

A-level **HISTORY**

Non-exam assessment (NEA)
Framework for confident marking

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About

Administering and marking the NEA can be time-consuming and feel overwhelming at high pressure times of year.

Whether this is your first experience of NEA, or you're taking stock to revisit your approach, we've condensed what you need to do to successfully administer and mark it with confidence.

First things first

Question criteria direct from the Lead Moderator

Students can form their own questions, or teachers can collect a range of questions for a topic and invite students to choose. It's also acceptable for students to choose the same question provided that this choice is an individual one and reflects consideration of the question.

Enthusiasm or expertise in a topic may not directly translate to a suitable question. The NEA must be independent work, but there are ways to help students select the right topic and question for them.

Question reminder

It should:

- span a chronology of approximately 100 years
- prompt an answer that is achievable within the time and space available, taking resource availability into account
- allow for genuine historical debate, with evaluation of at least two suitable historical interpretations (AO3) and include three sources that are contemporary to the period (AO2)
- not duplicate the content of the examined periods, although chronological overlap is fine.

Example question titles

Here are some examples of sensible question titles. Students should aim to complete their NEA in **3500-4500** words, excluding the bibliography, footnotes and appendices, with a limit of 4500 words. Remember that any NEA which exceeds this word limit will incur a **five mark penalty**.

Example question	Lead Moderator's comments
In the context of the years 1857 to 1949, how important was Gandhi in achieving Indian Independence?	An appropriate question, though students should make sure that the response balances the role of Gandhi against relevant other factors drawn from the whole period being discussed.
'It was the failure to solve the financial crisis that caused the French Revolution'. How valid is this view of France in the years 1700-1789?	The date range is acceptable (although it could possibly be refined a little further) and the question allows for good comparisons, eg between short and long term issues, financial and other difficulties etc.
The collapse of Tsardom in Russia was the result of Russia's participation in the First World War'. Assess the validity of this view with reference to the years 1825 to 1917.	Again, this question allows the student to select from a good variety of viewpoints.

Example question	Lead Moderator's comments
In the context of 1893-1998, to what extent were economic factors the real driving force behind problems in Ulster?	This gives students a really good opportunity to select and investigate different interpretations, and they have access to a wide variety of contemporary sources. Such questions are also accessible to all abilities, allowing those at the lower end access and those at the higher to see the full potential of the question.

Example question titles to avoid

The following question types should be avoided as they wouldn't allow students to access the full requirements of the NEA.

Example question to avoid	Lead Moderator's comments
In the context of the years 1865 to 1968, how far was Martin Luther King the most significant leader of the Black Civil Rights movement?	This question is not allowed, for the simple reason that the Black Civil Rights movement does not have c.100 year context. This question would need to change to something along lines of 'improvement in black civil rights'. Students must consider the whole context even then. This question is typical of a problem often seen, where the question is not really about a wide enough period, but is looking to shoe-horn a certain topic or figure into the work, regardless of the immediate limitations that this places on marks.
'The Cold War was primarily an ideological conflict.' How valid is this view of the years 1891 to 1991?	Date range does not work. In fact, no question solely on the Cold War (or similar) will work because the date range for it is too narrow to meet the regulatory requirements of 100 years.
How far had the role of women changed in British society in the years 1887 to 2007?	The question is a little general and thus does not really allow for alternative interpretations that have sufficient historical weight. Answers to such questions then tend towards narrative, so it would be better narrowed down and made more precise, for example to the political.

See the [NEA administration and question setting guide](#) for advice on formulating an appropriate NEA question.

Tip: there's no reason not to share the mark scheme with students, and work backwards to set the question.

How NEA marking works

Historical investigations are marked by you, but moderated by us.

Robust marking step-by-step

You could:

- familiarise yourself with the [AQA Historical investigation mark scheme](#)
- mark some example responses via T-OLS (Teacher online standardisation) to compare your marking with the Lead Moderator's
- coordinate any colleagues to do the same
- hold a structured meeting to discuss and compare outcomes.

Use a best-fit principle with level descriptors

[The historical investigation mark scheme](#) is 'levels of response' style, so each assessment objective is accompanied by a series of levels which:

- work from level 5 at the higher end of the ability range, down to level 1
- encourage positive marking
- have defined but concise descriptors.

Use descriptors to determine a level before thinking about marks.

Students need to demonstrate all skills in a level to achieve the highest mark in a level. We know many students achieve some of the descriptors at one level, but not all of them, so start at the top and work down, applying a best-fit principle.

Annotate

This mark scheme is quite specific. Annotation helps show the moderator how marking criteria have been met and why different marks were awarded.

Details need to be included on the [candidate record form](#) but other approaches include:

- flagging evidence in margins
- making summative comments on precise sections of work.

What's been done well

The Lead Moderator's insights and commentaries on example responses from past series are shared in Feedback on the NEA CPD events. We've reproduced the key points below. Find the full material in our [secure area](#).



- Many responses reflected a deep understanding of the chosen period, providing a fully analytical NEA containing a balanced argument and a well-substantiated judgement.
- There was considerable variation in the topics chosen which suggests that the NEA engaged many differing passions and interests.
- Many questions had a clear focus; provided differing historical interpretation and also had a good range of primary sources.
- The best questions were those that allowed a student to develop a clear and substantiated judgement from the outset and to answer all aspects within the word limit of 4500 words.
- Evaluation of primary sources had a very clear focus on value, and considered both the content and the provenance in a sophisticated manner. They were well chosen.
- No source was seen as entirely valuable or indeed entirely without value. The best responses argued an overall impression of each source.
- The evaluation of primary sources was explicitly linked to the set question and it was clear how the inclusion of each source helped to advance the answer. As such the sources were referred to when relevant to the answer being advanced.
- Interpretations were clearly linked to the set question.
- The interpretations had clear differences, ideally in argument, time and/or context and also in limitations experienced by historians.
- There was a very good evaluation of the interpretations – the views were not simply taken at face value.
- Evaluation of provenance advanced far beyond generic commentary about bias, or to schools of history.
- There was evidence that the academic historians had been researched, as had the context in which the interpretation had been written.
- The evaluation of both primary sources and of interpretations was integrated within a sustained and effective answer to the set question.
- Footnoting was well done and there was a clearly – set out bibliography.



Common pitfalls to avoid

The Lead Moderator's insights and commentaries on example responses from past series are shared in Feedback on the NEA CPD events. We've reproduced key points below. Find the full material in our [secure area](#).



- The most damaging weakness was the failure to cover the full date range set in the question. Questions without sufficient breadth did not advance out of Level 2 in AO1.
- Typically failure to cover breadth saw students consider the very start and then the very end of a period.
- Some questions prompted a stepping stone approach, jumping from one event to the next but neglecting 20 or 30 years in between.
- Failure to provide an answer to the question really rather undermined the purpose of the exercise.
- Some questions did not provide sufficient opportunity to find the range of different primary sources, or indeed even two differing interpretations.
- Some NEAs were heavily descriptive, with students seeing the task as a research exercise rather than simply an analytical and balanced answer to the set question.
- There was a tendency to describe the views of others, rather than to advance the student's own answer.
- Some questions were simply impossible to arrive at an answer to – for example those that sought to find reasons for an event happening after the event had actually occurred.
- Some questions did not provide an opportunity for an informed and balanced debate.
- A second common error was a failure to evaluate the value of the primary sources. Students still struggle to define what may or may not make a source valuable as opposed to simply accurate or reliable.
- Some primary sources were evaluated in the abstract and not linked to the set question. A source needs to be valuable in doing something, ie in helping to answer the question, or not.
- Reliance on simplistic evaluation – such as simply stating that a source is biased, or that a source is more valuable as it was written closer to the events.
- Some students also struggled to effectively evaluate the provenance of the interpretations, relying on clichés or simplistic comments about the background of an author.



Guiding students through the NEA

The NEA is an independent investigation that enables the student to produce a bespoke and individual piece of work reflective of personal interests, emphases and talents.

Two key requirements to keep in mind throughout are:

- the supervising teacher needs to be able to sign a declaration of authentication after the NEA has been completed to confirm that the work is solely that of the candidate concerned and that such work was carried out under the required conditions.
- all candidates must sign a declaration to confirm that the work they submit for final assessment is their own unaided work.

However, it is expected that teachers will provide guidance or advice to their students throughout the process. What follows aims to provide some indication as to what this might mean in practice for teachers.

Setting out the requirements to students – the Mark Scheme

It is **expected** that students are provided with the mark scheme for the NEA and that they are given a clear indication of exactly how their work is assessed. This might also include an indication of what skills are required to access each level.

It is also permissible to provide a simplified, candidate-friendly version of the NEA mark scheme, provided that it is not specific to the work of an individual candidate or of a group of candidates.

However, it is not acceptable for a centre setting one question alone to write a bespoke mark scheme tailored to the specific demands of that question.

Acquiring the sources and the interpretations

The NEA is not assessed for the quality of the research. Rather, marks are awarded for the manner in which the researched material is integrated into the overall argument and the standard of the evaluation and assessment as demanded by the relevant mark schemes. It is not the selection of material, but how that material is utilised that indicates independence of thought and of process.

Centres can provide a list of recommended websites, books, journal articles, or libraries from which students might acquire their material. Centres may also provide students with an overview of the historiography of a period or topic.

Centres can also provide packs of relevant source material or of collections of various interpretations from which students make their own selection. However, any sources or interpretations provided to students must **not** be accompanied by an indication of how such material might be assessed for value, utility, or for any of the other criteria used in the Assessment Objectives.

The use of writing frames

Some students may benefit from appropriate guidance in how to structure their work. For example, instruction in effective paragraphing and in general essay writing skills is entirely appropriate. Guidance can also be provided on how to integrate source material and/or interpretations into the NEA, as long as it remains general stylistic advice and is not specific to the question set.

It is not permissible to produce a writing frame that is bespoke to the set question. This may result in a stilted and somewhat artificial analysis from the student, or in argument and structure that makes it difficult to prove that the final piece is the work of the individual student.

Nor is it permissible for centres to provide model answers or writing frames specific to the set question, for example paragraph headings bespoke to the question set.

Finally, students should not be provided with examples of previous NEAs submitted on the same or similar questions.

Ongoing supervision

It is a **requirement** that teachers supervise the work of each student and that they are therefore able to attest that the final piece is indeed the student's own. Some teachers opt for regular class or individual supervision, whilst others require all work to be written on cloud-based software which the teacher can access remotely at any time.

Teachers may review students' work and offer advice at a general level at any time. Teachers can comment on or ask questions about the way students are approaching their work or to highlight the requirements of the marking criteria. Both written and verbal feedback are acceptable, though in commenting on written drafts teachers must be careful to avoid providing detailed advice that identifies specifically what must be done to improve the content or presentation of the work. For example:

- in commenting on AO1, the teacher may indicate that the work is too narrative in form and needs more analysis, but may not indicate how this might be achieved.
- in commenting on AO2, the teacher may indicate that focus on the value of the sources for the issue in the NEA title is limited, but may not provide guidance on where and how to address this.
- in commenting on AO3, the teacher may indicate that that the analysis of the time/limit/context of the interpretations is weak. However, any further advice indicating how this might be improved or about where the weakness specifically lies is not permissible.

Feedback of marks and moderation

Candidates must be informed of their marks before submission for external moderation to AQA. They should be made aware that these are subject to review. Marks should only be returned to students once a process of internal moderation has been carried out in accordance with JCQ guidelines. Students should be offered an opportunity for internal review of NEA marks in accordance with JCQ procedures and before marks are sent to AQA for external moderation.

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