

THE HISTORY APTITUDE TEST

FAQs, DOs AND DON'Ts

Now that the HAT has been running for several years, we thought it might be helpful to provide some further feedback to candidates. We continue to maintain that the HAT is nothing to worry about and, specifically, that it does not require preparation, but we are aware that some schools provide more help and support to candidates than others, so we have taken a decision to increase the amount of guidance that we ourselves provide. Below are some questions and answers based on points often raised with us by candidates and teachers, together with some advice on how to handle the test itself. There is further information elsewhere in these pages, and you will also find discussions of HAT on our online discussion board, 'History Off the Shelf' (<http://hots.modhist.ox.ac.uk/>).

Do I need to do any preparation for the HAT? I think other people are.

No. The HAT is designed to test how you think, not what you know. At the same time, there are two things that you might find helpful to do:

- It could be worth looking at the past papers, so that you know what the test will look like, and what kinds of things to expect. If you want to use them for practice, you can then use the marking scheme to see how you might have done. There is no specific advantage in knowing what was in previous HAT papers, but you might find it easier to relax and focus in this year's paper if you have seen the format before.
- You will need to deploy some historical knowledge in order to be able to answer the essay question (1c). The HAT examiners will not be marking your essay for depth of knowledge, but they will consider whether you've chosen an example that shows understanding of the question, and you may find it easier to think of a good example if you've spent a little time reviewing the work that you have done since year 11.

Equally, you will find it easier to consider what you've studied in relation to the question if you've refreshed your memory a little. You don't need to learn facts from your notes – it's not like revising for an A level, or IB, or whatever – but it might be worth thinking about the 'big picture' in the topics you have studied. What was each topic really about? What changed during the period you looked at? Why did it change? What stayed the same? Why? What conflicts or movements did you study, and how can they be characterised? What made them happen, and why did they stop happening? What groups were involved? How would you describe the political life of the periods you studied? How would you describe society in these periods, or religion, or ideology, or culture, or the economy? There is no need to do any extra reading to answer these kinds of questions, and not all of them will necessarily fit what you have studied: it's more a case of thinking a bit about how to characterise what you've studied, and how to generalise from it. If you don't have time to think about all of these issues in advance don't worry – careful thought on the day is much more important – but if you do have time to give them some thought beforehand you might feel more confident when tackling the essay question.

You often choose medieval examples, but I don't know anything about the middle ages. Is this a problem?

Absolutely not. On the whole, we try to choose material which we think will be equally unfamiliar to all students, and we don't expect people to know much about modern Vietnam, or Korea, or Nigeria either. It won't disadvantage you if you know nothing about the periods or

problems explored in question 1 or question 2: the examiners are marking you on the basis of your capacity to understand and apply concepts from question 1, and on the basis of your imaginative response to, and close reading of, the source in question 2. If you *do* know something about the periods or problems discussed in the texts, try not to let your knowledge distract you from taking the texts on their own terms and thinking flexibly about them.

How important are the word-limits?

Except for question 1(a), where being concise is part of the exercise and you will probably be penalised for going substantially over, the word-limits are guidelines only. You will not get credit for writing longer answers, and you may find that you can answer the questions adequately in a shorter space than the recommended length: our suggestions are simply intended to tell you what to aim for.

I didn't answer all the questions: does this matter?

Yes. It is important to answer all the questions. If you do not answer one of the questions, you will get a mark of zero for it, and this will affect your overall mark. You should find that you have plenty of time to read, think, plan and write the four answers required.

Why do you ask candidates to write on one side of the paper only? What happens if we don't?

We do this to make it easier for us to photocopy the scripts. If you inadvertently write on both sides of the paper, don't worry, and certainly don't waste time rewriting: we will manage! If you can number the pages of your script, it helps us to make sure it's in the right order.

I don't think my vocabulary is very sophisticated. Will I lose marks for that?

No. Clarity is the most important thing, and it is often possible to express complex ideas in simple words. We are much more interested in relevance, fluency of argument, accuracy and so on, than we are in the quality of your vocabulary. It is important only that you should say what you mean, and that we should be able to understand it.

Are there right and wrong answers to the questions?

For the most part, no. Our mark scheme establishes a common understanding among the markers of what they should be looking for, and it also gives examples of some of the things they might expect. It is easiest to be precise about questions 1(a) and 1(b), because these are mainly about comprehension. Our guidelines for questions 1(c) and 2 are necessarily more open-ended. Every year, candidates do things with the essay question which we have not anticipated and/or see things in the source question which we haven't spotted. That's fine – as long as your answer fits within the terms of the question, it should be properly rewarded by our examiners: they are used to making these kinds of judgements, not only from the experience of HAT marking, but from the experience of marking university exams.

Is there any more advice you can give about how to handle the HAT?

- Try to relax a bit and take your time. You shouldn't need to spend too much time writing in this test: it's important to give yourself time to read, think and jot down ideas. Most candidates will find the texts difficult to understand. You may want to read them two or three times, or even more, and you may need to puzzle over some passages to get at their full meaning. Give yourself time to do this.
- Bear in mind the weighting of the different questions when apportioning your time. The first two questions are certainly important, but they only account for 30% of the marks,

so you will not want to spend much more than half an hour on them (including reading and thinking time).

- Use your own words, as much as possible. This is especially important when you're asked to summarise: you should try to paraphrase briefly, using alternative words from your own vocabulary, rather than copying out short extracts from the text. One reason we ask you to do this is to check that you've understood the text correctly; another is so that we can also measure your ability to express your understanding. Of course, there are limits to how far you have to go in using substitute words: in the 2007 paper, for example, it would be fine to use the word 'governments' in your answer, but you would not be advised to answer 1(a) by saying, 'The principal points made by the author in the first paragraph are that "all governments had in common a striving to extend effective control over their subjects" and...'.
- Plan the answers to the longer questions. A good plan helps you to structure your argument, as well as reminding you of relevant information. With the **essay question**, you might want to begin by spending a bit of time thinking about what the question means. Having done that, you'll need to think of a historical example that you can use to answer it: it may not be immediately obvious how what you've studied can be used, but if you think about it, you will almost certainly come up with some ideas. Next, you might want to jot down whatever ideas about your example and/or things you know about it might be relevant to an answer. You could then look critically at what you've got – how does it fit together? Does all of it really address the question? Is there another side to the question that you didn't think of at first? Then finally, sketch out the bones of an argument that answers the question, including an introduction that explains the question and indicates why you've chosen your example, several paragraphs of argument/analysis/exposition, and a conclusion. In the case of the **source question**, you don't need to write an argument, but you might want to group your points together a bit, and planning might also help you to think about their implications, or about deeper connections between them.
- When answering the essay question, take care not to regurgitate an essay that you've already written for A level or IB. It's fine to use material that you've learned at school or college, of course, but it's most unlikely that an essay you've written before will be the best possible answer you could write to the question on the HAT paper, and we give great emphasis in our marking to how well candidates have tailored their answers to the demands of the question.
- Be confident in your own ideas. That's easier said than done, but if you've figured something out, and you can say why you think it, it's almost certainly worthwhile, even if no teacher, or book, has ever said anything like it. You may well want to challenge your own ideas ('Hang on, why do I think this? It contradicts what I've just said about that') but that's a different matter from worrying about them or discarding them: it's part of refining them, and/or taking them to a point where you're sure that you believe in them. Your ideas are important, and we want to see them.