

# Skills Supplement

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## Working with Sources

### Votes for Women

William Simpson. Latterly Cheltenham College and Senior OCR Examiner

#### The nature of source material

SOURCES ARE CONVENTIONALLY DIVIDED into two categories, primary and secondary. Primary sources are the tracks left by our predecessors, sometimes by intent, more often by accident. Those made for the 'deliberate record', see A. Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 1970, pp 136-7, range from government statistics, cabinet minutes, accounts of parliamentary debates and newspaper articles to memoirs and autobiographies. The 'unwitting testimony' is to be found in private correspondence, family photographs, private diaries, e-mails and telephone calls, in fact in all those sources never intended for public scrutiny. Secondary sources are the attempts made by historians at various levels to make sense of those tracks, and by linking them to provide coherent accounts of the past. They range in kind from the scholarly article to the school textbook and in scale from the history of a continent to the history of a village. They may cover anything from a few days, as with the Cuba crisis of November 1962, to 2,500 years, like Norman Davies's *History of Europe* which begins with the Ancient Greeks and ends in the twentieth century. Each category of source depends on the other. Without primary sources there can be no History. But, equally, without the efforts of successive generations of historians, those primary sources would have remained undiscovered and inert. Anyone wanting to find out about the past has to begin by looking at the work that has already been done. Primary sources can only be understood in a context that is already reasonably familiar. The famous 'piece of paper', Hitler's promise to work for peace, which Chamberlain waved when he returned from the Munich Conference with Hitler in 1938, can only be understood with a full knowledge of the Czech crisis which preceded it.

Under the 30 year rule, adopted in 1967, most government records now have to be open to public scrutiny. All recent histories of the Second World War, for instance, have had to take into account the use made of the signal traffic intercepted by British intelligence through the breaking of the codes used by Enigma, the German encoding machine. This was only acknowledged in 1974. Churchill's *War Memoirs* were written without any reference to it. The Freedom of Information Act, passed in 2000, has accelerated this process of disclosure. It is too early to tell how much difference this will make to the writing of history, but the origins of the Iraq war launched in 2003 have already been thoroughly investigated. Evidence on the origins of the First and Second World Wars is still coming to light. In March 2005 the admiring letters written by Lord Rothermere,

proprietor of the *Daily Mail* at the time, to Hitler in the summer of 1939 were released for the first time.

Thus, there is a complex and continuing relationship between primary and secondary sources. As new evidence comes to light it is absorbed and reflected in the secondary accounts of the period or topic to which it relates. This relationship is implicitly recognised by the three examining boards, AQA, Edexcel and OCR who all include in their specifications the requirement that both primary and secondary sources should be included in their source-based questions. While they differ in detail, their questions are designed to test four different skills:

1. *Comprehension*. The ability to clarify terms and phrases by reference to their context.
2. *Comparison*. The ability to bring out differences and similarities in points of view.
3. *Evaluation*. The ability to assess the reliability of a source, to discern the viewpoint of its author and to indicate the information and insight it can contribute to the overall picture.
4. *Synoptic skills*. 'Synoptic' is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as 'taking or affording a general view of the whole'. In this context, it means the ability to reach an informed judgement using the sources available and one's further knowledge. It is here that understanding the relationship between primary and secondary sources is crucial.

#### Votes for women

One of the central developments in British twentieth century history was the struggle to gain the vote for women, and the explanation of how this was achieved. It rightly figures in the AS syllabuses of all three examination boards: AQA Britain 1895-1918, Edexcel Votes for Women and OCR England in a New Century, 1900-1918. It thus makes a very suitable topic through which to illustrate the variety of sources and the kinds of question that pupils are likely to be asked to address.

The sources which follow have not, to my knowledge, been used in any previous examination paper, but they are, I hope, a representative selection of the kind of material that candidates might encounter.

Every group of sources in an examination question is likely to focus on a particular problem connected to the topic under consideration. In this example it is whether the cause of women's suffrage was aided or hindered by the activities of the militants. Most of them were members of



shared goal was votes for women on the same terms as men. In Source A, Emmeline Pankhurst claims that militant methods revived the Suffrage movement ('The Suffrage movement was almost dead, the women had lost heart') and brought new life to the constitutional movement as well, and that militancy was only adopted when all other methods had failed. Millicent Fawcett, the leader of the NUWSS argues in Source B that the intention of the militants 'to make war deliberately upon the public, to injure, alarm and exasperate' will only be 'once more to make the suffrage movement unpopular, and to convince the Government that so far as the electors are concerned it may safely leave our grievances unredressed'. A distinction should be drawn between the relatively peaceful methods pursued by the militants between 1905 and 1910, which the suffragists were prepared to accept, and the more violent tactics pursued in 1911-14, which they condemned.

**Question 3**

The reliability of the Source can be judged by the fact that it is a verbatim quotation from a speech delivered in public. There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the words spoken. The speaker, Lord Curzon, is clearly hostile to the cause of women's suffrage, both because of the position he occupies and the evident pleasure he takes in the success of the Anti-Suffrage cause. He is not an unbiased witness, and his views on the prospects for women's suffrage in 1914 need to be read with this in mind. The Source is still very useful because it indicates the hostility which a powerful member of the Conservative party showed to women's suffrage. Curzon, having been Viceroy of India, was to become a member of Lloyd George's War Cabinet in 1916, and foreign secretary thereafter.

**Question 4**

This is a complex question and you need to ensure that you use all the Sources and your further knowledge in the answer. Before making up your mind on whether to agree or disagree with the statement, make a rough summary of the arguments on both sides from the Sources and your wider knowledge:

In favour

Against

**Sources**

Source A. Suffrage cause dead until militants take it up. All other methods have failed.

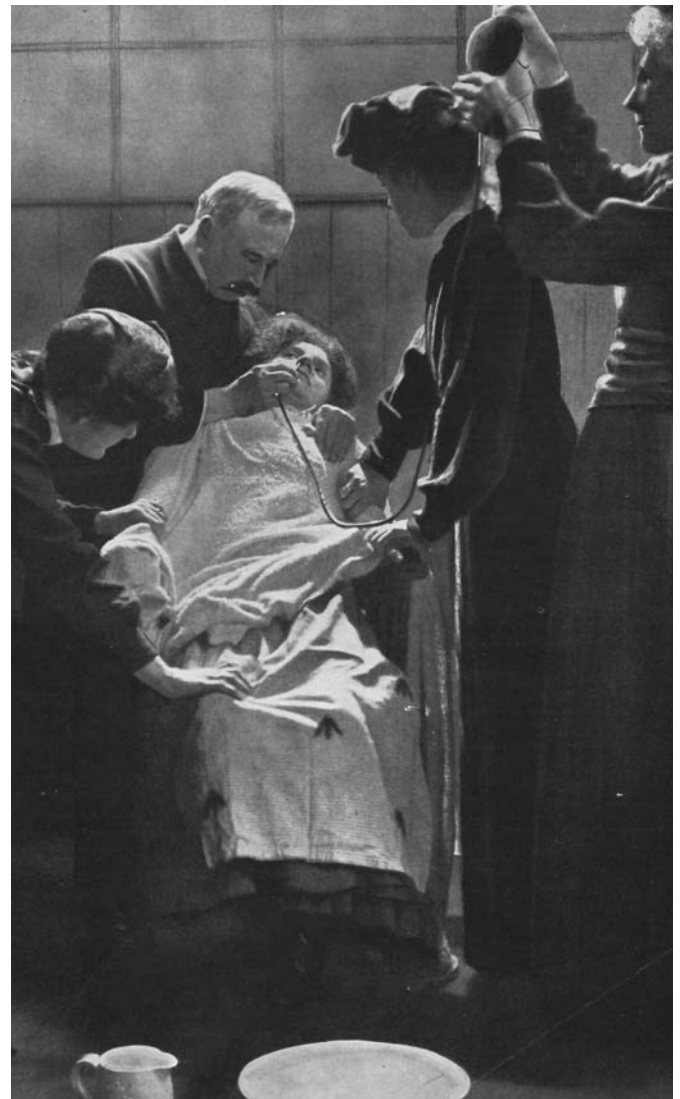
Source D. Morgan's view that without militants cabinet would never have considered women's suffrage.

Source B. Public antagonised by militants.

Source C. References to 'the errors of our opponents' and 'I think we may say that the cause of the women's vote is absolutely dead in the present House of Commons'.

**Further knowledge**

You need to explain that in terms of public opinion and in Parliament the cause of women's suffrage had probably been won by 1911. A Private Member's Bill was passed by 310



One aspect of militants' activity was the hunger strike when they were imprisoned. A suffragist being force fed in prison, 1912

votes to 143. It was the government's refusal to provide time for its passage that led to its failure. It was this which led to a renewal of militant activities which now included arson, attacks on letter boxes, etc., and the antagonising of public opinion. The same bill was defeated by 14 votes in 1912 because many MPs changed their minds.

Source D makes no reference to the First World War in which women's contribution to the war effort certainly had the effect of converting many opponents of women's suffrage, notably Asquith. It is also worth noting that the militants abandoned their campaign in August 1914, and showed their fervent patriotism, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst in particular.

**Conclusion.** Make up your own mind!

William Simpson, formerly head of History at Cheltenham College, is the author of several A-Level textbooks and *Twentieth Century British History, A Teaching Resource Book*, Routledge, 2005, He was, until recently, a senior OCR Examiner.

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