

BBC Bitesize - GCSE History- Exam Skills

Episode 1: How to answer a knowledge question

ANNOUNCER: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

DATSHIANE: I'm Datshiane Navanayagam, a history graduate and BBC presenter.

KATIE: And I'm Katie Charlwood, a history podcaster.

DATSHIANE: And this is Bitesize GCSE History.

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KATIE: This is the first in a four-part series on History GCSE exam skills. Throughout this series we'll be helping you with hints and tips in order to revise for GCSE History.

DATSHIANE: And in this episode, we'll be opening up the exam skills toolbox to look at how to answer 'knowledge question'.

KATIE: We'll be defining concepts such as causes, consequences, change and continuity.

DATSHIANE: And significance and similarity.

KATIE: We'll also be looking closer at the differences between exam keywords, such as describe and explain, and thinking about what the examiner is really asking for. And at the end of each episode, we'll have a quick 30-second summary of all the main takeaways.

DATSHIANE: We'll always be here, so feel free to press pause along the way if you want to stop and make notes.

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DATSHIANE: So, Katie, history is about events that have happened in the past.

KATIE: Obviously.

DATSHIANE: So, this is the very first step to revising history. We have to remember the basic facts surrounding those events: what happened, where did it happen, when did it happen, and who was involved?

KATIE: Oh, very conveniently beginning with it a W: who, what, where and when?

DATSHIANE: 'Who' relates to the names, so that might be things like people or countries involved; 'where' is the place or places the events happened; 'when' are the dates that it happened; and 'what' is any other information about the event, so what was it or what happened?

KATIE: We can also add some 'how' evidence relating to the event, so information such as 'how much?', 'how long?', 'how many?' These are the basic statistics of the event. On their own, these 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when' and 'how' (factual evidence) are only the beginning. Next step is to think about concepts such as the cause, consequence, change and continuity.

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DATSHIANE: Okay, let's look at the first two of those: cause and consequences. Cause first, or even causes, because often there are so many causes that help us to identify why an event happened in the first place, and these causes are frequently interlinked.

KATIE: Causes help to explain the driving forces behind what happened, and they can be political decisions, economic crises, or even the decisions of a single individual, for example. And as you've said, most of the time, many events have multiple complex causes, and these might have been short-term or even long-term ones. Remember, nothing ever happens for just one reason.

DATSHIANE: Let's take the example of the Cold War, the post-Second World War period of political tension between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies. So what were the main causes of the Cold War?

KATIE: So we are after the 'why'. Some of the causes of the Cold War lies in the ideological differences between the capitalist West, led by the USA and the communist East, led by the Soviet Union. Other causes include two post-war conferences in Yalta and Potsdam, where tensions arose over the future of post-war Europe, as well as the USSR's expansion into Eastern Europe.

DATSHIANE: Perfect, Katie. So causes are the 'why' factor, why things happened, and there's usually many of them, and they're often interlinked. Our next word is consequence. What were the effects or the outcome of the event? Like, how did the event affect politics, the economy, or society? And like causes, there often are many consequences. Some are immediate and others only become clear over a long period of time. Again, if we take our Cold War example, what are some of the consequences of the Cold War, Katie?

KATIE: Okay, so some of the immediate consequences was that the world was divided into two ideological blocks or superpowers: the capitalist West, which was led by the USA and the communist East that was led by the USSR. Although there were no direct wars between these two nations, there were proxy wars such as wars in Vietnam and Korea, where the superpowers backed opposing sides. And then other consequences include the nuclear arms race, the space race and the decolonization of European empires. Now, I find it really useful to draw a spider diagram of the causes of an event and the consequences, highlighting which ones are short term and which are long term. Have a go after the podcast yourselves with an event that you are studying.

DATSHIANE: So that's cause, the many reasons why an event happened; and consequence, the effects or outcomes of that event. Next up are change and continuity.

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KATIE: So change focuses on how the event transformed societies or political systems or economies over time; and continuity focuses on what remained the same, despite the changes.

DATSHIANE: Can you give us an example, Katie?

KATIE: Of course, let's look at some of the changes and continuity during the civil rights movement in the United States in the 20th century, and there'll be more on this in that particular series.

DATSHIANE: Note the changes relates to how civil rights was campaigned for during the century, from early efforts that focused on legal challenges...

KATIE: ..to later changes that included the rise of black power and groups that emphasised self defence, economic independence and cultural pride, as well as focus on more broader issues such as economic inequality, housing discrimination and police brutality.

DATSHIANE: But throughout this period, there was continuity of the fundamental goal to end racism, discrimination and injustice, which remained an unbroken thread throughout the century.

KATIE: Identifying both the changes and the continuity helps us to see the evolution and stability of history over time. Again, when you write down your revision notes, it can be really useful to add change or continuity headings to each event and list them underneath.

DATSHIANE: So that's cause, consequence, change and continuity; but what about significance and similarity? Why not write these down in your notes if you find them useful?

KATIE: So, significance allows us to judge the importance of which events or people or developments were turning points or had the greatest impact. The significance of an event can change depending on the perspective of historians or groups affected. For example, the significance of the Hundred Years' War will be viewed differently by English and French historians and by people then and now.

DATSHIANE: Katie, I think we need another example.

KATIE: See, I knew you were gonna ask for one, so here's one I prepared earlier. Why is Mahatma Gandhi seen as a significant figure during the period of British rule in India?

DATSHIANE: Okay. Well, we can make a list of all of Gandhi's key actions and related events. These include his principle of non-violent resistance; his mobilising of millions from different social, religious and economic backgrounds; and his call for boycotts of British goods and institutions. And then we can explain how each is significant within the context of Indian independence. We would also add that Gandhi wasn't only seen as significant then, but also that he is still seen as a significant figure in Indian history.

KATIE: That significance then, evaluating how important those key events or people were. So what about similarity?

DATSHIANE: Okay, so similarity allows us to compare different events or periods to try and identify patterns or shared characteristics, so that we can see if these might reveal a common cause. But equally, it's important to recognise differences. So, we have cause and consequence, change and continuity, and significance and similarity. These are all concepts we'll be coming back to, to give us a much more analytical perspective on history.

KATIE: And even more importantly, to get higher marks in your exams.

DATSHIANE: Exactly.

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KATIE: Talking of which, to get on the road to a good mark, it's important to understand exam keywords. What exactly does the examiner want from us when a question asks us to describe or explain or give features? So, Datshiane, can you begin by explaining 'describe'?

DATSHIANE: I can indeed. So, if you see a question that asks you to 'describe', then this type of question is looking for detailed information about what happened, and you need to give a clear description of an event, focusing on key facts without necessarily explaining why it happened. So, keep in mind those who, what, when and where words, and it might be useful to do this in chronological order or a logical sequence. So, Katie, for example, can you describe the events of the Cuban missile crisis?

KATIE: But of course! Who, what, where, and when. Okay, so in October 1962, the Soviet Union placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. The USA discovered the missiles and responded by imposing a naval blockade. After intense negotiations, the USSR agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for an American pledge not to invade Cuba.

DATSHIANE: Can I just say, that was a lovely answer. Nice and concise, just the main facts. But what about if you see the word 'explain' in a question?

KATIE: This type of requires you to give reasons or causes for an event. It focuses on the why, and a good way to answer those explain questions is to offer reasoning for each point made. So Datshiane, how about you explain why the Berlin Wall was built?

DATSHIANE: Okay, so if I want to explain why the Berlin Wall was built, I need to think about the causes or the why. The Berlin Wall was built in 1961 by East Germany to stop the mass migration of people from East Berlin to West Berlin, which was damaging East Germany's economy and undermining the communist regime.

KATIE: Okay, okay. We're off to a good start. But if you can give two reasons why something happened, do so. What about how questions? These can seem to be a bit like the explain questions, but they focus more on the process or method by which something happened or was achieved. You need to identify the steps, developments or mechanisms involved, showing the progression behind the event. So here's one for you. How did the Cold War affect global politics?

DATSHIANE: Okay, so for this, let's think about some of the steps involved in the progression of the Cold War. The Cold War affected global politics through the creation of military alliances such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact. It also increased arms races and proxy wars in regions like Korea and Vietnam.

KATIE: Perfect. Finally, what if a question asks us to give features?

DATSHIANE: Well, that type of question is asking for characteristics of a certain event, and here you should identify and briefly describe the key facts or features without going into too much detail. So Katie, give me two features of the Cuban missile crisis.

KATIE: All right, so that is just the key facts and brief description. Firstly, that there were secretly installed nuclear Soviet missiles in Cuba, which the United States discovered just 90 miles from the American coast. This heightened Cold War tensions. And two, the American naval blockade around Cuba to prevent further Soviet shipments of military equipment. This was a major action in the standoff, bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war. So, how about a quick episode summary, Datshiane?

DATSHIANE: Let's do it.

KATIE: When you're answering a knowledge question, remember the evidence: who, what, where and when.

DATSHIANE: Before moving on to the cause or why something happened; and then the consequence, the effects of the event; the changes made by the event and the continuity or what remained unchanged.

KATIE: Not forgetting the significance of the events and similarity with other events.

DATSHIANE: And remember what the examiner is looking for if you see these keywords: describe.

KATIE: Focus on what happened.

DATSHIANE: Explain.

KATIE: Why it happened.

DATSHIANE: How.

KATIE: The step-by-step process behind an event.

DATSHIANE: And 'give features'.

KATIE: Brief description of the characteristics or key points.

DATSHIANE: You can find loads more information on the Bitesize webpage and in the other episodes in this series.

KATIE: And in the next episode, we were looking at how to write an answer to an essay question. See ya!

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