Tackling the Documents paper at AS

Cartoons from *Punch*

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AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT IN THE NEW A LEVEL is the source work. In the AS Level it is worth 40 per cent of the total marks awarded for the exam.

How you can achieve a good grade

Common-sense points

1. The first requirement is to know your subject. If you are studying the unification of Germany, for example, make sure that you have revised the syllabus thoroughly, as the documents set you in the exam will cover some key aspect of the course. Without having a good background knowledge, you will not be able to interpret the documents effectively.
2. Read through the documents in the exam paper carefully. They usually contain several different points. Note the mark allocation, as it indicates how much you should write. Each question also tells you which document(s) it is asking you to analyse. Only bring in information from the other documents if it is relevant, or tests the reliability of the document you are evaluating. If you are asked to use your own knowledge as well, you are expected to use relevant background information from your course.

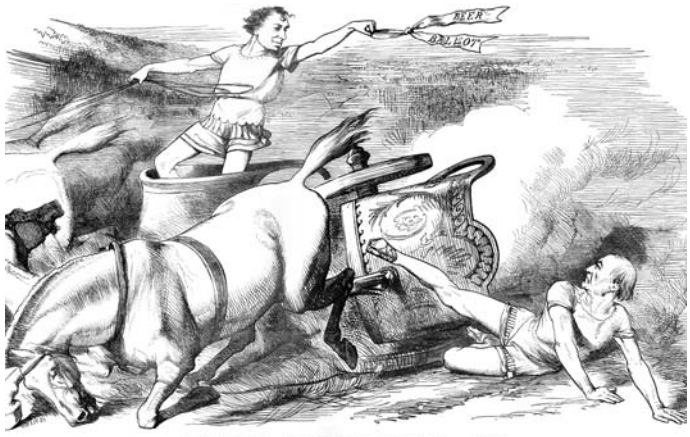
What analytical skills are needed?

1. Accurate comprehension. This is the basis of all interpretative skills. You need to understand what the sources are saying. Are they a factual account, propaganda or satire?
2. Evaluation. This means making an assessment of the evidence in a document. Ask yourself what the particular document you are studying actually shows and how reliable is it as a source. For instance, where does it come from and what is its date? Use your background knowledge and, if relevant, the other documents, to check its reliability and utility - that is, what use is it to you in solving the question you are asked? A satirical cartoon may be helpful in shedding light on why a particular policy is unpopular. Similarly, a government propaganda document can indicate what a government wants to hide. In evaluating a cartoon or picture, ask yourself what is the overall message the artist wants to communicate. Then go on to see what it tells you about the events and people portrayed.

A worked example

Punch first appeared in 1841. From that date its pages, with its weekly topical and political cartoon, offer a contemporary commentary on events for the rest of the nineteenth century. Consequently, *Punch* has become the textbook writers' quarry from which appropriate, and to students often impenetrable, illustration can be taken. Many students find the allusions made in the cartoons difficult to understand, and these cartoons, unlike Walt Disney ones, are not always particularly funny. As illustrations in the textbook it is easy to pass them by without giving them much attention and without making the effort to draw conclusions and inferences from them. That effort can be very worthwhile. In this example of the kind of source question you may have to tackle at AS Source A is a *Punch* cartoon from 1874 commenting on the general election of that year when Benjamin Disraeli, leader of the Conservative party, defeated his great rival William Gladstone and his Liberal party. Study that and read the two sources that follow.

SOURCE A: *Punch* cartoon from February 1874 expressing a view on the general election.



National Spring Meeting, 1874

SOURCE B: an extract from a letter written by Gladstone to his brother in February 1874

> We have been borne down in a torrent of gin and beer. Next to this has been the action of the Education Act of 1870, and the subsequent controversies. Many of the Roman Catholics have voted against us because we are not denominational; and many of the Nonconformists have at least abstained from voting because we are. Doubtless there have been other minor agencies; but these are the chief ones.

SOURCE C: adapted from E.J. Feuchtwanger *Democracy and Empire Britain 1865-1914* (1985)

> The underlying cause of the Liberal defeat was the simultaneous loss of working and middle class voters. The working classes were disappointed because Liberal reforms had not really changed their lives. The middle classes were alarmed not merely by what the Liberal Party had done, but by events such as the Paris Commune, which seemed to promise threats to all property and security in the future. The loss of support of particular groups of Liberal activists meant that the Liberal Party could probably not realise its full voting potential, while the improvements in the Conservative organisation in urban areas had the opposite effect in the Tory camp.

Analysing the sources

It is easy to recognise the characters in the cartoon as Disraeli and Gladstone. The suggestion that the election is a contest between the two men reminds us that the 1874 and 1880

general elections were more like modern elections than any previous ones. The electorate, *Punch* implies, had a clear choice between the two leaders. In this two chariot race it was Gladstone who had taken the tumble. The ribbons waved by the exultant Disraeli give us *Punch's* explanation for the result - 'BEER' and 'BALLOT'. The way in which the cartoon is captioned also adds to the sense that this election was the culminating contest between the two politicians - it is 'the final heat' of the 'National Spring Meeting'. The Gladstone letter also focuses on the importance of the drink question, but adds the impact of the 1870 Education Act on various religious groups, particularly the Catholics and the Nonconformists. Both A and B pose the same question - do they give us a clear view of what happened and why the Liberals lost? Source C begins to direct attention to other factors while continuing to stress the importance of Liberal legislation. There is a hint at the changing political outlook of the middle classes and a contrasting of Conservative organisation and positive action with Liberal disintegration and apathy.

The Questions

(a) With reference to Source A and your own knowledge explain the meaning of the 'BALLOT' in the context of the 1874 general election. (3 marks)

(b) Study Source B - with reference to it and your own knowledge comment on the value of Source B as an interpretation of the reasons for the Liberal electoral defeat in 1874. (7 marks)

(c) Study all three sources and use your own knowledge.
'The main reason for the defeat of the Liberals in 1874 was the unpopularity of its policies and legislation.'
With reference to all the sources and your own knowledge explain whether you agree or disagree with this statement. (15 marks)

Using the sources in your answers

Remember, the examiner will be looking for the way you refer to the sources in your answers. Certainly the mark scheme for part (c) will restrict the level of mark your response will receive if you refer only to the sources or only to your knowledge.

Part (a) is the starter question to get you into the task. It is also designed to test your understanding of a term or issue in the context of the topic chosen for the question. In this case a reference to the Ballot Act of 1872 would score at the lower level of the mark scheme while some consideration of the implications of the ballot, as implied in the cartoon, for the Liberals in the general election would move the answer up through the levels.

Any evaluation of utility or reliability (question (b)) requires some comment on the provenance of the source or the likely attitude of the writer. In this case the writer was in a good position to understand what had happened and he was writing in the immediate aftermath of the defeat. Gladstone, however, focuses on the issues he felt were important in the result, the Licensing Act and the Education Act, and their consequences within the Liberal party. This is not a complete picture - what about legislation that alienated the working class? There is no reference, perhaps understandably, to Disraeli and the changed organisation of the Conservative party. The letter is useful in helping us to explain what Gladstone felt about things but it cannot give a completely impartial view of what went wrong. Gladstone is not going to admit to his own mishandling of the situation in the weeks before the election and his fighting the election on the abolition of income tax, a policy that had no appeal for the working class and which no longer had the resonance with the middle class it might have had in the 1860s.

In your response to (c) the examiner will expect you to use both the sources and your own knowledge. Be explicit in your references to the sources. The *Punch* cartoon would be a good starting point with its reference to both the significance of the secret ballot and of the licensing legislation. Somewhere in your answer it would be worth pointing out the way in which the cartoonist presents the contest - as a clear choice between Gladstone and Disraeli. Source A agrees with Gladstone's opinion to the extent that Gladstone's 'we have been borne down in a torrent of gin and beer' refers to the Licensing Act and the belief that the brewers and publicans had used their influence against the Liberals. The new element in Source B is the Education Act 'and the subsequent controversies'. This should lead you into a discussion of the significance of the Nonconformist revolt. Source C reinforces some of the points made in the other sources but should remind you of the trade union legislation of 1871 which protected the funds of trade unions but made picketing illegal. Working-class defections were as important as middle class and Whig defections from the Liberals. Source C should also enable you to discuss the part played by Disraeli from 1872 in exploiting the weaknesses of the government and in encouraging John Gorst in his endeavours to give the Conservatives the superior organisation they possessed by 1874. Finally, on a wider front, you would need to say something about the changing attitudes of the middle class, their resentment and fear of 'meddling legislation' and the increasing number of middle-class votes that were swinging to the Conservatives for stability and security. The sudden appearance of the Home Rulers in Ireland and the heavy losses the Liberals experienced should also find a place in your answer.

Part (c) does ask for some evaluation. The obvious response is to agree with the hypothesis and to use the sources and your knowledge to achieve this. To get into the higher levels of the mark scheme you will need to be examining a wider range of factors and reaching a much more balanced answer, or even one that disagrees with the statement. The examiner is looking for your argument and your use of appropriate material in the sources and from your own knowledge in support of it.

Conclusions

- Treat cartoons and other illustrations with care. It is too easy to skim over them and to miss the point.
- Study them carefully.
- Jot notes around them as you might highlight sections of the text.
- Make sure that you can put them into their context.
- Consider the questions they raise - is the artist making a political point? What is omitted?
- In your answers refer explicitly to the cartoon and its content just as you would when using the written texts.
- Remember that historians are always challenging interpretations. Do not be afraid to offer a critical or contrasting view or to challenge the statements in the sources.

Howard Martin, Head of Curriculum, Poynton High School, is the author of *Britain in the 19th Century,* Nelson - Challenging History series. His earlier contributions to this series, available on Exam and study advice for AS/A2 Modern History on our history-ontheweb site include:

Attitudes to parliamentary reform, 1831;
Pictures, cartoons and illustrations as historical evidence.
Using Statistical Sources: The 1841 Election