which historians build and support their arguments. We must not pretend that there are not different

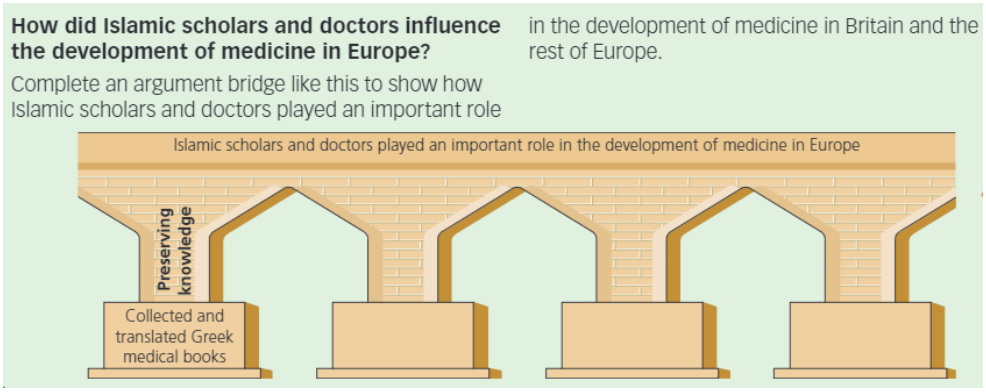
histories and many uncertainties. History is a dialectic and underpinning our approach to curriculum planning should be a commitment to making history lessons controversial, dynamic and alive. The history curriculum should engage and provoke, which means getting students arguing and helping them see the process of argument construction in the work of historians. As Michael Wood points out, history changes as more is discovered and as new perceptions develop, 'History is never fixed, always in the making, never made. But it is always made by us.'

b) Argument bridges

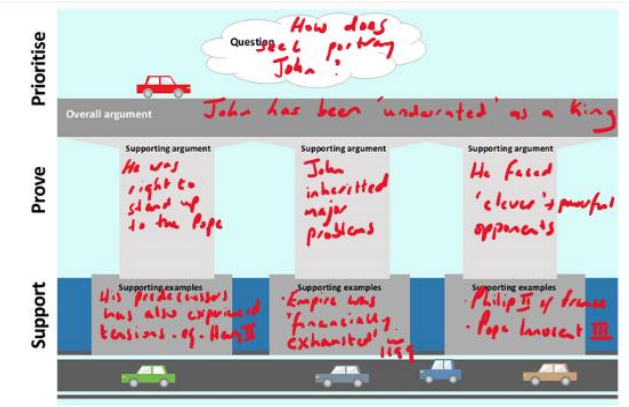
Argument bridges can be a very effective tool for developing historical thinking and helping students see the shape of an answer or argument. I use the analogy of constructing a strong argument being like a bridge – the supporting explanations (pillars) and examples (foundations) need to be strong enough to support the argument – otherwise the bridge collapses. The example below is used at Key Stage 3 and initially I get students to plan within the shape, so they remember the structure. The questions at the bottom and side of the handout are designed to encourage complex thinking, focussed in this case on the concepts of causation and change. The questions prompt students to think more deeply about the nature of historical change and to characterise and explain links between causes.



Embedding this type of thinking at Key Stage 3 will help students construct strong answers at GCSE and A Level. In the example below, the argument bridge is used to help students prove that Islamic countries made a significant contribution to the development of medicine in Europe during the Middle Ages.



The argument bridge also proves useful as a tool for analysing historical interpretations, especially the arguments put forward by historians. Students can be asked to identify the main message of an interpretation (the overall argument). Then they can use the bridge analogy to analyse how this interpretation has been constructed by a historian (What are the three key reasons why the author has come to this conclusion?) and supported (What specific examples/killer evidence does the author use?). Once again, at Key Stage 3, I get students to record their ideas within the bridge shape as they analyse the work of historians. By the time they get to GCSE, students should be well prepared for questions that require them to identify disagreements between interpretations and to explain which interpretation they find the most convincing. The example below shows how a student has used the bridge to analyse two differing interpretations of King John, using the work of Marc Morris and Graham Seel.



Argument bridges therefore play a pivotal role in helping students learn to construct their own arguments by helping them

a) understand how historians construct and support arguments

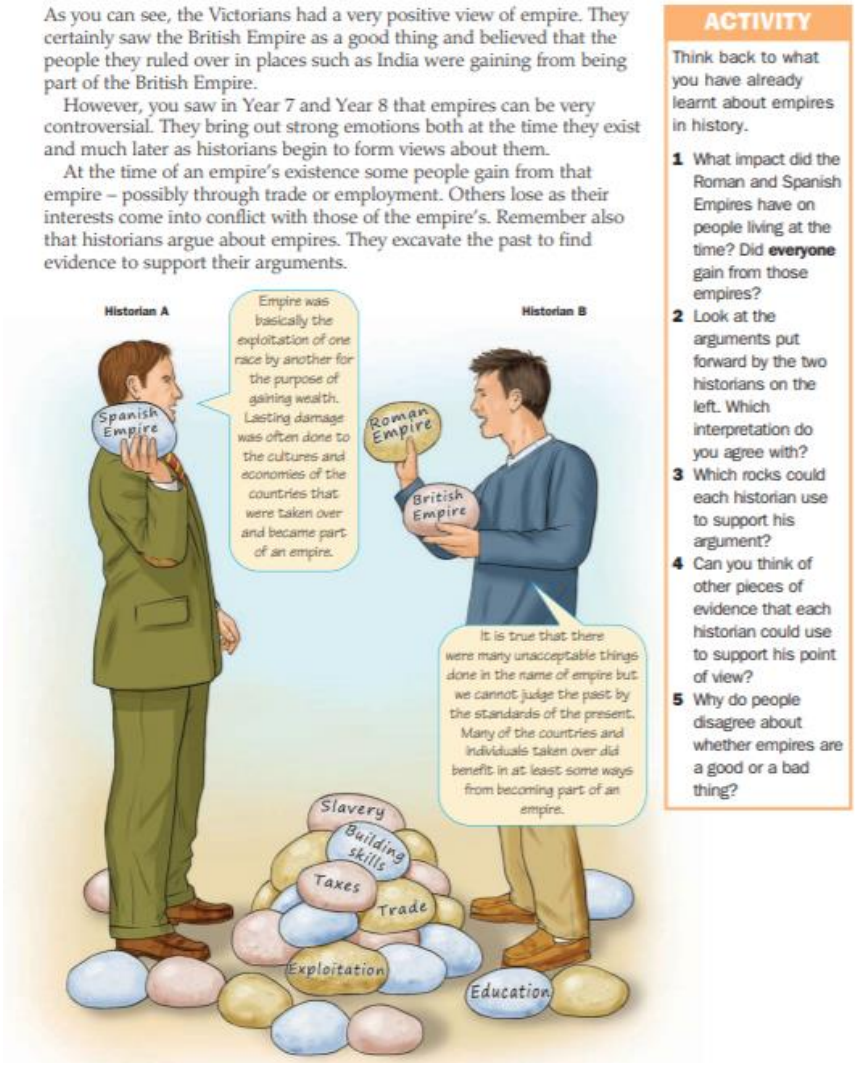
b) gain structured practice in constructing and supporting their own arguments

c) see very explicitly the central importance of argument in historical writing and answering exam questions

c) Building argument into the History curriculum

How do you introduce the idea of argument? One way that we've used in the classroom and textbooks is through activities like the one shown below from the Y9 SHP textbook. In this and a comparable activity for Y7 on the Roman Empire we shortened the process by giving students two competing arguments (shown in the speech bubbles) and asked them to choose supporting explanations and examples (as in the Argument Bridge) from the options (the rocks) provided in the illustration. The aims were to give students practice in selecting appropriate explanations and examples and to see that competing arguments do each have supporting evidence (it's not a case of one argument having all the supporting evidence) and that this often makes reaching a decisive conclusion difficult.

Another analogy which can be used to exemplify the building of an argument is to create a wall of boxes with each box labelled with a particular piece of evidence in support of an argument. Done in the classroom this can physically replicate the argument bridge and will prove a memorable event which you can refer back to in later lessons and years.



Given the central importance of argument in the study of history it's important to look for regular opportunities to open up debates for students. The most obvious opportunities lie in individual topics but there are others which are worth building into whole KS3 planning or at GCE and A level. The example below was used to conclude a study of the 20th century in Y9 and sets up the opportunity for students to debate which aspects of the history they have studied have been the most significant and, therefore, to discuss the criteria for their judgements. The same approach can be taken to individual people and events, perhaps earlier in KS3, and overall these kinds of activities provide an excellent way of concluding a course (rather than falling off the end of the last events studied) and enhancing students' understanding of the role and nature of argument in history

Which events are most worth studying?

Planning a history course for pupils or writing a history textbook for use in schools is very difficult. With history, you can study anything that happened at any time in the past, to anybody, anywhere in the world. As authors we have had a number of arguments about what should be included and what should be left out of this book.

We should include more pages on the Second World War. This was the most significant event in our history. Just think what Europe would be like if Hitler had won. We need to include some more information on the Eastern Front and the role that the Soviet Union played in opposing Hitler. This was one of the key turning points in the war. Twenty million people from the Soviet Union were killed in the conflict. Even Churchill admitted that it was the Russians who 'tore the heart out of the German army'.

I disagree, history textbooks are too full of conflict and war. There are other important events to study – like the way that ordinary people had to struggle for civil rights. I want to include more pages on the struggle to achieve civil rights in South Africa and how women in our country had to fight to win the right to vote. These events changed the lives of millions of people. They also show how ordinary people have the power to change the world in which they live.

In the end we decided to make cuts to the conflict section of this book and include more pages on the struggle to achieve equal rights. Do you think we made the right decision?

Are there any other key events from the last 100 years that you think we should have included in this book?

ACTIVITY

Imagine that a new edition of this book is being produced but it only contains 100 pages. Look at the Contents pages at the front of this book. Which key events would you keep and which would you cut? Explain your reasons.

In addition, as we argued in part 1 of this discussion of helping students to communicate, over-arching enquiry questions which immediately engage students in debate can be set up to provide coherence for individual examination units at GCSE and A level.

Examples include:

- Why do people today have better health and live longer than people in the past?
- What reputations do Richard I and John really deserve?
- How should we remember William the Conqueror and the Norman Conquest?
- Was Henry VIII really a great and successful king?
- Was Italy destined to be united?
- If people did not want civil war, why did the Wars of the Roses last so long?

At KS3 broad questions to encourage debate can be posed about individual periods e.g.

- Are people right to be so negative about the Middle Ages?
- Was the Early Modern period really so different from the Middle Ages?
- Has the modern world been war-mad since 1750?

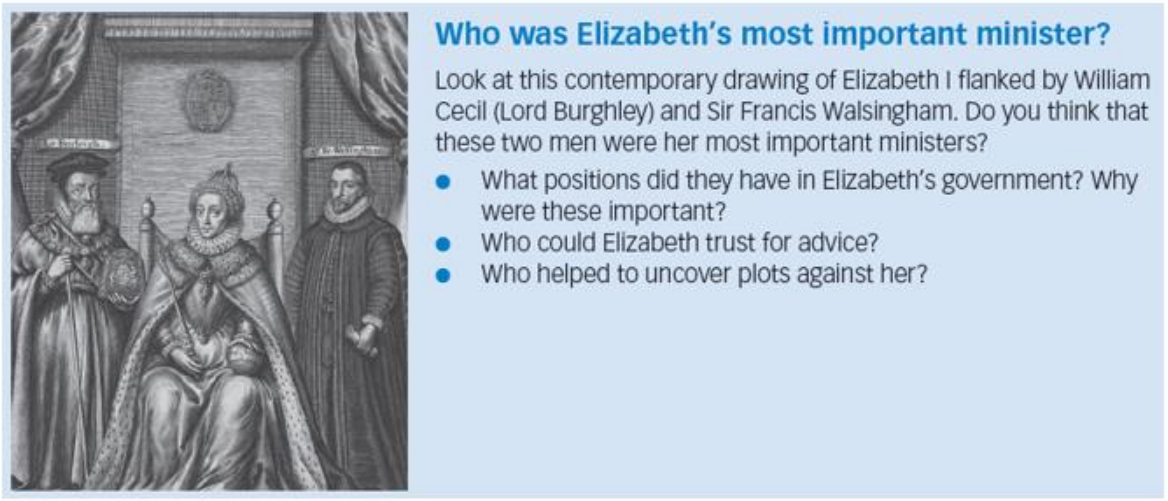
For discussion on this approach see

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/Periodisation.html

d) Creating regular opportunities for speaking and listening to explore and debate different interpretations

There should be a strong focus on speaking and listening when students are constructing arguments. Structured debates help students to generate ideas and construct arguments that may otherwise have remained incomplete. Such tasks help students shape their learning and understanding in a low-risk activity, whilst at the same time keeping them involved and motivated.

Within schemes of work, teachers should make a conscious effort to position speaking and listening activities before written tasks. To achieve this, we need to keep history controversial or argumentative, showing that there are often competing interpretations of an event or individual. For example, the drawing below can be used as the springboard into a debate on who was Elizabeth's most important minister – Cecil or Walsingham? This is a great way of recapping many of the key themes of the Elizabeth course at GCSE – the nature of the royal court, the system of government and the role played by key ministers, the key religious decisions of the reign and the people and the motives behind them, Elizabeth's spy network and the plots against her.



A similar debate can be set up at the end of a unit exploring Nazi Germany – Who was Hitler's key henchman – Goebbels or Himmler? Did the Nazis control people mainly through fear or propaganda?

Debates with the teacher in the 'hot-seat' as an individual who is placed on trial for their actions in the past can also be very effective – allowing the teacher to put across a considerable amount of information in an engaging way. Students can interview the individual in the hot-seat and then act as prosecution or defence lawyers in the subsequent trial. For example, Chamberlain for his policy of appeasement, Papen for killing Weimar democracy, Charles I for causing the Civil War, William the Conqueror on the impact of the conquest on England.

For a description of one such activity which models the approach see King John in the Hot Seat

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/KingJohnHotSeat.html

e) The importance of criteria-based arguments for effective argument building

Before a debate or a historical enquiry, it is worth investing the time to establish the criteria on which the individual, event or development will be judged. Examiners often bemoan the absence of criteria-based arguments at A Level and GCSE. It is important that we model criteria-based arguments at Key Stage 3. The work of historians can be used as models and the criteria for judging significance or success should be co-constructed with the class. The example below is taken from a debate centred on the most significant invention of the last 150 years.

A great invention should:

- change the way that large numbers of people live.
- have positive consequences – the invention should improve the quality of lots of people's lives.
- have long-lasting consequences – the invention should have an impact over a long period of time.

It should not:

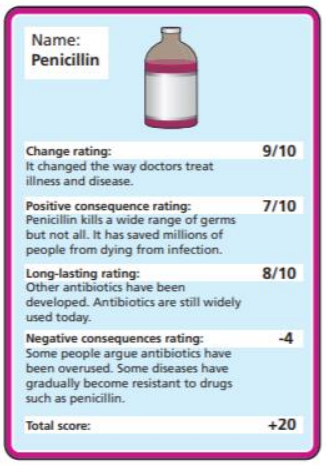
- have unwanted consequences – these include things that the inventor may have been totally unaware of (for example – global warming).

DISCUSS

Look at the criteria on the left. Is anything missing? What would be your most important criteria?

ACTIVITY

1. Work in groups to develop a set of Top Trumps cards like the one on the right. Use the criteria in the example provided (right) or develop your own four tests to establish the most important invention. Write a brief comment to explain each score.
2. Which invention of the last 150 years do you think has done most to improve ordinary people's lives?
3. Compare your choice to the invention chosen by:
   a) the general public in the vote organised by *The Times*.
   b) the panel of experts set up by the same newspaper.
   Their decisions can be found on page 196. Did they agree with you? If not, produce a short argument that challenges their choice and supports your own.



Establishing the criteria before the debate always leads to more focussed and constructive arguments. It makes the implicit (historians use criteria to reach judgements) explicit and 'visible' to the students.

The use of criteria improves thinking and therefore writing. Once again, the argument bridge can be used to make the process of constructing a convincing historical argument visible. Students can use criteria to structure their argument. In the case below, taken from a Year 8 enquiry into the significance of Toussaint Louverture, the criteria used to establish significance at the start of the enquiry can be used as a 'pillar' to support the overall argument (that Toussaint was highly significant). For this unit we used Christine Counsell's 5Rs of significance to provide our criteria for the enquiry. Before revealing Christine's criteria, the students reflected back on their learning so far at Key Stage 3 and started to construct their own criteria and questions (see introductory slide below).

Enquiry: Why was Toussaint Louverture significant?

What makes an individual historically significant?

- Aim to produce at least 3 criteria for significance.

REFECT BACK …

Think of an individual you have already studied (in Y7 or Y8). Use the criteria to explain why they were significant.

- Support your explanation with at least 2 pieces of evidence for each criteria.

The students came up with similar ideas to Christine's 5 Rs and we were able to add additional questions as thinking prompts within the 5Rs structure. After discussion, we decided that the following 3 criteria should be used to construct an argument bridge that explained why Toussaint was significant at the time. The construction of an argument bridge (see below) led to focussed, highly developed writing.

Enquiry PART 1: Why was Toussaint Louverture significant at the time?

- Remarkable
- Remembered
- Resulted in change
- Resonant
- Revealing

- **Use the highlighted criteria to write 3 paragraphs that start to answer the enquiry question.**
- **Select at least 3 pieces of evidence to prove that Toussaint meets each criteria.**

What makes an individual significant?

Remarkable – at the time and/or since

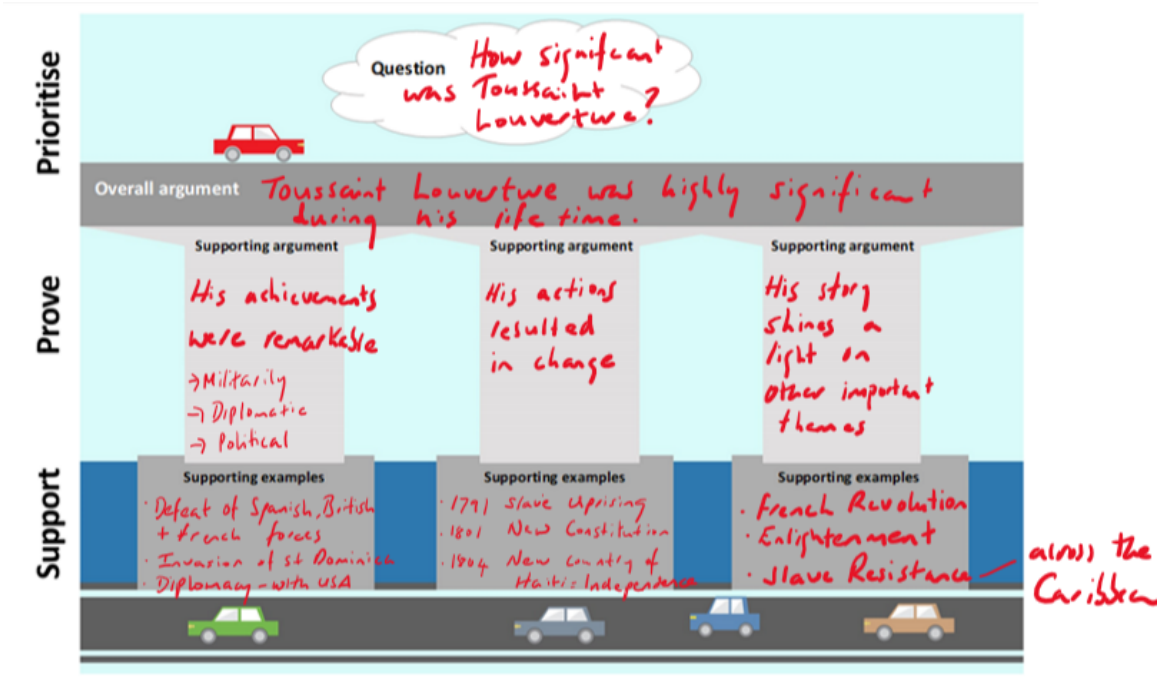
- Were their achievements remarkable? Were they ground-breaking? Was their behaviour remarkable?
- Did they overcome lots of obstacles? Did they show remarkable resilience?
- Did people at the time find them remarkable? Do people today still find them remarkable?

Resulted in change – their actions had consequences

- Did they reshape things (politically, economically, socially, culturally)?
- What was the scale of the change? Was it far reaching? Was it long-lasting or temporary? How many lives were affected?
- What type of change happened? Was it transformational? Was it a turning point or a catalyst?

Revealing - of some other aspect of the past

- What parts of the past does the story shine a light on? What attitudes and ideas does it reflect?
- What can we learn from it about society at the time?



The scaffold above also helped students see 'the overview lurking within the depth'. Focussing on the life of Toussaint Louverture was a deliberate choice in terms of our curriculum planning, it allowed us to move away from a narrow focus on the slave trade and to put slave resistance at the heart of the enquiry. It also allowed us to identify key takeaways such as the wider impact of the French Revolution and concepts such as the Enlightenment and Colonialism.

In the second part of their enquiry, students then used the criteria of 'remembered' and 'resonant' to develop arguments proving that Toussaint has been significant since his death – focussing on how he has been remembered and how his story has resonated with people across time, across different countries and in different contexts. We made sure that we explored disputing voices – comparing the negative portrayal of Toussaint by French colonial historians with the positive representations produced before and after the Second World War, when colonialism and imperialism were being challenged by historians. The students explored a full range of interpretations. These included films, paintings, stamps, bank notes and memorials. From this stimulus they were able to see that there was not one, 'fixed' way that Toussaint has been remembered and that historians are still arguing about him today.

The use of criteria to structure our arguments was very important, encouraging students to think in a complex way and way links across the curriculum. For example, students were able to reflect on why Toussaint's story still resonates with people today, making links to the Black Lives Matter movement and drawing comparisons with other leaders from a range of different historical periods (figures included Nelson Mandela, Spartacus and Napoleon).

Enquiry PART 2: How has Toussaint Louverture been remembered?

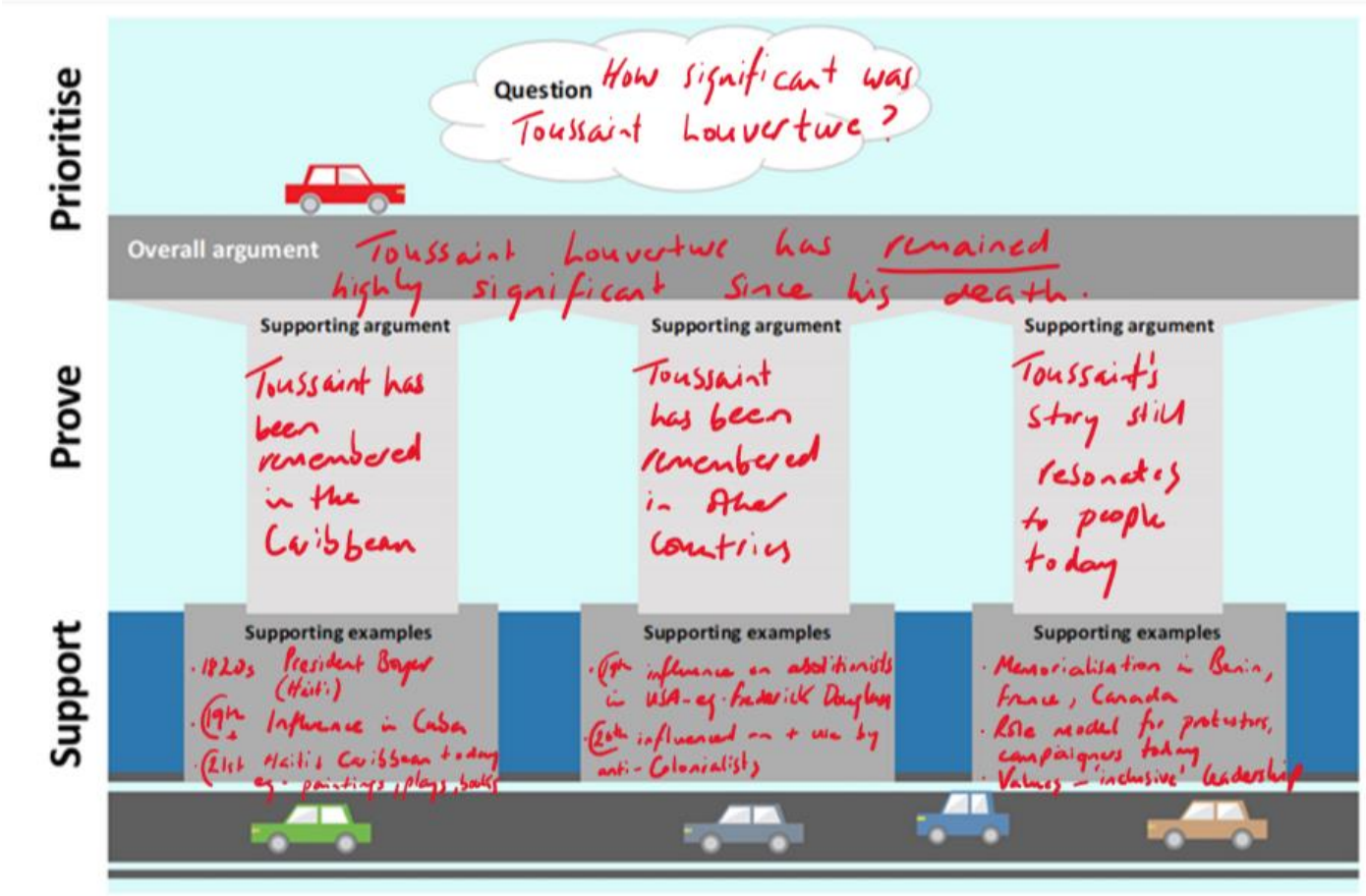
Remembered - it was important at some stage in history within the collective memory of a group or groups

- How have they been remembered in their country?
- What about other countries?
- Have they always been remembered? Are they still remembered today?

Enquiry PART 3: Why has Toussaint Louverture resonated with people over time?

Resonant – people have connected with their story across time

- Have people connected to the experiences and beliefs of the individual? Have they drawn similarities or parallels?
- Have people been influenced by this story? Have they found it relevant?

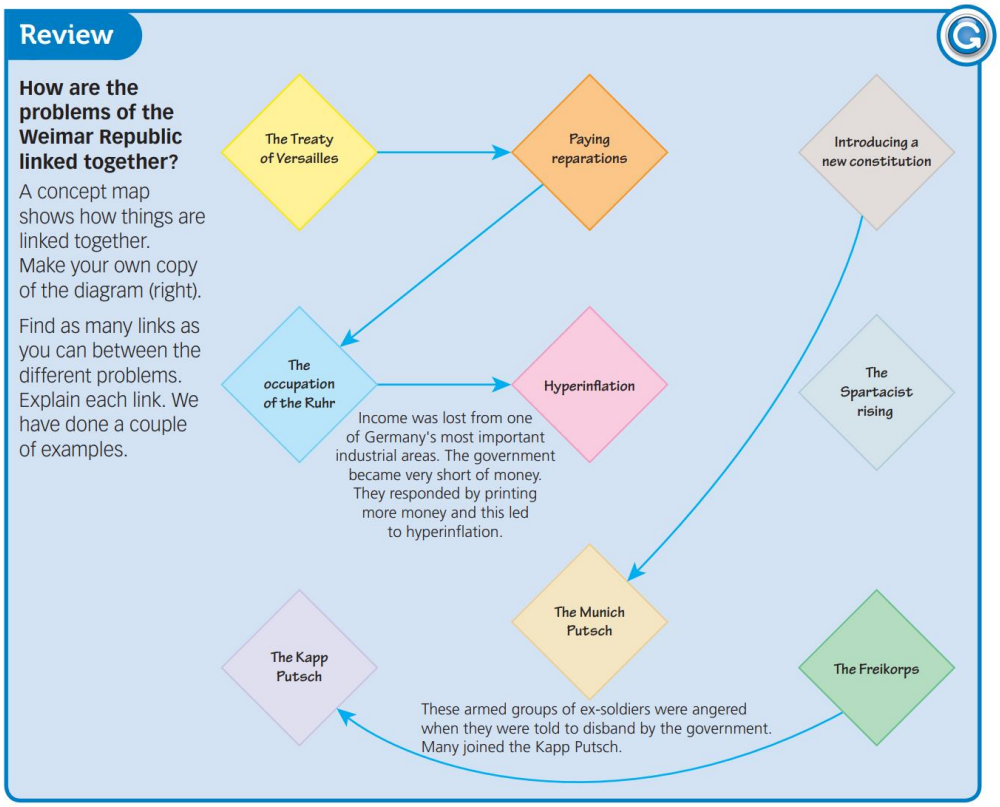


f) Ways of helping students to construct arguments

We'll finish this section with examples of individual activities which can be used to help students build arguments for different kinds of questions. It's important, as ever, to make the learning visible by explaining to students the purpose of using these activities in developing their ability to construct arguments prior to writing – so that they realise that this is not simply about understanding the content.

Concept Maps

Concept maps can help students explore links between causes before they begin a piece of writing. This can help them demonstrate complex thinking and prioritise causes. The example below is taken from Hodder Education's Engaging with AQA GCSE History series.

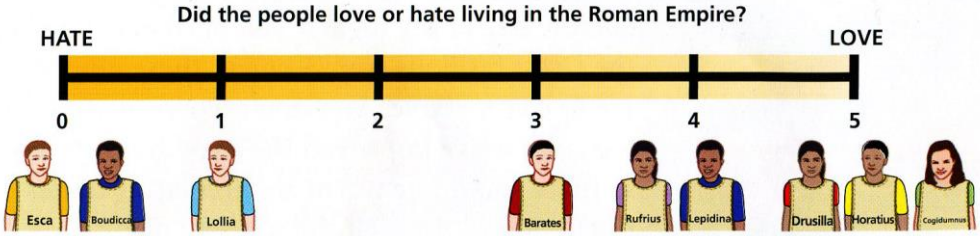


Continuum Lines

Continuum lines are obviously a very commonly-used classroom technique which are great for prompting students of all ages to think carefully about a whole range of 'to what extent' type issues and then discuss their conclusions – the key phase in building arguments before writing an answer. We have used continuum lines in a range of publications and lessons.

The two examples overleaf come from opposite ends of the age-range – the first from a Y7 book in a section on the Roman Empire, the second from an A level book on the Wars of the Roses.

As you have looked at the impact of the Roman Empire on different people you have probably built up a love–hate line something like this.



Enquiry Focus: Is Professor Carpenter right about Edward IV?

Professor Carpenter's verdict that Edward was a success seems puzzling. How could Edward have been a success and yet still be deposed in 1470? Surely a success would have kept his crown, not fled for his life? This enquiry examines the key aspects of Edward's reign to test Professor Carpenter's verdict. Making detailed notes will be essential but using the Success/Failure line below is just as important, helping you see the 'big picture' of the arguments and reach an overall conclusion, and stopping you getting lost in the details. (Note the seven aspects are not positioned on the line.)

1 Draw the Success/Failure line. Re-read Professor Carpenter's summary and decide where on the line she would put the aspects of Edward's reign, as shown in the boxes. (Note that two, Marriage and Splendour, are not discussed in the extract on page 77, so leave them out here. They are all discussed in this enquiry.)

2 Read pages 79–89. Place each of the seven aspects of Edward's reign where you think they go on the line. Make notes to justify your choices and list anything that makes the placement choice difficult.

You will find a concluding Activity on page 89.

Lancastrian opposition | Foreign policy | Relations with his nobility | Royal finances | Splendour at court | Marriage and an heir | Justice and order

HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL — COMPLETE FAILURE

4 3 2 1 0

Here are just some of the other issues which continuum lines (also known as washing lines) can explore:

a) Change and continuity – Continuum lines with key phrases linked to change can help students think about the extent of change that occurred over a period. The continuum line should run from phrases associated with highly important change (transformational, all encompassing, far-reaching), through to quite important change in the middle and then to phrases that signify little real change at the other end of the line (intermitent, minimal, negligible). Students can place a cross on the line and then justify their choice. Detail can be built up on events such as the Norman Conquest or Industrial Revolution by preparing topic cards (Homes, Transport, Religion etc) and asking students to place them on the continuum line.

b) Success …. Failure – examine the success or failure of a ruler, government or policy by placing events, reforms or policies and consequences on the continuum line. Move into interpretations by looking at whether everyone at the time would agree, whether there is a difference between contemporary views and those of historians and whether the pattern explains subsequent events.

c) Useful …. Not useful or Reliable ….. Unreliable – begin with a question such as 'Why did the Normans win the battle of Hastings?' and ask students to place John of Worcester, William of Jumieges, Harald's Saga etc on the line according to their reliability or usefulness for that question. But what happens if you change the question and ask 'Why did the Norwegians lose at Stamford Bridge?' The sources need to be re-evaluated and moved – a very good lesson that sources are not intrinsically reliable or useful – it all depends on the question.

d) Threatening …. Unthreatening **–** Which opponents of Henry VIII were most threatening or use the continuum line to compare the threats posed by protests against the Tudors or 19th century protests and campaigns.

e) Significant ….. Insignificant – Explore the factors involved in explaining Germany's collapse in 1918 and place the factors on the Significance … Insignificance line. Would historians, contemporaries, people from different backgrounds or countries agree? This can be used for all kinds of causal questions.

f) Strongest evidence for ….. Strongest evidence against – begin with a statement e.g. 'Queen Elizabeth I was a highly successful monarch.' Place events, quotations or other evidence on the Strongest evidence for ….. Strongest evidence against line to build up a picture of the complexity of the case – this helps students choose which evidence to use in arguing a case and building an essay. This works at all levels and is a good introduction to a topic with the line being amended by further study.

g) Certainty … Uncertainty – use a continuum line to chart students' progress during an enquiry to help them feel comfortable with the idea that uncertainty is OK and with using words such as probably and possibly. For example, ask students to position themselves on the Certainty … Uncertainty line after looking at introductory evidence. Later ask them to rethink their position after looking at more evidence and then again at the end of the enquiry. See the Skeleton in the Fields mystery for an example of this in action:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/RiccallMystery.html

For a longer discussion of the use of continuum lines (washing lines) see

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityModel/ActModWashingLine.html

An interactive classroom display using continuum lines

Continuum lines can be displayed in the classroom and used interactively. They can help students find the right language to express their arguments. Look to have a continuum line on each wall of your classroom (this can be relatively high up). Along the wall select words or phrases that indicate a particular position in a debate/argument. Select students to stand next to the word or phrase that best sums up their position and then justify why they are standing there. As they listen to other arguments, allow students to move position and ask them to explain why they are moving. This makes the thinking process 'visible' to students and encourages them to re-think their position as they encounter new arguments or evidence. For example:

- WALL 1: A degree of certainty line – running from absolute certainty to a guess! Along the wall have words that express different positions between these two (and very rare) extremes … Undoubtably … Probably … Possibly … Perhaps …

- WALL 2: How far do you agree line – running from totally convinced through to not all. In between can go words/phrases such as … mainly … to a large extent … to some extent … partially …

- WALL 3: Extent of change line – running from complete change through to insignificant. In between these extremes can go words such as … transformational … fundamental … considerable … partial … minimal …

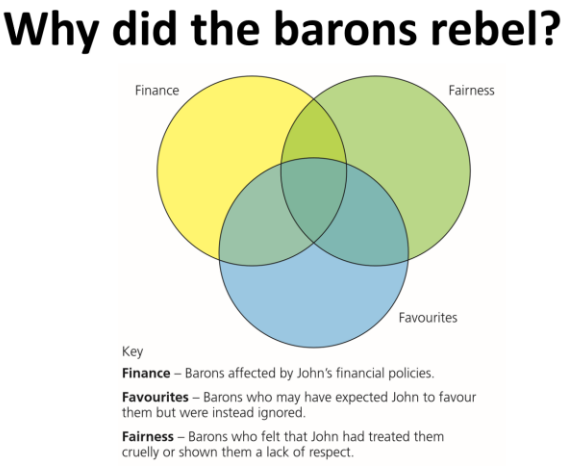
- WALL 4: How useful is this evidence for our enquiry line – running from a key piece of evidence to unimportant. In between can go words such as … extremely … very … quite … partially … problematic …

Select a few students to stand against the wall to show the extent to which they agree or disagree with a statement.

Venn diagrams

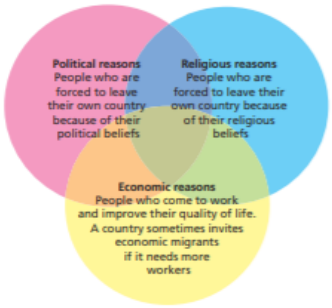
Venn diagrams can help to show students that people in the past had mixed motives for their actions. For example, students can study the motives of a number of individual barons for rebelling against King John. They can then place each baron in the Venn diagram below. This helps student see patterns and understand that some barons had a range of motives and that there were differing reasons why the rebellion occurred.

Venn diagrams can also be used to encourage students to this more deeply about the impact that individuals, events or developments have. The example below is taken from an enquiry into the impact of migration on Britain, pre- Windrush. It helps students see than an individual can influence more than one area of British life.



What can individual stories tell us about migration?

Individual stories can tell us a lot about migration. Use the stories on pages 210–211 to explore, in more detail, migration before the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*. These stories should help you destroy the three Migration Myths to an even greater extent.



▲ *Venn diagram 1: Do people always migrate for economic reasons?*

◀ *Venn diagram 2: What impact have individual migrants had on Britain?*

ACTIVITY

1. Read the individual stories on pages 210–211. Fill in Venn diagram 1 on the left. Think carefully about why each individual or their family settled in Britain. Some individuals may belong to more than one category. Others might not belong to any of the three circles.
2. On a separate piece of paper make brief notes on the impact that each individual had when they arrived in Britain.
3. Use your notes to place each individual in Venn diagram 2. Once again you need to think carefully – some individuals may have impacted on more than one area.
4. Look back to page 205 and add the names of Michael Marks, Montague Ossinsky and Dr Thomas Barnardo to both of your Venn diagrams.
5. Write two short paragraphs challenging Migration Myth 2 – Migrants have always moved to Britain for economic reasons, and Migration Myth 3 – Migration before the Second World War had little impact on Britain.

g) Conclusions

While we have concentrated on the pragmatic importance of constructing arguments to achieve higher grades, whether at KS3, GCSE or A level, there's a wider value in helping students to construct effective arguments. This helps prepare students for life beyond school e.g. enhancing their political or media awareness by appreciating:

- the importance of building their own judgements based on relevant evidence
- The importance of looking for the evidence behind claims and statements being made in public
- Improving the quality of their own ability to communicate effectively
- The contentious nature of history – that it often creates arguments in the present

This work is also an important part of building students' ability to study independently, something that should be underway during A level courses at the very latest.

For more on independent learning see:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueIndependentLearning.html