Essay writing for everyone:
an investigation into different methods used to teach Year 9 to write an essay

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Essay writing is at the very heart of school history, yet despite the wide range of developments in this area over the past decade, pupils still struggle. Alex Scott and his department decided to investigate a variety of methods to see what methods worked in enabling pupils to construct essays successfully and independently at Key Stage 3. His conclusions may encourage many to rethink not only the methods they use in the classroom, but also how those methods are used in order to encourage both independence and progression.

'The writing's on the wall' bemoans Hillary Spurling in the Sunday Times Education Supplement, March 2006, as she assesses the worrying findings of a report on the standards of university students' writing, compiled over a six-year period and based on seventy one universities around Britain.

> One of the recurrent themes of the report is the confusion, embarrassment and fear endured by students who find themselves confronted with written assignments they don't understand and can't begin to tackle. The inability to write, based on lack of preparation and practice, destroys young people's confidence.[1]

Teachers of any literary subject, including history, are used to listening to concerns frequently raised by universities, businesses and parents that our children are leaving school unable to write essays, and so Hillary Spurling's findings are reflective of a wider criticism of the teaching of writing skills in schools. Alan Booth has further reinforced some of these themes, by exposing the tensions in school history departments between 'needing to get students into university at all costs and preparing them for historical study when they arrive there.'[2] The perception, therefore, is that teachers of all subjects, including history, would rather give their students the answers, than show them how to come to their own conclusions and express themselves independently.

Sentiments such as these cause upset in the history teaching community, which prides itself on innovative approaches to essay writing. We work hard to show our students how to organise their thoughts into categories, such as long-term and short-term causes through the use of sorting cards, and then to structure their ideas into paragraphs through the technique of scaffolding.[3] We use innovative comparisons, such as the 'evidence sandwich' or 'hamburger', to demonstrate paragraph structure with an opening argument, several pieces of evidence in the middle and a concluding sentence at the end.[4] These methods are proven to improve students' understanding of the essay writing process and to increase attainment.

Nonetheless, the problem still remains that students lack confidence when writing independently and, after observing my year 8 classes writing the essay 'Why was there a Civil War in the 1640s?' I began to speculate on some reasons for this. First, it seemed as though several students had failed to understand the point of the question. For example, one typical answer began 'Hello, my name is Leah and here is my essay telling you everything about the Civil War.' While this was a worthy ambition, it was not what had been asked. A second problem was that some students were using the sorting cards I had prepared as little nuggets of truth, to be inserted into paragraphs at suitable points, rather than as prompts to further thought, which suggested that they were failing to develop their own ideas and opinions, and therefore not truly engaging with the exercise.

Finally, I began to wonder whether previous essays completed in year 7, such as 'Why did William win the Battle of Hastings?' had failed to provide a sufficient grounding for the challenges of year 8. For example, to answer the Hastings question students are instructed to write under the headings 'luck', 'skill' and 'mistakes' which are provided by the teacher. When they come to tackle other questions, such as 'Why was there a Civil War in the 1640s?' they might logically assume that there are the same three categories of reasons (luck, skill, mistakes), and when told that the categories are now political, economic and religious, confusion is the likely result. To sum up, it seemed to me as though the students lacked understanding of the point of essay writing; they did not believe that they could bring their own opinions to the process and they had not developed sufficient confidence from previous exercises.

I decided to experiment with two different approaches to teaching essay writing and, as a result, have begun to develop some principles for an integrated approach to

this vital skill. It is clear that students' writing abilities improve when teachers choose essay questions carefully and integrate them into schemes of work, in order to reflect the different categories of non-fiction writing and to stimulate their classes' interest. I illustrate a variety of techniques not only to enable students to answer the question, but also to take them through the process of writing a history essay, and finally, I record and analyse the results of my experiments, to provide an example of how to measure the success of different techniques and to inform future lesson planning.

The Experiment

When we set essay writing activities for our classes, we face two issues:

1. How can we help our students to answer the question we have set, develop their confidence and enable them to write a good essay?
2. How can we help them to understand the very process of writing an essay, so that they can repeat the process next time with greater independence and confidence?

It is my perception that we as history teachers are adept at the first issue, but that there is some room for new techniques to help us improve on the second. In order to investigate this issue our department decided to split the Year 9 cohort into two groups.[5] Different methods were then used to enable each group to answer the question 'Why was Hitler so popular in the 1930s?'

Group A: This group was given sets of cards, which, with teacher guidance, they were encouraged to sort into groups to provide themes for paragraphs to write the essay (see figure 1).

Group B: This group brainstormed different answers to the question with their teachers, and then spent time discussing the point of the question and the writing type with a help-sheet (figure 2).

The aim of the experiment was to investigate whether the students working with factual aides, such as card sorts, performed any better than those taught with an approach developing their understanding of the overall process of answering an essay problem. I also wanted to investigate whether there were any differences in the ways that they answered the question, based on how they had been taught in a lesson. Eltham Hill is an 11-16 girls comprehensive in London, where standards of literacy on arrival in Year 7 are often lower than average and there is a high proportion of students with EAL, and so the need for good teaching of essay writing is paramount. I chose to trial these methods with the whole of the year 9 cohort, as they form a large and representative sample group.

Choosing a question

Before the experiment could begin, it was important to pick a suitable essay question, which would be interesting and accessible to everyone in the year group, but which would also provide opportunities for students to develop the principles of essay writing. A poorly-conceived essay question can in fact have a negative impact on students' learning and confidence, by confusing them in terms of the structure expected or by asking for something which is either too simple or beyond them to answer, and so some careful thought is needed. After developing some principles for choosing essay questions, I picked 'Why was Hitler so popular in the 1930?' for the reasons laid out below:

1. Pick a question that students want to answer
As Robert Phillips has shown, students' interest in what they are learning can be maximised by the use of engaging Initial Stimulus Material at the start of a new topic, and Matthew Lipman's 'Communities of Enquiry' are an excellent way to motivate students by giving them the opportunity to set their own key questions for learning.[6] The same principles apply for essay writing, that if students can see the point of the essay and are interested by the question, they will engage with the topic to a greater degree and their understanding will improve. The question 'Why was Hitler so popular in the 1930s?' offered a truly difficult problem for students to answer. At the beginning of the course, I had engaged them with stimulus material showing Hitler ranting and raving at the Nuremburg rally, pictures of families in bomb shelters and an image of a yellow star worn by the Jews. If Hitler had been so seemingly crazy, if he had caused a World War and persecuted so many people, then why on earth, we wondered, had he been so popular? The question is easily explained and Year 9 found it interesting and meaningful, and so levels of engagement were high from the start.

2. Pick an open question that can be accessed at many levels
For all students to be able to progress, whatever their current level, the questions we set must also be answerable at a number of different levels, based on the work done in previous lessons in a scheme of work. For example, 'Why was Hitler so popular in the 1930s?' fits neatly into this category because it can be answered with a simple statement, 'because he brainwashed people', or in much more depth, by analysing the problems in Germany in the interwar years and the policies Hitler proposed to solve them. As a result, students can quickly see how they can progress from a simple answer to a more complex one, and in that way improve their level of essay writing.

Going back to the classic 'Why did William win the battle of Hastings?' the question can become more effective for teaching essay writing as part of a more open ended study, considering the growing convergence

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of Anglo-Saxon England and Norman France in the 1050s-60s, or the claimants to the throne in 1066, so students can understand the importance of the topic to English history and the variety of ways of answering it. Open-ended questions, based on a number of previous lessons, also allow students to develop their own themes and paragraph headings, and to engage with the problem without such a degree of teacher influence, which should ultimately give them the confidence to write more independently in the future.

3. Pick a question which fits into one of the non-fiction Writing Types

The National Strategy for Literacy sets out a variety of 'types of non-fiction writing' and the National Curriculum for History attainment targets also stipulate that students should write 'narratives, descriptions, explanations and interpretations', so it is important that any question chosen fits neatly into one of these writing types.[7] By planning a programme of essay questions as a department and writing them into schemes of work, students get the opportunity to practise the different types and understand the similarities and differences between them. Furthermore, there is no reason to ignore the more traditional narrative writing type when planning programmes of essays as Séan Lang has argued, since practising narratives will help students not only to develop a useful skill stipulated by the National Curriculum, but also to differentiate between narratives and more analytical writing types.[8] 'Why was Hitler so powerful in the 1930s?' fits well into the explanation writing type, and therefore helps students to understand this writing type.

Ways of teaching good essay writing

Having chosen the question for the experiment, I planned how each group would be taught. I decided that group A should be given some factual information, in the form of sorting cards, to enable them to organise their thoughts and construct an essay without having to remember too much detail in their heads. Group B would be taught in a more open-ended way, as teachers brainstormed initial ideas with the class and then directed them towards the writing type needed with a help sheet. Below I discuss the methods I used with group B, which helped them not only to answer the question set, but also to understand the bigger point of essay writing.

Brainstorming

A useful way to initiate classes to think about an essay question is through brainstorming, which allows students to bring their initial conceptions, and misconceptions, to the fore at the very start as a basis for further development. Through brainstorming, students come up with a variety of ideas, either from the notes taken in previous lessons or from their own thoughts, so that they themselves become the main resource for the first part of the lesson. In Group B, we brainstormed by choosing three responsible students to come to the front of the class and write up notes on a

mind map on the board, while the rest of the class suggested answers. It was the teacher's job to coordinate the process and give ideas on how the points raised might begin to be categorised or developed.

This simple technique requires little planning, but has the great advantage that it gets the whole class involved, as every student will be able to come up with one or two reasons, even if they show little knowledge or understanding of the period. For example, brainstorming 'Why was Hitler so powerful in the 1930s?' led to complex answers about the disillusionment felt towards the political leaders who had signed the Treaty of Versailles, as well as very simple answers like 'because he was a cunning man'. Both are right in some ways, and the variety of answers shows that the question is well differentiated and is being accessed by many students at different levels. All students not only learn ideas that they could use in their essays, but also develop their understanding of how an essay can be written. They also avoid falling into the trap of thinking that there is one answer to the question, or that a good mark will depend on arranging the 'nuggets of truth' in the most effective manner.

The drawbacks of the brainstorming technique are that it often relies on a few more confident (and not necessarily the most able!) students voicing their ideas, and so teachers have to work hard to make sure that a variety of opinions are heard, that incorrect ideas are dealt with sensitively and that weaker students do not simply copy ideas that they do not fully understand.

Posters and tables of writing types

All teachers in our department have in our classrooms eye-catching posters, which illustrate the main writing types most common in history:

- Narrative
- Description
- Explanation
- Interpretation

We also have 2 further posters, which give advice on how to answer source questions and how to take good class notes (See figure 3). Teachers refer to these posters whenever a writing task is set, so that students understand exactly which writing style they need to adopt. As these posters can be used from year 7 through to year 11 and as they occupy a central place in each teaching room, students can also make connections in their own heads between the question 'How harsh was life in the middle ages?' which they tackled in year 7 to 'How successful were the first pioneers to the West?' which they answer in year 10.

The posters contain a central picture, illustrating the structure of each type of essay, which can be developed through role-play to help a class to understand how paragraphs and points interrelate physically. For example,

an interpretation is likened to a set of scales, and students act this out by writing up their ideas on A4 sheets and coming up to the front of the class to step onto one side or another of a metaphorical set of scales. Teachers can then develop the concept by giving weight to certain sheets, either by picking heavier students to take more important points, or (more sensitively!) varying the size of the sheet that they hold, so that, by the end of the activity, students can visually see the scales moving and make their conclusions. Explanations can similarly be dramatised by encouraging students to write down ideas and then to find other students with linking causes or effects to join with, thus illustrating that this sort of writing type needs to link causes with effects to show how a problem was solved. These activities have the great advantage that they actually teach students how to write essays in general, rather than just the specific question being answered, and they can be great fun!

In my trial, Group B was given a table, derived from DFES guidelines on writing non-fiction developing the main points on the posters.[9] This approach has the advantage of setting out to students, in very clear terms, exactly what the purpose of their essay is and how to construct it from the top level of paragraphs down to individual words.

They were given advice on concepts which we as teachers often take for granted, but which cause great concern for students who are unfamiliar with the construct of a formal essay, such as the overall purpose of the text, the sorts of language or the tense to use and the level of detail needed. An explicit discussion of the writing type needed also shows students how to concentrate on the right type of essay, thereby avoiding the classic history traps of 'falling into narrative' or 'losing the point of the question'.

Modelling

A final technique to get students writing good essays is modelling different writing styles. The teacher presents two extracts from two essays, and gives students tasks to do in analysing the text, for example:

- Underline 3 connecting words in the text
- Find some examples of detailed language
- Find an example of informal English
- Find a point which is vague or exaggerated
- Which extract do you think is the best and why?

Below are two ways of answering the question 'Why was there so much progress in medicine during the

Figure 1: cards used to answer the question with Group A

People were angry about the Treaty of Versailles of 1919.	Hitler built up the army.
Hitler promised to get back Germany's land after WWI.	Hitler wanted to take over other countries to give Germans more space.
Many Germans lost their jobs in the Depression of the 1930s.	The Communists wanted to get rid of the factory bosses.
German businesses lost money in the Wall Street Crash of 1929.	Hitler was seen as a strong leader.
Hitler took over Austria in 1939.	Hitler took over Czechoslovakia in 1939.
Hitler promised to stop paying reparation money for losing WWI.	Hitler promised to get rid of the communists.

Industrial Revolution?' which have been successful in generating interest and raising achievement with Year 10 classes studying the History of Medicine.

Text 1
Back in the Victorian times people were poor and living in factories and everyone was ill and dying of cholera and stuff. It was really bad cos they were so poor and nobody cared and everything. But things started to get better due to Pasteur and the germs, because he found out that there are germs and that's what makes us ill and when he found that out everything got better. And there was also technology and science around at that time. So that's why things got better in medicine.

Text 2
One reason why medicine progressed in the Industrial Revolution, 1750-1900, was due to science. For example, it was through science that Louis Pasteur formulated the Germ Theory in 1861. At first, he began his investigations in a beer factory, when the owners were worried that the beer was going off. He observed, using a microscope, that germs were responsible for the problem, and then reasoned carefully to conclude that the same thing might be happening in humans

These activities allow students to compare the different styles of writing an essay, and encourage them to think about what sorts of language, grammar and punctuation would be most appropriate for their own essays. By contrasting a very good and a very poor piece of writing, a teacher can have a lot of fun with a class without offending anyone who might actually be tempted to follow the poor writing style, and students can start to model phrases and sentences of their own in their heads. We did not use the modelling technique in the Year 9 experiment, but I have included it another good method to enable students to develop their sentence structure and use of words and grammar.

Results of teaching experiments

While lots of excellent ideas and new teaching techniques are proposed and developed by the teaching history community, we rarely have time to assess their impact against other more tried and tested means. I decided that it would be important to evaluate some of the different methods, first to find some hard evidence for their practicability, and second, to illustrate a framework by which other teachers may evaluate their own teaching methods.

To mark the essays, I developed a mark scheme along the lines of Sally Burnham and Geraint Brow, which can be seen in Figure 4.[10] I recorded the results and then separated the two accelerated classes from the four

non-accelerated, mixed ability classes, as the figures seemed to tell a different story. I continued by calculating the percentages of students who received each level and finally used the weighted scores to calculate the mean average level, in other words, the average mark that students scored in each group.

The mean average levels are shown below:

Mean Average Scores for Mixed Ability Classes:
Group A (cards)   3.0
Group B (help-sheet)   2.9

Mean Average Scores for Accelerated Classes
Group A (cards)   3.9
Group B (help-sheet)   3.6

The results can be seen in more detail in Tables 1-2 and Graphs 1-2, which show the levels for the mixed ability classes and then the accelerated classes respectively.

Analysis
The results show that, for the mixed classes, there was a very small increase in the average scores of students who used the sorting cards of 0.1 of a level, but for the accelerated classes, there was a larger increase in average scores of students who used the sorting cards, of 0.3 of a level. Whether these results are significant is beyond the scope of this article, but certain points can be discussed.

Firstly, it is interesting to note that factual aides, such as cards, had a positive effect, in helping students to recall facts and structure their essays. However, in both cases the increase in attainment was small, which suggests that students can generate most of the information to answer a question through the technique of brainstorming, without the need for written prompts or aides. It is therefore debatable whether using factual aides such as cards are worth the extra increase in attainment, in light of the concerns that they may encourage students to become dependent on their teachers.

Secondly, it is particularly revealing that the students who benefited the most from the cards were in the accelerated classes, in other words, those who might be expected to have improved recall and analytical skills. All teachers in the experiment noticed that this was because the higher-level students seemed to use the cards as prompts to recalled information, which they then expounded and developed during the course of their essays, which is exactly how cards should be used. Lower ability students were less able to utilise the cards in this way, and more likely to see them as little nuggets of truth, to be inserted into their essays at the correct points, which led to somewhat incongruous sentences and interrupted the flow of their essays. Some students had started off answering the question in their own words, but had then felt concerned that their explanations did not correlate with the information given on the cards, and had changed tack to copying out the cards at the end of their essays.

Y9 Assessment: Why was Hitler so popular in the 1930s?

The task

This is an <u>explanation essay</u> to answer '<u>Why was Hitler so popular in the 1930s?</u>'

What is an explanation essay?

Purpose	
▶ What is its purpose?	▶ To explain why something happened
▶ Who is it for?	▶ Answers the question 'WHY?'
▶ How will it be used?	▶ For someone who is interested in the topic
▶ What kind of writing?	▶ Formal style of writing
	▶ Clear and easy to read

Text level	
▶ Layout	▶ Introduction, main section and conclusion
▶ Structure/organisation	▶ Each paragraph around a theme
	▶ Explains how one thing led to another

Sentence level	
▶ Prevailing tense	▶ Past tense
▶ Sentence structure and length	▶ Sentences linked by *next, although, therefore, similarly, as a result, on the other hand, finally*
▶ Linking words	▶ Steps to show how things occurred

Word level	
▶ Stock words and phrases	▶ Treaty of Versailles, 1919
▶ Vocabulary and facts	▶ Communism and dictators
	▶ Wall Street Crash 1929, the Depression
	▶ Hitler's propaganda
	▶ Hitler's foreign policy

Plan

Ideas	Evidence and facts
Introduction	
1st topic	
2nd topic	
3rd topic	
Conclusion	

Figure 3: posters used to illustrate writing types

Writing a **Narrative**

Purpose: To tell a story

In order of events

Could be a diary or a biography

Past tense

Tells when, where, who, what, why?

Key words: Later, meanwhile, because, since, however, nonetheless

Can use images, similes and metaphors

Specific about times, people, events, places, and facts

Writing a **Description**

Purpose: To give information to someone about something

Tone: formal and factual. avoids personal opinions

Like a painting with words

Lots of general information

Headings or paragraphs to categorise information

Past tense

Precise, factual vocabulary

May include tables, diagrams, illustrations or pictures

Writing an **Explanation**

Past Tense

Answers the question "Why?"

Paragraphs or subheadings on different topics

Should be clear and easy to read

Gives lots of steps to show how things occurred

Links ideas together

Purpose: To explain how or why something happened

Key Words: next, although, therefore, similarly, consequently as a result

Writing an **Interpretation**

Purpose: To give strengths and weaknesses or the importance of something

Sentence Starters: Some evidence suggests... On the one hand... On the other hand...

Split into paragraphs

Past tense

Backs up opinions with facts

Like an evaluation of a topic or person

Gives good and bad points

Has a final conclusion

Answers 'how much?' or 'how important?'

Figure 4: Mark scheme for the essay

Level 1	Basic and sometimes inaccurate understanding of a couple of aspects of Germany 1919-1945 (knowledge)
Level 2	Gives some factual knowledge about Germany 1919-1945, gives a simple and unsubstantiated reasons why Hitler came to power (comprehension)
Level 3	Describes Germany 1919-1945 in some detail or tells a story of the period, makes some more developed links to reasons why Hitler came to power (application)
Level 4	Explains reasons why Hitler was popular, using developed sentences and knowledge about the period to support explanations (analysis)
Level 5	Analyses reasons why Hitler was popular, showing the relative importance of different reasons and coming to a synthesised conclusion. (synthesis)

Finally, the very weakest students had not been able to use the cards at all, as they did not comprehend even the simple pieces of information that were contained on them. It seems as though they had failed to understand the overall purpose of the essay, and that the cards therefore had added to their confusion. It is ironic, therefore, that an activity that we often consider to be a good tool for differentiation, seemed to benefit the most able rather than the least.

- Results from the year 9 investigation described here show that card-sorting activities are still a beneficial way of enabling students to write essays, but their benefits should be weighed against the concern that they increase the dependence of a student on their teacher.
- Card sorting activities for enabling essay writing benefit more able students the most, whilst their effects on the less able can be negligible and possibly even negative.

Conclusions

Throughout the article I have suggested that there is room for teachers to develop new activities to teach the process of essay writing, in order to develop students' independence and understanding of the process of essay writing. As a result, I have come to the following conclusions:

- Departments can benefit from a programme of essays for all year groups, integrated into schemes of work, which set interesting, open ended tasks for students, within the frameworks of the writing types of narrative, description, explanation and interpretation.
- There are a number of ways of teaching the process and structure of essay writing, including the use of posters, role-play to enact explanations and interpretations, brainstorming and modelling, all of which can be fun and effective with a class.
- Essays can be marked using a table of levels such as in figure 4, and it is useful for teachers to record and examine the levels their classes reach in graph or mean average form, so as to find the most successful teaching techniques.

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