

# Refocusing Assessment

history

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and teachers network

**ASCL** Association  
of School and  
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# Refocusing Assessment – history

## Introduction

SSAT, ASCL and NFER have worked together to produce *Refocusing Assessment*, which is a resource to support schools in developing and reviewing their assessment practice. The resource identifies five key questions for all departments, which you will find below.

In the following pages you will also find some responses to each question. These are drawn from the expert panels that SSAT, ASCL and NFER convened, which were comprised of heads of department and representatives from subject associations. These are not intended to offer definitive answers to the key questions, but may help to support, challenge or structure your discussions.

For details about the references in this document, please refer to the *Refocusing Assessment* overview document.

## How to use this resource

- 1 Spend time with your department discussing each of the five questions.
- 2 Record a summary of your discussion.
- 3 Look at the responses produced by the expert panels. How far do they reflect the thoughts of your team?
- 4 See if you can summarise the 'assessment requirements' for your subject on the template.
- 5 You may then be asked to share your responses with other departments to help identify the commonalities and differences between subjects in order to help establish a whole school approach. You may wish to consider the following questions:
  - › How do the needs of different subject areas vary?
  - › How can you apply best practice in different subject areas whilst also maintaining consistency across the whole school?
- 6 You may wish to produce an action plan to modify and shape your assessment policy and practice.
- 7 Set a time to review and evaluate the impact of the action plan on assessment.

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# Five key questions

1

**What does it mean to be a successful student in history?**

What is the purpose of our subject?

What does it mean to be a good historian? Is this what we are preparing students for?

What are the core knowledge and skills required for success?

2

**What is the purpose of assessment in history?**

Why do we assess?

Who is assessment for?

3

**What does progress look like in history?**

How do we know when a student is making progress?

How might progress vary over time?

4

**How can progress be assessed most effectively in history?**

Which assessment techniques work best in history?

How successfully do we use formative assessment approaches?

How can formative and summative assessment work together to ensure effective assessment for learning?

How do we benchmark/quality assure our assessment practices?

5

**How do the assessment practices in our department contribute to/work with whole school policy?**

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# Question 1: What does it mean to be a successful student in history?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

Success in history requires a combination of skills and knowledge. Although the specific content being taught will vary from school to school, students cannot demonstrate genuine historical thinking or engage in the kinds of analysis that are fundamental to the subject without mastery of that knowledge.

Knowledge alone is not enough: historical understanding is only fully developed and revealed in the application of that knowledge in the process of describing, explaining, analysing or evaluating particular historical phenomena.

To be successful in history, students require developed skills in academic writing. For many students, historical knowledge and understanding do not translate to success in answering exam questions. Students need to be able to interpret exam questions and then write at length, developing and sustaining an evidence-informed and coherent line of argument. These are challenging skills even for more confident and knowledgeable students.

Critical thinking is key – an ability to weigh up different views and to interrogate source material. Students need to be able to express their ideas orally as well as in writing, to argue and to explore.

The ability to create and sustain an argument is a core skill for historians – making claims, substantiating them with evidence and deploying knowledge effectively. Students require sophisticated conceptual understanding, including a sense of perspective and an awareness of how their learning about the past relates to the world in which they live today.

## Question 2: What is the purpose of assessment in history?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

The key purpose of assessment should be to help students understand where they are in their learning - supporting them to know what they are secure with in terms of their knowledge, understanding and skills and helping them identify areas to develop.

However, assessment can also:

- › allow learners to reflect on learning over time
- › be used to find out where students are before they start something new
- › help teachers reflect on their pedagogy
- › help teachers to develop a better understanding of the student as a learner
- › help to identify learning issues to support the planning of strategic interventions
- › provide a basis for a meaningful dialogue with students, parents/carers and other stakeholders, such as school leaders, governors and Ofsted, about students' progress.

Assessment information is needed for a variety of stakeholders and purposes but, fundamentally, assessment should be focused **on** the student and **for** the student. It should:

- › allow students to know where they are in their learning
- › help to inform future teaching and learning activities
- › help to identify specific learning issues and to provide additional support/intervention where needed
- › track and monitor students' progress and to identify underachievement.

Formative assessment can provide helpful insights into learning and take a range of forms, for example: from informal discussions, to the use of 'hinge questions' in lessons, to assessing extended tasks that can be used to tease out more complex and deeper levels of understanding. Effective formative assessment should address the totality of a student's performance, not just the easily measurable and is integral to everyday teaching.

In developing formative assessment, it is vital to consider what information the assessment is aiming to collect. Effective formative assessment helps to identify strengths and areas for development and can also help to demonstrate progress over time.

There are different kinds of assessment for different purposes and assessment needs to be dynamic. There needs to be a discussion in every department about what the purpose of assessment is – the range of ways in which it might be used, what is being assessed and why. Are assessments genuinely going to move students on? How do we plan for different kinds of assessment?

Brave curriculum planning can support more effective assessment, in planning for innovative and different ways to assess. There is still a tendency to assume that assessments need to be worthwhile, but many schools have found verbal assessments very beneficial – e.g. using debates to assess students' ability to construct and substantiate a line of argument.

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## Question 3: What does progress look like in history?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

Due to the breadth of skills that students are developing, it is not possible (or desirable) to have formal assessed tasks that cover everything; it is more likely that different assessments will focus on particular areas of knowledge and/or the application of particular skills.

Students knowledge of history will be expanding and their ability to apply that knowledge will be developing, even if their performance in an assessment task that calls for a *different* kind of historical analysis seems to be at the same level or even slightly lower than that achieved on the previous task.

Many students will see uneven patterns of achievement, e.g. performing well in response to a question focusing on a causation task, but finding a task that asks them to identify differences between particular interpretations and explain why they have arisen more challenging.

As students progress, they tend to display a greater degree of independence in their work: an ability to question what they read, confidence in drawing their own conclusions and in structuring historical enquiry.

Getting better at history means getting better at dealing with uncertainty: feeling excited, challenged and engaged by complexity and multiple interpretations.

There is a sophisticated interplay between different historical skills and concepts – something which students will usually only begin to understand over time and through opportunities to undertake meaningful historical enquiry. As such, it is not always possible to see progress in a short period of time. Whilst progress in knowledge and understanding might be evident in the course of one lesson, the deeper learning may take longer.

Progress in academic writing needs to occur alongside progress in historical knowledge and understanding. Students need practice in interpreting exam questions and constructing balanced arguments.

# Question 4: How can progress be assessed most effectively in history?

Some thoughts from the expert panel discussion

Effective assessment is a blend of good practice in AfL in every lesson, which builds up your understanding of your students and informs your planning and techniques used to test recall and progress over time.

Any effective assessment of progress in history must take into account both knowledge and skills.

**Quick tests** of factual knowledge can be very helpful as a means of assessing recall and ensuring that students' understanding is on track, but it is the application of that knowledge that will really demonstrate progress in historical understanding.

**Curriculum planning must take centre stage** to ensure that all students have opportunities to demonstrate the full range of their understanding.

An **enquiry-based approach** works well, enabling students to tackle a genuine investigation in a systematic way, building up the knowledge they need to tackle it and progressively refining their judgement as they learn more.

Historical enquiries work best when the **overarching question** has a genuine element of uncertainty and legitimate, worthwhile debate associated with it – rather than merely asking students to reiterate well-rehearsed, settled views.

**Application of knowledge** can involve a wide range of skills and assessments need to provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate their capacity to engage effectively in different kinds of historical processes, such as:

- › explaining causes and consequences
- › describing and analysing change and continuity over time
- › analysing the extent of similarity and difference
- › making use of appropriate criteria to reach judgements about historical significance
- › using sources critically as evidence to develop and substantiate historical claims
- › explaining how and why different interpretations arise.

The **timing of larger assessment tasks in history is extremely important**. Teachers need to be able to determine the point at which students will have sufficient knowledge to be able to fully tackle the task. This can become problematic where all departments are expected to complete a large assessment task at a given point in a term or half term, regardless of the structure of their curriculum or the frequency of history lessons.

Since some students struggle with academic writing, it is important that knowledge and understanding is not only assessed through written tasks. Using **debates or verbal presentations** can be a good way of building students' confidence in their knowledge and supporting them in structuring arguments. This can also help them to structure written responses later on.

**Higher levels skills are also central to progress**, such as:

- › creating and sustaining an argument
- › independent thinking
- › resilience – sustaining and substantiating a point of view
- › thinking skills.

Students' progress in understanding and application of these skills needs to be revisited regularly.