2020 Modern History Subject Assessment Advice

Overview

Subject assessment advice, based on the 2020 assessment cycle, gives an overview of how students performed in their school and external assessments in relation to the learning requirements, assessment design criteria, and performance standards set out in the relevant subject outline. They provide information and advice regarding the assessment types, the application of the performance standards in school and external assessments, and the quality of student performance.

Teachers should refer to the subject outline for specifications on content and learning requirements, and to the subject operational information for operational matters and key dates.

School Assessment

Assessment Type 1: Historical Skills

It was pleasing to see that more teachers and students made the effort to access the 2019 Subject Assessment Advice, and where appropriate take measures to amend and improve practices based on explicit feedback provided. Teachers should recognise that task design and the types of task being set are critical in providing students with opportunities to attain the highest levels of achievement against each performance standard. This is especially relevant for the Performance Standards of Application and Evaluation and Analysis, where task design allows students to demonstrate evidence of a higher level of critical analysis of sources and a range of historical perspectives. There were examples where teachers clearly provided opportunities for students to extend their knowledge and understanding beyond the content being taught in class.

The more successful responses commonly:

* allowed students to develop and demonstrate a selection of 3-4 performance standards in each task
* demonstrated clear and innovative task design that allowed students to show their application of a variety of historical skills in a myriad of ways including creating a sources analysis broadsheet, essays, live interview, sources trail, curating a museum and evaluating historiographical approaches to periods
* provided carefully constructed tasks that gave students the scope to develop a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of different perspective and points of view about the issue being explored, e.g. empathetic writing tasks which were designed to include writing from two or three individuals including passive and active participants in the historical developments being discussed
* addressed key concepts directly, providing evidence that they have understood and explored i.e. by providing a clear definition linked to ideas, people, events, and by identifying in the introduction the aspects of the concept that would be explored in the task
* covered three or more arguments (including at least one clear counter argument) in extended responses to the question being posed
* included tasks that demonstrated the application of historical conventions, i.e. planned paragraphs that thoroughly synthesised evidence. Included topic sentences, explained and discussed highly relevant evidence, and drew conclusions on what the evidence showed
* prompted students to develop arguments, especially focussed on motives of individuals and groups
* demonstrated understanding and the ability to use subject specific language when analysing sources particularly when dealing with the concepts of origin, bias, perspective and reliability
* provided tasks that required students to use a consistent form of referencing and provide an accurate bibliography
* demonstrated evidence of students using a range of scholarly sources, with evidence of discerning evaluation of the credibility of types of research methodologies and sources being used
* identified and evaluated both internal and external challenges in relation to a range of aspects including leaders, ideas, politics, social, cultural, religious and economic, justifying judgements made about their interdependence and relative significance
* included tasks that demonstrated the application of historical conventions
* prompted students to develop arguments, especially focussed on motives of individuals and groups.

The less successful responses commonly:

* required students to demonstrate achievement against 5–6 performance standards resulting in students only providing superficial evidence against the performance standards
* invited a simplistic recount on how or why, resulting in very basic analysis
* were open-ended research and report style tasks which did not provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate evidence of learning against the Application and Evaluation and Analysis criteria
* described rather than discussed and analysed ideas; factors involved in a situation
* consisted of folios of evidence that required students to complete 3–5 essay and sources analysis tasks under timed conditions
* exceeded the word limit or multimodal time limit
* contained no research undertaken in any task throughout the folio, with no use of referencing or a poorly constructed bibliography or no bibliography
* were predominantly essays and sources analysis completed under test conditions. This approach disadvantaged students
* lacked application of historical conventions in essays and sources analysis tasks.

General Comments

Moderators noted that in 2020 there was a more varied range of Modern Nations or The World Since 1945 areas studied, although Topic 3: Germany (1918–48) and Topic 7: The changing world order (1945–) remain the most popular. There was an impressive range of continents and regions represented in Assessment Type 1: Historical Skills e.g. the Middle East and Asia. Overall the level of critical thinking and historical literacy skills has improved, with more students demonstrating their understanding of the importance to evaluate sources and interpretations of history in a discerning manner.

Assessment Type 2: Historical Study

The formulation and construction of the question is the most critical factor that influences success in this assessment type. Teachers are encouraged to work closely and guide students in the initial stages of this assessment type to help in the formulation of an effective question/hypothesis to form the focus of the historical study. The most effective questions/hypotheses have a very clear specific focus, including time frame and place. The most effective responses were those that used the correct conventions of history essay writing, with clearly defined and relevant arguments and counter-arguments. Students often saw the historical study as an opportunity to construct an independent academic historical inquiry by focusing on an area of interest. Teachers are reminded that there is scope to differentiate the task design for individual students for students to present their understanding in a format most suited to them. There are also some schools that marks different performance standards for different students, dependent on the scope of their question (this specifically relates to A1 and A2 performance standards), that can be advantageous in allowing students to achieve at the higher-grade band in criteria.

The more successful responses commonly:

* focussed on a historical topic that had a clearly defined contextual focus and specific scope, including time frame and place
* focussed on a question that invited reasoned historical argument. This approach was critical to allow students the opportunity to achieve at the higher-grade bands of Application and Exploration
* demonstrated the use of a variety of primary and secondary sources, including speeches, diaries, artwork, propaganda and eyewitness accounts. These sources were used to demonstrate a critical understanding of evidence
* were film analysis and literature analysis style questions. Higher achieving students used these texts as historical sources and engaged in a reasoned historical argument of reliability and limitations. Most successful essays carefully chose other primary and secondary sources to compare and contrast these
* used correct conventions of history essay writing, with clearly defined and relevant arguments
* included and evaluated different perspectives from e.g., active or passive participants, commentators or historians
* ended with a comprehensive conclusion which provided a direct answer to the question, summarised the main arguments and often incorporated implications of the answer
* used a consistent form of referencing and a bibliography and adhered to the word count
* demonstrated a high level of academic research being undertaken. This was evident by students who showed a sophisticated use and engagement of historiography
* demonstrated careful consideration of the types of sources used — including use of academic journals and scholarly works
* demonstrated critical thinking skills when discussing and evaluating relevant sources
* demonstrated critical thinking skills when discussing and evaluating both internal and external issues and challenges, or long term and short-term interactions and relationships.

The less successful responses commonly:

* were selected from time frames outside ‘the modern world’
* focused on contemporary issues without establishing sufficient connections with historical background/nature
* addressed questions that would have been better suited to subjects such as Philosophy or Psychology
* were in response to questions that lead to students simply retelling how events and developments unfolded
* tried to cover too large a time frame, geographical region or scope
* did not effectively conclude or resolve the question
* drew conclusions but provided no evidence to substantiate their findings
* simply presented information without synthesising ideas
* relied on internet sources and did not evaluate their reliability or validity
* were poorly structured and lacked clear topic and closing sentences
* did not actively engage with sources
* lacked a reasoned historical argument including a counter argument
* had questions based around conjecture or were of little historical value
* had multimodal presentations without a reference list to acknowledge sources
* lacked a consistent form of referencing and accurate bibliography.

External Assessment

Assessment Type 3: Examination

The students of 2020 appeared to be well-prepared for the electronic exam following its introduction in 2019. Once again, students were presented with essay questions in the form of proposition which provided students with the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of and ability to apply both knowledge, skills and historical concepts. Overall, the quality and detail of essay responses were better than those in previous years.

An added feature of this year’s exam was a video source in Part B. As in previous years, there was a very high level of engagement with the sources which explored the civil rights protest by two American athletes at the XIX Olympiad in Mexico City. While students’ responses overall were very good, the overwhelming majority of responses to question (d) were concerning in that students seemed unable to draw conclusions based on information from a source. Instead, those students simply restated information from the source in different words.

As in previous years, students generally addressed the Knowledge and Understanding, Inquiry and Analysis and Communication design criteria well to very well. The Reflection and Evaluation design criteria once again was the one where most students let themselves down in both the essay and sources analysis sections.

Markers’ overall observations were that:

* responses to the Sources Analysis questions continue to be better than those to the essays
* Germany was once again by far the most studied topic
* the standard of essay responses was better than in recent years
* compared to recent years, a smaller proportion of students did not address the question, preferring to present a seemingly prepared answer or a narrative of events
* a very high proportion of essays were well-structured with an introduction, clear body paragraphs and a conclusion
* the majority of responses clearly outlined their argument in their introduction and wrapped it up in their conclusion
* while most students attempted to provide at least one counter-argument, many were simplistic
* many students included quotes to illustrate or support their points however some students didn’t make clear connections between the quotes and their argument
* many students did not make their understanding of key words and terms (e.g. ‘status’, ‘isolationist’, ‘unrest within its republics’) clear in their essay responses
* a high proportion of students appeared to have difficulty interpreting what the questions were asking of them (e.g. specifying the values of many Americans in Question. 4, naming the left-wing groups in Question 7 or the key individuals in Question 8.
* many students still seem unwilling to declare the extent to which they support the proposition.

More successful responses commonly:

* addressed the whole proposition
* showed signs of planning during the exam to produce a consistent, coherent response
* contained a clear and well-structured introduction that clearly specified time frames and scope and key points of argument presented to orient the reader
* demonstrated a clear understanding of the key words in the question
* topic sentences were used effectively to signpost the argument to be developed in each paragraph, rather than just providing an indication of the area of the topic to be addressed in the paragraph
* conclusions were comprehensive and summarised the key points made in the preceding paragraphs
* provided a clear argument and integrated at least one relevant counter-argument that added depth and scope to their response
* showed detailed content knowledge of individuals and events
* made effective use of quotations from historians and historical figures
* showed understanding of a range of different historical perspectives about the question posed
* connected points to each other, as well as to the question
* applied relevant, accurate evidence to illustrate the points being made.

Less successful responses commonly:

* provided detailed accounts
* wrote long paragraphs that often drifted off topic
* wrote about aspects of the topic that were not relevant to the question
* included relevant details but didn’t connect them to the proposition or the argument
* wrote brief responses that didn’t develop an argument or counter-argument
* provided only an argument or counter-arguments
* didn’t respond to all aspects of the proposition.

Essays

Question 1

There were very few responses to this question.

More successful responses:

* identified the importance and influx of skilled labour from Eastern Europe during the post-war period.

Less successful responses:

* failed to clarify their definition of ‘economic boom’
* focused on Australia prior to 1945.

Question 2

There were very few responses to this question.

More successful responses:

* explained how the status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples improved as a result of key events
* used evidence from Indigenous contributions to World War Two and the Pilbara strike of 1946.

Less successful responses:

* discussed events from 1967, outside the timeframe for this topic.

Question 3

There were very few responses to this question.

More successful responses:

* provided examples from the Prime Ministerships of Hughes, Curtin and Menzies when dealing with issues of conscription during World War One, Australia’s relationship with Britain during World War Two and post-World War Two immigration.

Less successful responses:

* lacked detail about leaders, events and issues.

Question 4

This was quite a popular question.

More successful responses:

* identified ‘values’
* considered changes primarily in both economic values (e.g. economic policies) and social values (e.g. acceptance of minority groups)
* discussed changes to economic values and focussed primarily on the move away from laissez-faire policies and the introduction of welfare focussed schemes
* recognised changes to social values included the re-framing of the role of women – both inside and outside of the home
* explored the shift in moral values surrounding the consumption of alcohol and the ending of Prohibition along with an increase in taxation on alcohol to fund government spending
* identified the on-going struggle by women and minority groups to find acceptance in a primarily Western society
* made it clear that different groups were affected differently.

Less successful responses:

* struggled to identify which groups constituted ‘everyday Americans’ or the values that ‘dramatically changed’ (e.g. willingness to accept Social Security benefits, changed attitudes towards self-reliance)
* tended to describe the New Deal and/or its legislation
* did not include a counter-argument discussing groups whose values remained unchanged (e.g. rural, African-American) or whether the identified changes endured
* only provided details of various events and policies.

Question 5

This was quite a popular question.

More successful responses:

* considered isolationism at the start of World War One and recognised that it was not sustainable
* identified that the reduced involvement of the USA in Europe originated from not signing the Treaty of Versailles or joining the League of Nations, despite these being a primary focus of Woodrow Wilson during the immediate post-war period
* identified different conferences, agreements, pacts and legislation signed and decisions made in order to influence international events and avoid another world war (e.g. rejection of membership of the League of Nations, Washington Naval Agreement, Kellogg-Brand, Neutrality Acts, Good Neighbor policy, Cash and Carry, Lend-Lease, bans on exports to Japan) or at least prevent America’s direct involvement in it
* observed that while the USA initially avoided military involvement in World War Two from 1939, they were involved both politically and economically
* considered evidence from the whole period
* showed impressive grasp of events and understanding of the complexities of Roosevelt’s foreign policy, particularly during the 1930s
* cited examples of isolationist attitudes and policies and also noted examples where application of such policies was selective.

Less successful responses:

* struggled to clarify the term ‘isolationist’ or showed a simplistic understanding of the term (e.g. simply avoiding war)
* focussed only on the attack on Pearl Harbor
* provided insufficient concrete examples to be fully convincing or concentrating too much on a narrow range of events.

Question 6

There were only a few responses to this question.

More successful responses:

* showed understanding of the term ‘superpower’
* provided specific examples of superpower behaviour in actions before and after Pearl Harbor
* explored dimensions of US power other than military referring, for example to its economic and diplomatic involvement (e.g. in Europe, Asia, Central and South America) before and after this event.

Less successful responses:

* focussed on explaining the event of Pearl Harbor, rather than the bombing’s impact on US foreign policy.

Question 7

This was an extremely popular question.

More successful responses:

* considered both right-wing and left-wing threats
* identified the threat the that left-wing groups posed and considered the Spartacus and Red Bavaria movements in relation to the wider European context, specifically related to the example that had been set in Russia
* identified that the Freikorps were a right-wing group and the SDP used these to suppress uprisings (and therefore should not always be considered threatening)
* considered political and economic climates in conjunction with activities by right-wing and left-wing groups to destabilise the Weimar governments including the Treaty of Versailles, ‘November Criminals’, reparation payments, Dawes Plan, Hyperinflation and the Golden Years
* recognised that it was ultimately a right-wing challenge that led to the end of the Republic, and were able to articulate the way in which the Nazis posed a challenge (by force in 1923, and through legal means in the early 1930s)
* showed detailed knowledge of different forms of challenges (e.g. protests, media criticism, armed threats, ideological)
* demonstrated knowledge of the way historians have explained the failure of the Weimar Republic and used this knowledge to create stronger, deeper, more insightful arguments
* addressed the reasons for the failure of the Weimar Republic, making clear how political and economic factors were inter-related, creating a situation after 1929 when challenges from the left and right became stronger and the Weimar Republic failed to adequately respond.

Less successful responses:

* focussed solely on the activities of the Nazi Party
* extended their argument outside the scope of the topic (i.e. beyond 1933)
* ignored the perspective that right-wing and left-wing parties held any responsibility, but rather blamed the Weimar constitution, economic policies, individual politicians (e.g. Ebert and Stresemann) instead
* discussed the attempts to overthrow the different attempts to overthrow the Weimar Government in chronological order
* focussed just on right wing challenges
* described individual events without incorporating them into their argument
* consisted of blocks of information about the hyperflation of 1923 and The Great Depression
* explained the fall of the Weimar Republic which did not address the proposition
* included assorted information about the Third Reich not linked to this question.

Question 8

This was an extremely popular question.

More successful responses:

* were able to articulate detailed knowledge of the roles of key individuals inside and outside the party who contributed to the rise of the Nazi Party during these years (e.g. Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, Röhm, Himmler, Brüning, Hindenburg, von Papen, von Schleicher)
* explained how groups, such as the SA and members of the Reichstag, contributed to the Nazi Party’s success
* were able to apply this knowledge to illustrate the growth of Nazi influence and power from 1929
* focussed on factors other than key individuals (e.g. influence of economic conditions, external influences, flawed Weimar responses and policies, growing popularity of Nazi policies) as the basis for coherent counter-arguments
* demonstrated knowledge of the way historians have explained the rise of the Nazi Party and used this knowledge to create stronger, deeper, more insightful arguments.

Less successful responses:

* focussed just on Nazi figures and did not consider those outside the Nazi Party
* answered outside of the scope of the question and topic (e.g. arguments included the Treaty of Versailles, Beer Hall Putsch, Night of the Long Knives)
* failed to include a clear qualifying judgement statement (to a high or low extent), and most often stated to a ‘reasonable’, a ‘medium’ or a ‘moderate’ extent
* wrote as if after 1929 everyone in Germany came to support the Nazi Party and their vision for Germany
* presented often disconnected chunks of information about different aspects of the Nazi rise to power
* included assorted information about the Nazi Party not linked to this question
* recounted events prior to 1929 without showing a connection to the proposition.

Question 9

This was quite a popular question.

More successful responses:

* focussed showed a clear understanding of key events in the Berlin Crisis of 1948
* focussed on the period 1944-48
* clearly identified long-term and short-term political factors that contributed to the crisis
* showed understanding of the fears and aspiration of the leaders of the USSR, the USA, UK and France
* demonstrated knowledge of the state of Germany itself as the war ended.

Less successful responses:

* struggled to clearly articulate what the Berlin Crisis was and how it generated fear
* failed to identify what ‘fear’ meant in this context
* provided a discussion surrounding the events that immediately occurred within post-war Germany and ignored the larger political, social and economic pressures within Europe
* simply provided a description of conditions in Germany during the six months immediately following the surrender of Germany
* dealt only with the fear of a reunited Germany and the horrors imposed on Europe by the Third Reich
* dealt mainly with the building of the Berlin Wall and the Cold War tensions and challenges of 1961.

Question 10

There were few responses to this question.

More successful responses:

* showed detailed knowledge of social conditions within the USSR under both leaders
* identified different aspects of social conditions (e.g. economic, political repression, cultural expression, gender issues, housing conditions in cities, social disparity, ruling elite, consumerism, agrarian life)
* provided an effective counter-argument reflecting some of the continuities between Stalin’s USSR and that ruled by Khrushchev (e.g. continued political repression of some groups such as dissidents under Khrushchev).

Less successful responses:

* demonstrated little knowledge of people, events, groups and places in the Soviet Union.

Question 11

There were few responses to this question.

More successful responses:

* defined what was meant by the fall and disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991
* demonstrated knowledge of the factors both external and internal which led to the fall of the Soviet Union
* showed detailed knowledge of specific situation in a least two Soviet Republics e.g. the Ukraine, Armenia, the Baltic Republics)
* showed knowledge and understanding of Gorbachev and his motivations, aims, innovative policies and challenges.

Less successful responses:

* completely disregarded the republics in their discussion
* misunderstood the differences between Soviet republics and Eastern European nations
* focussed on the Soviet Union itself.

Question 12

There were few responses to this question.

Less successful responses:

* struggled to clarify what they meant by ‘Russia’s national identity’.

Question 13

There were very few responses to this question.

More successful responses:

* demonstrated detailed and specific knowledge and understanding of the factors involved in Sukarno’s overthrow
* included both domestic factors related to Sukarno’s economic failures, the Indonesian military, the strength of the PKI as well as external factors, including Cold War tensions and rivalries.

Question 14

Insufficient responses to provide meaningful feedback.

Question 15

Insufficient responses to provide meaningful feedback.

Question 16

There were few responses to this question.

More successful responses:

* included strong introductions which included and explained the reasons why Mao introduced the Great Leap Forward
* included historian’s research (e.g. Michael Lynch) on this initiative and were able to use his insights critically in their arguments
* demonstrated and applied detailed specific knowledge of the failures in Indonesia’s agriculture and industrial output
* critically evaluated arguable successes of the regime such as increasing the reach and influence of the CCP on daily life, especially in the country, and greater female participation in China’s economy
* logically and effectively linked evidence back to the question.

Less successful responses:

* were largely descriptive
* lacked a counter-argument.

Question 17

This was quite a popular question.

More successful responses:

* had strong introductions which explained why Deng wanted to transform China
* evaluated the extent to which the transformations were primarily economic
* connected the Four Modernisations to economic considerations (e.g. academic links with USA, strengthen the economy through access to new knowledge)
* demonstrated and applied detailed specific knowledge of the reforms (e.g. Special Economic Zones, increase in manufacturing)
* critically evaluated other reforms (e.g. political, explored the encouragement of innovation, or less restrictions on music/dress)
* linked Deng Xiaoping’s political reforms back to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and also to economic and military reforms
* argued that while economic reform was the primary priority, political control was also viewed as critical
* discussed government’s responses to the increasing political turmoil in the late 1980s, and the events in Tiananmen Square 1989
* argued that political stability and CCP control were political imperatives for Deng
* logically and effectively linked evidence back to the question.

Less successful responses:

* only addressed economic transformations
* were largely descriptive
* lacked historical debate and discussion.

Question 18

Insufficient responses to provide meaningful feedback.

Sources Analysis

Question (a)

More successful responses:

* identified two actions (e.g. wearing socks or scarf, heads bowed, fists raised)
* were succinct.

Less successful responses:

* were too long although marks were still allocated
* claimed that the first action was a peaceful process and the second was part of the civil rights movement in America.

Question b

More successful responses:

* identified a positive and negative response.

Less successful responses

* were too long
* provided only positive or negative responses.

Question (c)

More successful responses:

* clearly identified examples of content that supported and did not support each other.

Less successful responses

* struggled to find a way in which the content of the sources did not support each other
* mentioned the type of each source as way in which they did not support each other
* provided a general overview of how the sources were similar or different (e.g. tone, format, origin) without providing specific examples
* gave the same example (e.g. boycott) as an example of a similarity and a difference.

Question (d)

This was the question in which most students failed to gain full marks.

More successful responses:

* were clear and concise
* supported each conclusion with at least one example
* used an associated or emotive word (e.g. anger, disappointment) as part of the conclusion.

Less successful responses

* were unable to draw a conclusion
* restated, directly quoted or paraphrased information from the source instead of drawing a conclusion
* were too complicated
* intertwined the conclusions
* drew an unsubstantiated although accurate conclusion
* used the word ‘deduction’ rather than ‘conclusion’.

Question (e)

More successful responses:

* highlighted artistic features of Source 6 (e.g. features of the athlete, it’s size and simplicity, the fact that it was displayed at a reputable institution)
* addressed all parts of the question and pointed out and explained strengths and weaknesses of each source using examples from each of them
* articulated how both the origin and nature of sources as well as their content affected their usefulness
* recognised that the artist was Brazilian and therefore explained that the protest was significant to the wider community / those outside of America.

Less successful responses

* described the nature, origin, purpose of the source rather recognising their usefulness and limitations
* analysed Source 6 as a photograph rather than as an art sculpture
* stated that sculptures are of no use to historians
* stated that because the sculptor was Brazilian, they would be more connected to events in Mexico
* provided superficial differences
* did not discuss how the origin of sources affected their usefulness
* used historical vocabulary accurately, however, did not apply it to evidence in the sources provided, instead writing very general responses without specific evidence from Sources 6 and 7
* used the word ‘weakness’ as a substitute for ‘limitation’
* asserted that a source ‘may be biased’ without stating that it, or parts of it, were biased and how and why that affected its usefulness or limitation
* used the term ‘entertainment’ when considering the purpose of a sculpture.

Question (f)

Overall, responses to this question were much better than in recent years suggesting that teachers and students are using previous feedback.

More successful responses:

* used all the sources
* wrote an introduction and/or conclusion (ideally both) that were consistent with the body paragraphs
* synthesised their findings into an essay structure
* identified ways in which parts of a source contained elements that supported or opposed the proposition or were neutral on the subject for which they wrote a separate paragraph
* incorporated the terms ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ effectively into their response
* based their response around connections between sources rather than discussing them in order from 1 to 7
* identified evidence to support their views by referring to the journalist, athlete, artist, author etc. instead of the number of the source from which it came
* provided a long-term view to the proposition as well as the range of contemporary views and perspectives.

Less successful responses

* briefly described whether each source supported or opposed the view in separate paragraphs
* argued only in favour of the view
* did not draw a conclusion
* restated parts of sources that described Smith and Carlos’ actions without connecting it to the proposition
* simplistically claimed that the whole source either supported or opposed the proposition
* a few responses did not refer to Source 1.