SOURCE EVALUATION SKILLS

What is a Source?
A source is a piece of evidence that historians use to find out about the past. There are many different types of sources that can be used, such as - letters, diaries, texts from books, pictures, cartoons etc.

TIPS FOR ANSWERING SOURCE QUESTIONS
- Always read the sources and the questions carefully.
- Make sure you relate your answer to the question, don't get bogged down writing everything you can think of.
- Read and use the captions underneath pictures and cartoons they can be hugely helpful.

There are 5 main types of source questions:
1) Comprehension.
2) Comprehension in context.
3) Reliability/Usefulness/Value of sources.
4) Source comparison.
5) Interpretation.

1. Comprehension
There are no ‘easy’ questions in History, but comprehension source questions are the easiest on paper 2 - they are usually the first questions asked and carry the lowest marks.
Comprehension questions will usually look something like this:
- What can you learn from Sources A and B about ..............
- What impression do Sources A and B give of .............
- What message does the cartoon in source C give about ...........

All you have to do is write down what the source is telling you about the person or situation mentioned in the question.
1) Firstly read or look at the source or sources carefully and write down the obvious things it is telling you. Make sure you keep the question in mind.
2) Secondly look beyond the obvious and see what you can infer. What can you work out from what you have read or seen in the source even though it may not be immediately obvious?
3) Write down what you have inferred and use the source to back you up.

Infer = To work something out from what you have read or seen.

Let’s have a look at a real ‘comprehension’ source question. Study the sources and read the question
1) Study Source A: What is the writer’s attitude towards the Black Death? Explain your answer with reference to the source. (5)

HINT Question Type: Comprehension. Draw conclusions from the source and support with examples from the source. Don’t copy out large chunks.

Source A

Plague deprived villages and cities, and castles and towns, of human inhabitants, so that there was scarcely found a man to live in them. Whoever touched the sick or dead immediately died.

Man and wife with their children travelled the same road, the road of death. To stop these important events dying with time and fading from memory, I have set them down in writing while waiting for the coming of death. And to stop the writing dying with the writer, I leave the parchment for the work to be continued in case in future any human survivor should remain.

From an account of the Black Death written by John Clyn a friar in Ireland.
He wrote this in 1349 and died the same year.

After reading and looking at the sources carefully, ask yourself what are the obvious things that these sources tell you about the effect of the Black Death

• Facts such a great many people died, in a variety of places, very few people were left alive.

These facts are all fine, but will only gain you 2 marks at the most. Now look beyond the obvious, what do these sources infer about the effect of the Black Death? What can you work out from what you have seen and read?

• Inferences such as the author may well have felt as if it were the end of the world – he felt that there may be nobody left to read his testimony. We can also infer that the Black Death had a devastating effect on villages and towns with very little population to do work.

3) These are all good inferences and will gain you 3 or 4 marks. To get a full 5 marks,

• If a question asks you to use more than one source, you must use more than one source.
• DO NOT paraphrase or describe everything in a source - it is a waste of time, it will not get you any marks.
• Always keep referring to the question asked, it will help you to avoid getting side-tracked.
2. Comprehension in Context

These questions require you to understand what a source tells us about a person or situation and then link it with knowledge you already have which is also relevant to the question.

Comprehension in context questions usually look something like this:

*Use Source A and Source B and your own knowledge to explain ..........*  
*How does Source A help you to understand .....?*  
*Use the source and your own knowledge to explain.*

1) Firstly study the source or sources - what does it tell you? Go through the same process as you would for a straight forward comprehension question, looking for inferences as well as the obvious.  
2) Then think about what else you know about the particular issue. If it is relevant and it would help you to understand the source better include it in your answer.  
Let’s have a look at a real comprehension in context question.

**QUESTION**  
Use the source and your knowledge to explain what Source A tells you about people’s understanding of the causes of disease. (8)

**HINTS FOR YOUR ANSWER**  
1) Firstly read the caption and the source carefully and ask yourself what the source tells you about people’s understanding of the causes disease.  
   • For example the source tells you that some people believed that disease was caused by the planets, god, miasma etc  
2) This will only gain you a couple of marks because you have not used your own knowledge at all in the answer. Now think about what you know. What do you know about people’s understanding of the causes of disease in the middle ages  
3) You should now be aware of what the source is telling you and what your background knowledge is. However it is not enough to just write down this is what the source tells me….., and this is what I know … To gain maximum marks you need to link your knowledge with the information in the source.  
   • You can link the fact that the source was written in 1349 and to your knowledge that there was a plague epidemic in 1349 and that doctors did not know what caused or spread the disease.
You can then link the two facts above that people cleaned the streets up and some people believed there was link between dirt and disease nobody knew about germs until 1861.

4) Linking what you already know to what the source is telling you creates a very good answer. Make sure it is written in a sensible way.

- If a question asks you to use the source and your own knowledge then you must use both.
- Start with the source and then add in what you can remember which will help you to understand the source better.
- Your own knowledge must be relevant to the question, keep referring to the question in your answer to keep you focused.
- Do not start writing about the usefulness or reliability of sources in comprehension in context questions, it will gain you nothing.

3. Reliability/Usefulness/Value of Sources

You are almost guaranteed to see a question of this type on your exam paper, so be prepared. The examiner wants you to recognise that some sources have more value to historians than others, some are more reliable than others, and some are more useful than others.

Reliability/Usefulness/value questions usually look something like this:

1. Does source A prove that "............"?
2. Does source B support Source A
3. How useful is source C to an historian studying "............"
4. What are the limitations of source D?
5. Which is the most useful source if you were studying "............"
6. Which is the most reliable source?

1. The first thing to ask of the source is, is it reliable? To do this think about:
   - Who wrote it? What did the author do?
   - When was it written?
   - Why was it written? Why did the author produce the source? What motives or intentions can be seen?
   - Is the author expressing his thoughts and beliefs? What are they?
   - What views or opinions is the author putting forward?
   - Does it match your own knowledge of the subject?

2. The second thing to ask of the source is, is it useful or valuable to an historian? Remember just because a source is not very reliable does not mean it is not useful or of value to a historian. E.g. A source written by a male doctor that gives an unfavourable view of a female doctor may be useful in telling an historian about male attitudes towards female doctors at that time.

3. Usefulness/Value of sources can only be decided when you know what the historian wants to use the source for. Once you know the question being asked you need to make two lists. What are the uses of this source to answer the question? What are the problems of using this source to answer that question?
4. Source Comparison

Once you are happy with the skills required to answer the 3 previous types of questions, comparison questions are a piece of cake. Comparison questions usually look something like this:

*Compare the value of Sources H and K for an historian enquiring into....*

*Do you think that Source B is more useful than Source C for an enquiry into......*

*In what ways do Sources D and E agree about ........*

*To what extent do Sources A and B agree about ........*

In many ways there are two types of question in source comparison, those that wish you to compare their value and those that wish you to look for differences and similarities. You know how to tackle the former from the last chapter.

1) The question may well ask you to compare two sources, but more likely you will be asked, what do these sources agree on, or how do they differ. Whichever way the question is worded, you MUST always look for both SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES.

2) As with usefulness/value questions it is often useful to draw up a table.

**HINTS FOR YOUR ANSWER**

1) Although the question asks you to look at how far the sources agree, to answer the question fully, you must also consider the areas of disagreement.

2) Having completed the table you should be clear on whether the sources agree on a great deal, on some aspects but not others, or not at all. You can therefore now write a solid answer.
3) For a well-structured answer, first write about the points on which the sources agree, then write about the points on which they do not agree. Finally write a small conclusion commenting on the extent to which they agree.

• When a question asks you to compare sources, it expects your answer to include similarities and differences.
• Draw up a quick table to focus your thoughts.
• Even if the details are slightly different, the sources might agree on a broader issue.

5. Interpretation
These questions are usually the last to be asked on Paper 2 and carry the most marks. You should be prepared to spend more time on these questions. They will ask you to explain or make a judgement about the past. You are usually required to use the sources and your own knowledge.

Interpretation questions usually look something like this:

Do you agree that there were very few advances in surgery prior to Pasteur’s development of the Germ Theory in 1861? Use all the sources and your own knowledge to explain your answer.

Source E suggests that Fleming played the greatest role in the development of Penicillin. How far do you agree with this statement? Use the sources and your own knowledge to explain your answer.

1) It would not be feasible to go through a sample interpretation question due to the number of sources and the length of the answer. Nevertheless the important thing to remember in answering this type of question is to produce a balanced and well structured response. You should also plan what you are going to say - again maybe in the form of a table.

2) You should structure your answer like this:

• An opening paragraph which refers to the question and suggests your opinion.
• Points from the sources and your own knowledge that support the view in the question.
• Points from the sources and your own knowledge that oppose the view in the question.
• A closing paragraph, which again refers to the question and sums up your opinion.
• Plan your answer and your time carefully.
• Use the sources and your own knowledge.