

Exam skills

Describe question

Describe questions are designed to test your knowledge and understanding of an event or the effects of an event. The questions should be relatively straightforward as long as you have done some revision before trying to answer the question. The question usually starts with the word 'describe'. For example,

'Describe the sort of jobs done by Irish immigrants in Scotland.'

OR

'What were the effects of the 1923 economic crisis on the German people?'

Key points

- These questions are worth 5 or 6 marks.
- You will probably be asked to describe an event, like the Battle of Bannockburn, or a development, like the rise of the Nazi party or the effects of World War One on Scottish women.
- One relevant point = one sentence = 1 mark.
- You should aim to make the same number of relevant points as there are marks available.
- The points you make do not have to be in any particular order, but your answer should make sense.
- You will be 'positively marked', i.e. you will not have marks deducted for anything you get wrong. You will however be credited for everything you get right (as long as it answers the question being asked).

In order to successfully complete the answer:

- Try to give information which directly answers the question.
- You will need to have revised. It is important that you know enough detail about key events, and their effects, and key people, and impacts they made.
- You can get more marks for developing points by giving further information and adding more detail to your point. However, this must be linked to the question. An example of this can be found below.

Example question

Describe the results of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch.

6 marks

The question is worth 6 marks – so you need six pieces of information describing what happened as a result of the Beer Hall Putsch.

Answer 1

Hitler attempted to seize power in Munich and take over the Bavarian Government. This was called the Beer Hall Putsch. It was when he tried to take power in Germany.

Markers' comments

This candidate has clearly answered in three sentences. However, there is nothing which answers the question. The candidate has said what the Beer Hall Putsch was but has made no effort to describe the results of the Beer Hall Putsch. This is a good lesson for the candidate to learn before the actual exam. It is important to understand the **type** of question and then look at **what is being asked**. In this case it is the results of the Beer Hall Putsch rather than the Putsch itself. Reading the question carefully is vitally important.

Answer 2

In 1923 Hitler had tried to take over the government in Bavaria with the Beer Hall Putsch. Many of Hitler's followers were injured or even killed by police marksmen, this was not good for the Nazis. Hitler failed, but it was not all bad as it helped his cause in the long run. One result was that Hitler and the Nazis got some good national publicity. Hitler's name appeared in newspapers which was a good result for him and his party, and he had his photo taken with General Ludendorff, who was a World War I hero. Hitler looked better because of this. Hitler was sent to jail but even this was a good thing for Hitler. He used the court case to get even more publicity. He also wrote his book 'Mein Kampf' when in prison. This book became important for telling other people about his ideas and getting support for the Nazis. While a failure, the Putsch actually helped Hitler and the Nazis in the long run.

Markers' comments

This scores full marks. The candidate has clearly described the results of the Beer Hall Putsch. The candidate has tried to mention as many results of the event as they can, good and bad. The candidate has made some straightforward points (i.e. Hitler gained some good publicity from the event) and also some further developed points (i.e. Hitler got his name in newspapers and also his picture taken with a World War I hero). The candidate would be credited for the initial point and also for the follow up developed point.

Explain question

These questions ask you to explain why an event or change happened. They are worth 5 or 6 marks. You will recognise them because they will start with the word 'explain'. There is no set way to answer these questions, but there are some basic rules.

Key points

In order to successfully complete the answer:

- You need to write at least five sentences – one for each mark. Sometimes, it is appropriate to write two paragraphs.
- You get a mark for each point you make relevant to the question. A further mark is available for developing points.
- Each point you make must be linked to the question – there must be a clear link between the information and the issue in question.
- You must do more than just describe the issue/situation/change.

Example question

Explain why Hitler was able to become Chancellor in 1933.

5 marks

Answer 1

Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933. He was a very good public speaker and was popular across Germany. Hitler would criticise all opponents and used violence to intimidate others. He targeted the Jewish population in Germany and used them as a scapegoat for all Germany's problems. Hitler also hated the Treaty of Versailles and promised revenge for the defeat of the First World War. The Nazis eventually won enough votes to become a large party in the Reichstag.

Markers' comments

Answer 1 is a weak answer despite giving some relevant points. The main issue is that the points are not linked to the question and are simple descriptions. Each point needs to be linked to the question for it to count towards the total. This is a common mistake, as candidates often give factors that relate to the question but without explaining the link to the question. For example, in answer 1 the second sentence could end with '... and this popularity meant that President Hindenburg thought he would be a successful Chancellor.'

Answer 2

Hitler was able to become Chancellor in 1933 because people in the Weimar government were seen as weak and so people turned to more extreme parties like the Nazis for stronger leadership. Hitler's use of propaganda also helped gain supporters. For example, parades and large public meetings excited many and this gained votes. Along with this propaganda, Hitler promised jobs to the unemployed and a creation of a stronger Germany. This encouraged people to vote for him. Ordinary Germans were keen to support the Nazis as many were scared of the influence of the Communists. Nazi anti-Communist and anti-Jewish policies became very popular. Hitler was also able to become Chancellor in 1933 due to the intimidation of others. For those not persuaded by the campaigning, the bullying tactics intimidated many that were reluctant to support. In the short term, Hitler became Chancellor due to the lack of effective alternatives, and so President Hindenburg had little choice.

Markers' comments

Answer 2 is clearly the stronger answer as it links directly to the question and makes relevant points that explain the factors in detail. It does much more than describe the issue.

To what extent? question

This type of question requires you to make a judgement about the extent to which a particular factor contributed to an event or development. You are required to give a balanced answer after making a judgement about the relative importance of other relevant factors and come to a reasoned conclusion.

Key points

- The To what extent? question is allocated 8 marks.
- Up to 5 marks can be gained for relevant points of knowledge. 1 mark will be awarded for each separate correct and relevant point made. However a maximum of 3 marks will be awarded if only one factor is discussed.

- The remaining 3 marks are awarded for the structure of your answer:
 - 1 mark will be awarded if you have structured your answer. This means that if you have made a judgement about the factor in the question and then balanced this with a judgement about the importance of other factors.
 - 1 mark will be awarded for your conclusion or overall judgement and 1 mark will be awarded for providing a reason to support your conclusion.

In order to successfully complete the answer:

- Make a judgement about the importance of the factor identified in the question.
- Balance this with a judgement about the importance of other factors relevant to the question.
- Come to a conclusion or overall judgement based on the points made in your answer.
- Provide a reason or reasons to support your conclusion.

Example question

To what extent was the delay in the abolition of the slave trade due to the effects of the French Revolution?

8 marks

Answer 1

The French Revolution was important in delaying the abolition of the slave trade as it turned many people against abolition.

However there were other reasons which played a part in delaying abolition. Abolition was also delayed as there were MPs in parliament who represented plantation owners. These MPs voted against abolition. Other important people also argued against abolition as they thought that the abolition of the slave trade would destroy Britain's empire.

In conclusion the effects of the French Revolution were important in delaying the abolition of the slave trade.

Markers' comments

The answer begins with a judgement about the extent to which the effects of the French Revolution contributed to the delay of abolition. A brief point of knowledge (that the French Revolution resulted in a decline in the popularity of the abolitionist campaign) is given in support of the judgement. The answer is structured (with the word 'However...') and proceeds to provide two points of knowledge in support of other factors. The answer ends with a conclusion but not a reasoned conclusion. In other words, no reason or explanation is given in support of the conclusion. This answer has both strengths and weaknesses. It provides a balanced assessment of the factors which contributed to the delay of abolition. However there are not enough relevant key points of knowledge given to gain 5 marks. This answer would instead gain 3 marks for knowledge. The answer is structured with a conclusion but no reason is provided in support of the conclusion. This answer would gain 2 marks out of a possible 3 for structure. Overall this answer would gain 5 marks out of 8.

Answer 2

It is believed that the abolition of the slave trade was delayed due to the events of the French Revolution. The execution of Louis XVI led to the British government passing Acts against large political meetings which meant it was difficult for abolitionists to meet. As a result there was a temporary decline in support for the abolitionist movement.

However there were other reasons why the abolition of the slave trade was delayed. An important obstacle was the fact that the slave trade was profitable and brought huge wealth to Britain through trade and taxes. Furthermore, powerful groups such as MPs, planters and merchants from cities such as London, Liverpool and Bristol also defended the slave trade. Lastly, it is believed that another reason for the delay in the abolition of the slave trade was the slave rebellion on Saint Domingue which exaggerated the fear of slave revolts and violence which discredited arguments in favour of abolition.

Overall the impact of the French Revolution was an important reason for the delay of abolition. It led to a decline in support for the abolition movement, among both the British people and MPs.

Markers' comments

This answer begins by making a judgement about the importance of the factor (the effects of the French Revolution) identified in the question. Two points of knowledge are given in support of this judgement. The answer is then structured and balanced with a consideration of the importance of other factors. Three distinct relevant reasons are given to further explain the delay in abolition. The answer concludes with an overall judgement and a reason is given to support this overall conclusion. This is a strong answer which would gain 5 marks for knowledge, 1 mark for providing a structured account, 1 mark for a conclusion and 1 mark for providing a reason in support of the conclusion. This answer would therefore be awarded the full 8 marks.

Evaluate the usefulness of a source

This question requires you to evaluate whether a source is useful for helping you learn about an event or period in history. Evaluate the usefulness questions will be worth 5 or 6 marks.

Key points

In order to successfully complete the answer you must comment on:

- **Provenance**

This means **who** produced the source, **when** the source was produced, and **why** the source was produced.

In the exam there is up to 4 marks available for this section.

In order to gain marks for the section on Provenance it is not enough to simply identify who wrote it, when it was written or why it was written. You must include an **evaluative comment**. In other words you must make a comment on how these things affect the usefulness of the source.

- **Content**

This means **what** the source tells you.

In the exam there is up to 2 marks available for this section.

- **Content omission**

This means what the source **does not tell you**.

It is important that you use **specific recall** to illustrate content omission.

In the exam there is up to 2 marks available for this section.

As you will have noticed, that means that that you do not have to get the full marks available for each of the above areas to get full marks for the question. In the example below you could get the full 6 marks with 3 out of 4 marks for provenance, 2 out of 2 marks for content and 1 out of 2 marks for content omission, or 2 out of 4 marks for provenance, 2 out of 2 for content and 2 out of 2 for content omission, or any other combination.

Example question

Source A is a report from the Moscow municipal corporation describing tenement buildings in the city written in 1902.

The apartment has a terrible appearance, the plaster is crumbling, there are holes in the walls, stopped up with rags. It is dirty. The stove has collapsed. Legions of cockroaches and bugs. No double window frames and so it is piercingly cold. The lavatory is so dilapidated that it is dangerous to enter and children are not allowed in. All apartments in the house are similar.

Evaluate the usefulness of **Source A** as evidence of the living conditions of workers in Russia during the Tsar's reign.

6 marks

(You may want to comment on who wrote it, when they wrote it, why they wrote it, what they say or what has been missed out.)

Answer 1

Source A is quite useful. It is a primary source from 1902. It is an extract from a report by the Moscow municipal corporation. It was written to tell us that the stove has collapsed. The source tells us that the lavatory was dangerous and there were no double framed windows so it was cold. It does not tell us what would happen to children if they went into the lavatory.

Markers' comments

Answer 1 makes some very common mistakes which you must try to avoid.

- It fails to use the language of the question. You must use the language of the question to show the marker that you are engaging with the question.
- In the comments on provenance it does not give evaluative comments. It would receive no marks for provenance because of this.
- It has confused purpose with content.
- It has not given a piece of specific recall for content omission.

Answer 2

Source A is only partly useful as evidence of the living conditions of workers in Russia during the Tsar's reign. It is a primary source from 1902 when the Tsar was in power: this is useful because it is from the time period we are being asked about. It is an extract from a report by the Moscow municipal corporation: this makes it useful because it is an official document and is part of a report into housing conditions. It is therefore likely to be accurate and not affected by bias. The purpose of the source is to provide an accurate report on the state of tenement housing in Moscow so is likely to be trustworthy.

The source is useful to us as evidence of the living conditions of workers because it provides very detailed examples of how the tenements in Moscow were dangerous and unpleasant places to live. For example it tells us that they are in a bad condition; 'the plaster is crumbling'. It also tells us that they are dangerous; 'The lavatory is so dilapidated that it is dangerous to enter and children are not allowed in.' It also tells us that the tenements are unhygienic; 'Legions of cockroaches and bugs.'

The source is not totally useful however as there are some things which the source does not tell us. It does not tell us that some workers lived in barracks that were built right beside the factory. In these barracks families were overcrowded and people on different shifts even had to share beds. The source is also limited because it only tells us about Moscow, it does not tell us about other cities in Russia.

Overall therefore the source is only partly useful as evidence of the living conditions of workers

Markers' comments

Answer 2 is obviously a much more successful answer than answer 1. It constantly uses the language of the question, and an evaluative comment is added to every point.

Source comparison question

This question requires you to compare the views of two sources overall and in detail.

Key points

- The question is worth 4 marks.
- You should make direct comparisons between the two sources. When comparing the sources overall you must describe what they agree or disagree about without quoting. When comparing the sources in detail you must use specific examples supported by quotations.
- For a simple comparison (either of the sources overall, or of a detail in the sources) you will receive 1 mark.
- For a developed comparison (either of the sources overall, or of a detail in the sources) you will receive 2 marks.
- You can therefore get the full 4 marks for the question for 4 simple comparisons, 2 developed comparisons, or a combination of both.

Example question

Source A describes the Battle of Loos.

The Battle of Loos was fought in September 1915. On September 25th the British 1st Army commanded by Douglas Haig attacked German positions at Loos. Haig's plan was simple – concentrated British artillery fire and pinpoint infantry fire would give the advancing British troops sufficient cover. In the lead up to the attack, another weapon became available to Haig – poison gas. He realised that such a weapon would neutralise the German machine gunners. The British lost many men to German machine gun fire as they attacked German positions around Loos without the aid of artillery support. The battle effectively ended on September 28th. The British suffered 50 000 casualties while the Germans lost about 25 000 men.

[Adapted from http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/battle_of_loos.htm]

Source B describes the Battle of Loos.

The Battle of Loos formed a part of the wider Artois-Loos Offensive conducted by the French and British in autumn 1915. Presided over by Douglas Haig, the British committed six divisions to the attack. Haig's battle plans called for the release of 5100 cylinders of chlorine gas from the British front line. During the battle the British suffered 50 000 casualties. German casualties were estimated much lower, at approximately half the British total. The British failure at Loos contributed to Haig's replacement of French as Commander-in-Chief at the close of 1915.

[Adapted from <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/loos.htm>]

Compare the views of Sources A and B on the Battle of Loos.

4 marks

Answer 1

The sources agree. They are both describing the Battle of Loos. Source A says it was fought in autumn 1915 and Source B says it was in September 1915. Source A says that they used poison gas and source B says they used chlorine gas. Both sources say that the British lost 50 000 men.

Markers' comments

Answer 1 is very basic in its approach. The overall comparison does not describe the views of the sources, only what they describe. It does not use the language of the question and it offers basic comparisons without developing the point.

Answer 2

Sources A and B agree about the Battle of Loos. The sources agree that the British were commanded by Douglas Haig and agree about the tactics he used during the battle. They also agree that the British suffered heavy losses during the battle.

The sources agree that the battle took place in autumn 1915. Source A writes 'The Battle of Loos was fought in 1915', Source B agrees by writing 'The Battle of Loos formed a part of the wider Artois-Loos Offensive conducted by the French and British in autumn 1915.' The sources further agree that the British were commanded by Douglas Haig: Source A states 'the British 1st Army commanded by Douglas Haig attacked German positions at Loos' and Source B agrees by writing 'Presided over by Douglas Haig, the British committed six divisions to the attack.' The sources also agree that Haig used poison gas: Source A writes 'In the lead up to the attack, another weapon became available to Haig – poison gas' and source B writes 'Haig's battle plans called for the release of 5100 cylinders of chlorine gas from the British front line.' The sources also agree that the British suffered much heavier losses than the Germans. Source A writes 'The British suffered 50 000 casualties while the Germans lost about 25 000 men' and source B agrees by writing 'During the battle the British suffered 50 000 casualties. German casualties were estimated much lower, at approximately half the British total.'

Markers' comments

Answer 2 is much more successful than answer 1. It consistently uses the language of the question and successfully compares the source overall and in detail. When it gives direct comparisons it develops the point by stating what they agree about, and then quotes to support the point.

How fully does source? question

This question requires you to make a judgement about the extent to which a source provides a full explanation or description of an event or development.

Key points

- A How fully? question will ask 'How fully does source ... explain ...?' or 'How fully does source ... describe ...?'
- The source you are asked to evaluate will contain four points relevant to the question but the source will also contain information which is not relevant to the question. It is important that you read both the question and source carefully.
- A How fully? question will be allocated either 5 or 6 marks. A maximum of 3 marks can be gained from identifying and interpreting points from the source. The remaining marks can be gained by adding points from your own knowledge. A maximum of 4 marks can be gained from adding your own knowledge. This of course adds up to 7 marks. This however means that you can gain full marks in different ways. If the question is worth 5 marks you could earn 3 source marks and 2 knowledge marks or you could earn 2 source marks and 3 knowledge marks, for example. Likewise if the question is worth 6 marks you could gain 2 source points and 4 knowledge marks. However a maximum of 2 marks will be awarded for answers which do not contain a judgement. Likewise, answers which refer only to the source will also only be awarded 2 marks.

In order to successfully complete the answer:

- Read the source carefully and make a judgement about how fully the source describes/explains the event or development in the question. For example, ***The source describes/explains ... quite well.***
- Identify and interpret what the source tells you about the event or development. For example, ***The source states that ...***
- Identify what important information the source does **not** mention. For example, ***The source, however, does not mention that ...***

Example question

Source A is about some of the problems facing Mary, Queen of Scots in 1561 and is adapted from *The Kings and Queens of Scotland* by Richard Oram (The History Press).

Mary's welcome lasted for several days with music and merrymaking. Most were delighted to have their young queen back to rule in person. However some Scots doubted Mary's ability to rule due to her youth and lack of experience. A minority of leading religious reformers including John Knox feared that Mary's return would upset the progress of the Scottish Reformation. Her insistence in maintaining her Catholic faith had to be explained. Mary also had to concede to the wishes of those Scots who now worshipped in the Protestant manner.

How fully does Source A describe the problems Mary, Queen of Scots faced when she arrived in Scotland in 1561?

5 marks

Answer 1

Source A says that some Scots doubted Mary's ability to rule as she was young and did not have a lot of experience in governing a country. The source states that Protestant leaders like John Knox did not trust Mary and thought she would try to put an end to the Scottish Reformation. The source also says her insistence in maintaining her Catholic faith had to be explained. Mary also had to concede to the wishes of those Scots who now worshipped in the Protestant manner.

Markers' comments

Answer 1 contains no judgement about how fully the source describes the problems facing Mary in 1561. Four points have been identified from the source. These four points are all relevant to the question. However, only the first two points have been interpreted. The other two points have merely been copied. No points of omission have been included. Due to the answer only referring to the source and the lack of a judgement, 2 marks only would be given for this.

Answer 2

Source A partly describes the problems facing Mary, Queen of Scots on her return to Scotland in 1561. Source A mentions how some Scots did not believe Mary could rule Scotland properly due to the fact she was young and inexperienced. The source also mentions how Protestant reformers such as John Knox did not welcome Mary's return to Scotland as they were worried she would interfere with the Protestant Reformation. The source also states how Mary insisted on worshipping the Catholic religion when Scotland had become a Protestant country. However Source A does not mention that some Scots were suspicious that Mary had been brought up in France and the French were unpopular with many Scots. Another important point not mentioned in Source A is that Mary now ruled over a religiously divided country. While Protestants did not want Mary to undo the Reformation, Catholics hoped Mary would restore the Catholic faith. Lastly, another problem facing Mary not mentioned in the source is that Elizabeth of England was suspicious of Mary after Mary claimed to be Queen of England.

Markers' comments

Answer 2 is a much stronger answer. There is a clear overall judgement at the beginning of the answer as to how fully the source describes the problems facing Mary, Queen of Scots in 1561. Three problems facing Mary are identified from the source. Each point is dealt with separately. These points are interpreted rather than simply being copied or listed from the source. There is therefore an understanding of the points being selected to support the judgement made at the beginning of the answer. In addition three good points of knowledge are made to support the candidate's judgement. This is a good answer which would gain full marks.