# How to do sourcework at GCSE
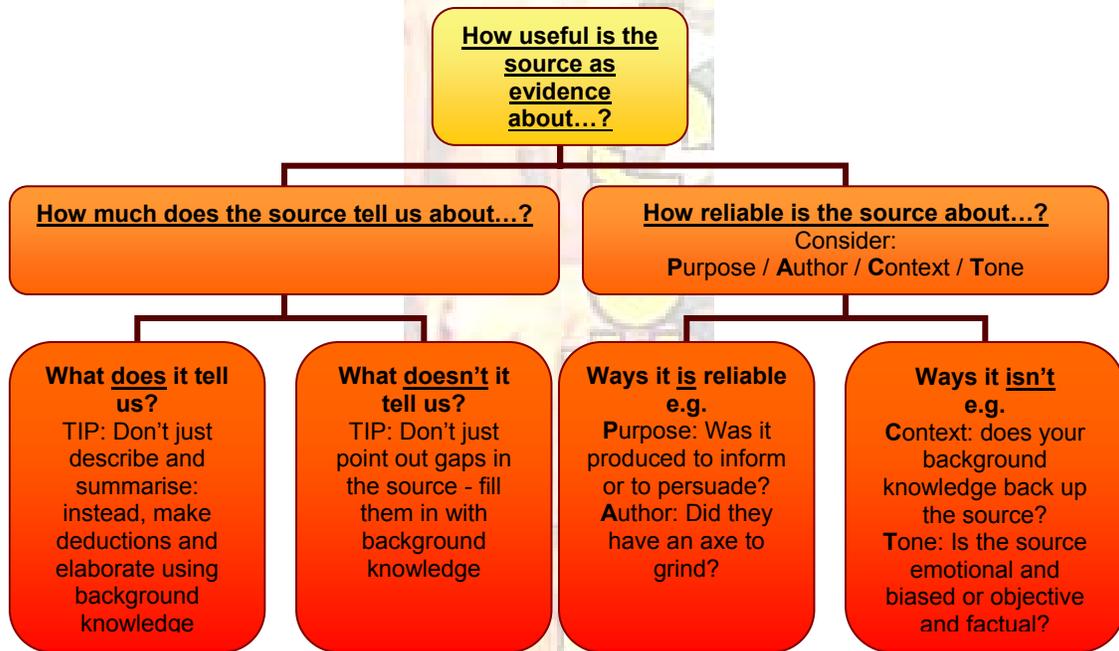## Originally published in the Times Educational Supplement, November 2002

Approached creatively, source analysis can be a stimulating and enlightening classroom exercise. Tackling sources not only encourages you to show off your background knowledge, but to develop your understanding of any topic. Yet even though sources are the stuff of history, for many of you they are approached with a sense of resigned duty rather than genuine interest. All too often, "source work" is a phrase in which the second word is very much the operative one, with practice exam questions about reliability and usefulness tackled with glum, even confused, determination.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that you are expected to provide distinct answers about *what* a source tells us, *how much* it tells us, *how useful* it is and *how reliable* it is – even though for the intelligent layperson there is infuriatingly little difference between such questions.

With these problems in mind, the following diagram (*figure 1*) illustrates that although these questions are closely related they are still quite distinct.

**How useful is the source as evidence about…?**

**How much does the source tell us about…?**

**How reliable is the source about…?**
Consider:
**P**urpose / **A**uthor / **C**ontext / **T**one

**What does it tell us?**
TIP: Don't just describe and summarise: instead, make deductions and elaborate using background knowledge

**What doesn't it tell us?**
TIP: Don't just point out gaps in the source - fill them in with background knowledge

**Ways it is reliable e.g.**
**P**urpose: Was it produced to inform or to persuade?
**A**uthor: Did they have an axe to grind?

**Ways it isn't e.g.**
**C**ontext: does your background knowledge back up the source?
**T**one: Is the source emotional and biased or objective and factual?

*Figure 1: Similarities and differences between source questions*

## 1. "How Useful?"

In summary, the usefulness of a source is assessed as a combination of how much information is in the source and how reliable that information is: the most useful sources are those which we can trust and which tell us a great deal; the least useful are those that tell us very little and whose reliability is questionable anyway.

With that matter cleared up, you are now in a position to focus on the demands of specific questions much more positively.

## 2. "How Much?"

"Comprehension in context" is the key to success with questions such as this: in other words, background knowledge needs to be deployed in every sentence to answer the question

effectively. Considering what the source tells us, for example, involves explaining what it means - not describing what it says. Rather than merely summarising or describing the extract ("It tells us that 20,000 British soldiers were killed in the Battle of the Somme"), you should instead use your background knowledge to elaborate upon and make deductions from the source ("…which helps to explain why so many people were later determined that this should be 'the war to end all wars'"). Similarly, pointing out gaps in the source ("It does not tell us the objectives of this battle…") is nowhere near as effective as filling these gaps in from background knowledge ("… - for example, to divert German troops away from Verdun").

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**3. "How Reliable?"**

To produce a balanced assessment of usefulness, the amount of information given by any source must be weighed against how reliable that information actually is.

All too often, you lazily equate primary sources with reliability and secondary sources with unreliability ("This is a primary source, so it must be reliable because it was written at the time"). This rule of thumb is not only unhelpful, but plain wrong in many cases: primary sources are so wrapped up in the events they describe that they cannot see the wood for the trees, whilst secondary writers benefit from objectivity, perspective and scholarly analysis. Every source must be considered on its own merits, and to this end I encourage you to think in terms of the **PACT**:

**(a) Purpose**: Every source is produced for a reason. Was this purpose to inform and educate, or rather to persuade, frighten or even mislead? Photographs provide particularly fruitful avenues of enquiry here, if you can avoid the mantra that "this is a photograph, so it could be staged". If you are going to make such statements, they need to draw on evidence to substantiate the assertion. For example, with photographs, never forget the presence of the photographer, which often tells us a lot about the reliability of the source: if this is a genuine depiction of three Freikorps soldiers firing on communists, would a photographer really be standing in the middle of the battle zone with his tripod and box brownie?

**(b) Author**: Just as all sources have a purpose, so too do they all have a producer. Occasionally you will know something about the particular author (Churchill delivering the iron curtain speech, Kennedy commenting on the Cuban Missile Crisis) in which case the key question to ask is "are they saying exactly what we would expect them to do in this situation?" If they don't – in other words, they are not speaking with self-interest at the forefront of your minds (e.g. Stalin admitting flaws in the 5-year plans) - then this suggests that the source is more reliable than it otherwise would have been.

**(c) Context**: With secondary sources in particular, you will rarely be able to comment meaningfully on the author. As a result, they should turn away from the provenance of the source and towards its content for clues about its reliability. In particular, does background knowledge gleaned from the classroom substantiate what is being stated in the source? Whether it does or doesn't, you should not simply assert this point ("This source says that life on the Western Front was horrible, and I know from background knowledge that this is true") but give specific examples to illustrate the fact ("…for example, the Tommies were infested with lice and had to share your dugouts with rats the size of rabbits").

**(d) Tone**: A final clue as to the reliability of a particular source is the tone in which it is written. A source which is vitriolic, sarcastic, embittered or dramatic is one which perhaps lacks the proper perspective and which should therefore be handled with care. In contrast, a dry, factual account with few adjectives or opinions might be less interesting to read but can probably be relied upon much more to be telling the truth. Nevertheless, this is a good time at which to come full circle and refer back to that "how useful" question: even if a source is unreliable, this does not mean that it is useless: factually unreliable sources give us a great insight into the opinions and attitudes of people involved in the historical process. Indeed, in many instances – Keynes's diatribes against Versailles, or Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech, for example – such sources profoundly change the course of history even as they comment upon it.