

# CREATE A USABLE SENSE OF THE PAST: WORKING WITH SOURCES

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## 1. Introduction

It is occasionally said that history is what happened long ago. This is not true because the **past** is what actually happened. **History** is what people say happened in the past. History is constructed by people who study the past (Copeland 1998: 1). History is created through working on sources – both primary sources (those that have survived from the period being studied) and secondary sources (later interpretations of the period being studied). Historians look for evidence of what happened in the past. Then they make their own interpretations based on the evidence they have found. The evidence can come from a variety of sources. Historical knowledge is therefore the outcome of a process of enquiry. This is a process that we now call '*doing history*'. This is a phrase that Jack Hexter started to use in his book on historical studies (Hexter 1971).

Historians operate in the following ways when investigating the past and constructing history. They pose questions of the past; collect sources which they interpret by organising, analysing, evaluating and extracting relevant information in order to address the question; construct history based on the evidence from the sources in order to answer the questions that they have posed; and communicate their findings in a logical, systematic manner (Dean 2002: 1-2).

At the end of the last century the teaching of history changed considerably (Catterall 1994). The focus moved to using both primary and secondary sources instead of only using school textbooks (tertiary sources) in the traditional way. Documentary evidence is the raw material that the historian works with. The interpretation of the past is constructed through a careful sifting of many documents of a diverse nature that can include official

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government documents, diaries and memoirs, artefacts, maps, sketches, diagrams, oral testimony, photos, cartoons, statistical data, and so on.

## **2. Construction of Knowledge in History**

A fundamental goal of teaching history should therefore be to teach learners to be historians. Learners should be taught how to construct knowledge in history instead of being passive absorbers of historical information. Furthermore, skills and techniques as well as knowledge and understanding can be assessed while learners empower themselves with their own learning. The learner's ability to construct historical knowledge – doing history – should therefore be the primary focus of the assessment.

Learners are brought face to face with the past through an investigation in order to present their findings. According to Nichol (1997: 66) they gain insights into the past by transforming the information (evidence) from their sources into a form that they can understand. The construction of knowledge needs to be based on the evidence and there need to be some accepted ways to interpret the evidence: looking at chronology; looking for change and continuity; cause and effect; similarity and difference.

The following diagram (Figure 1) and explanation<sup>2</sup> clearly illustrates knowledge construction in history (WCED 2005: 4):

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<sup>2</sup> Developed by the History Curriculum Advisory Service of the Western Cape Education Department.

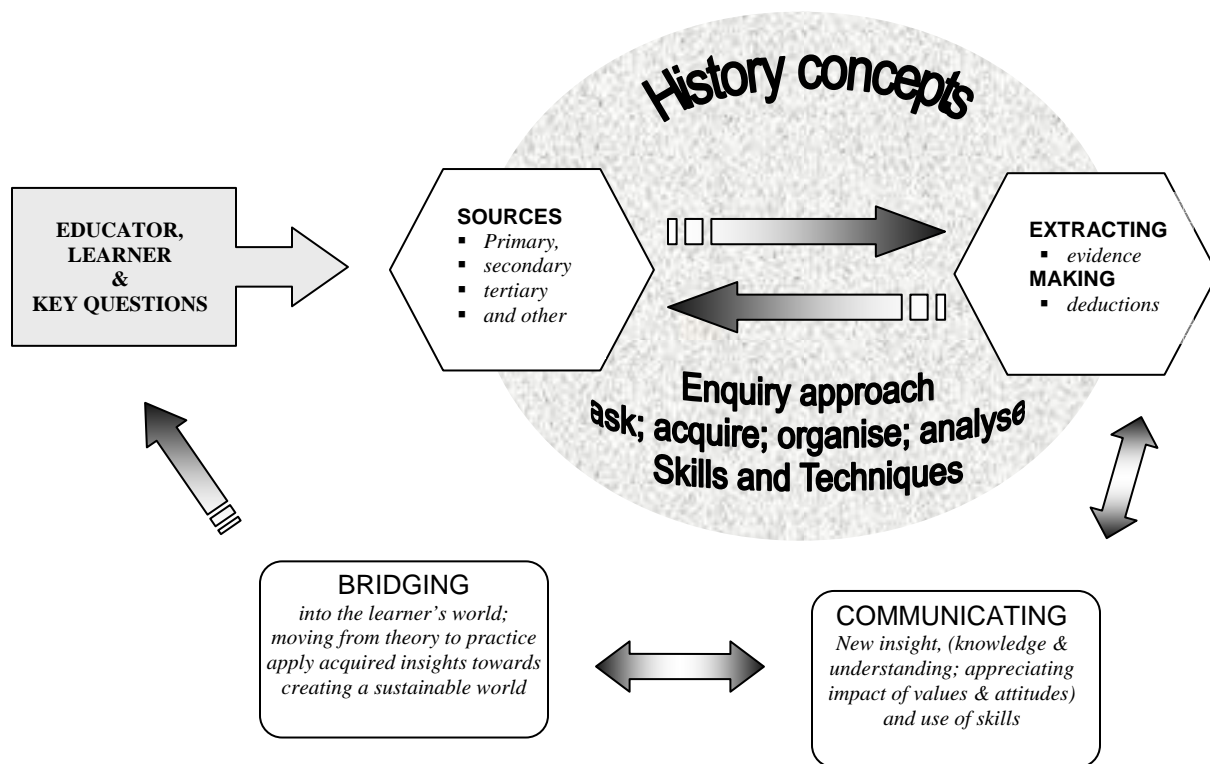


Figure 1

Thus the cycle of enquiry comprises the following:

- **Asking questions** of the past, present and future. The questions can come from either the educator or the learners. All learning in History should start with a question. This also offers an ideal opportunity to focus on issues in society, e.g. democracy, critical citizenry, human rights issues, etc.
- **Collecting information/data** to answer the questions. Educators structure activities to guide learners in extracting evidence from the sources (primary/secondary) at an appropriate level. Learners can also discuss different sides to a story or different opinions about something.
- **Organising information** in e.g. tables, graphs in order to simplify the next processes
- Making deductions by **analysing evidence (information/data)**
- **Constructing an answer** / taking up a position based on the evidence.
- **Communicating or presenting the answers** in a variety of appropriate ways.
- **Applying the new insights** supported by the educators who guide them to see the relevance of the enquiry to their own world.

According to Copeland (1998:7-8), it is very important that educator intervention takes place at a number of stages during the process of teaching, enquiry and construction:

- **Setting the key question:** The educator plays a crucial role in ensuring that the key question is well focused and that it will assist with the construction of knowledge. The aspect of the past to be constructed in the activity, such as difference, change, chronology, causation, will determine the choice of question. **How** did this event change the South African society? (change); **Why** do you think this event happened? (causation).

Progression can be seen in both the growing demands made on the learner by the question(s) and also in the decision by the educator to allow the learners to set their own questions.

- **Selection of historical sources:** The aspect to be studied and the ability of the learners are both important factors to be taken into account when selecting appropriate sources for the enquiry. One source or several sources may be selected. The sources may be of similar type (all photos) or a variety (an artefact, a picture and a document). An appropriate selection of sources will allow the opportunity to construct meaning.
- **Define skills and concepts:** The educator must decide on the skills and the concepts to be applied in the activity which will allow the learner to make a construction. Providing additional information or asking leading questions during the activity may also be used as a means to help the learner.
- **Setting the means of communication:** The concept that is used will determine the appropriateness of the recording and communication methods: tables to organise information; Venn diagrams to show change and continuity; timelines to focus on chronology of events; etc. It is of vital importance to use the appropriate recording and communication method to make sure that the learner constructs meaning that relates to the concept.

Differentiation and progression will be seen in the type of communication the activity demands; drawing, role-play, talking, writing, etc.

- **Selection of means of assessment:** The educator needs to assess the learner's ability to form a construction. The best way to do this is through the recording and communication method,
- **Creating opportunities to review:** Firstly, the educator needs to review the student's learning, by assessing the learner's interpretation and communication. Secondly, it is vital that the educator creates the opportunity for the learner to reflect on what s/he has learned and how the present construction is different from previous constructions; this is important in understanding the historical process.
- **Looking ahead:** It is important to help the learner look ahead to the next phase of the process of construction. The educator does this by sharing the focus of the next activity. This will enable the learner to place his or her learning into a continuum.

Construction of knowledge in history takes place in the present even though it is about the past. We use evidence about the past in the present and we use our own experiences, interests and assumptions in our constructions. Our constructions of the past are therefore "a very 'present' activity" according to Copeland (1998: 10). Construction of knowledge develops the learners' thinking skills and their insight into what may have happened in the past. It is through this process of construction that they are enabled to come to terms with their place in the World.

Learning history should present learners with dynamic and enabling skills and concepts which allow them to come to terms with the nature of the past and the present (Copeland 1998: 10).

### **3. Nature of Source Work**

It is therefore evident that knowledge construction will have an effect on the nature of source work in history.

The diagram (Figure 2) below gives a clear indication of the manner in which source work needs to be conducted. It can be done not only during an examination and a test, but also in the classroom. Source work can be done individually or as group work. It is important that sources are given in question papers, tests and classroom activities. These sources should be supplied by the educator for classroom activities or they may also be gathered by the learner or by the educator and learner.

The enquiry route needs to be followed, as explained in the diagram, regarding knowledge construction (Figure 1). The response by the learner can be presented in a variety of appropriate ways – visual, verbal and written format.

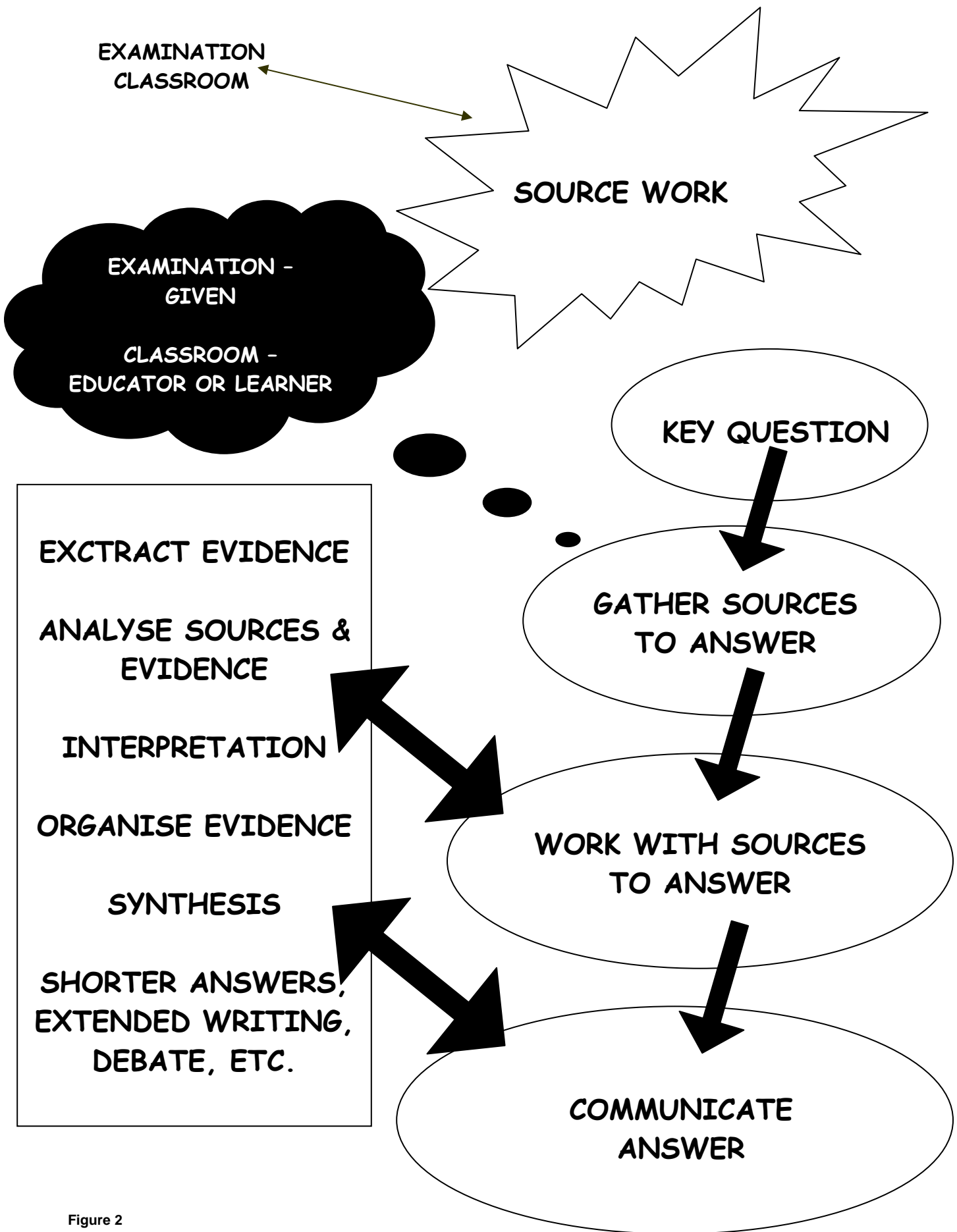
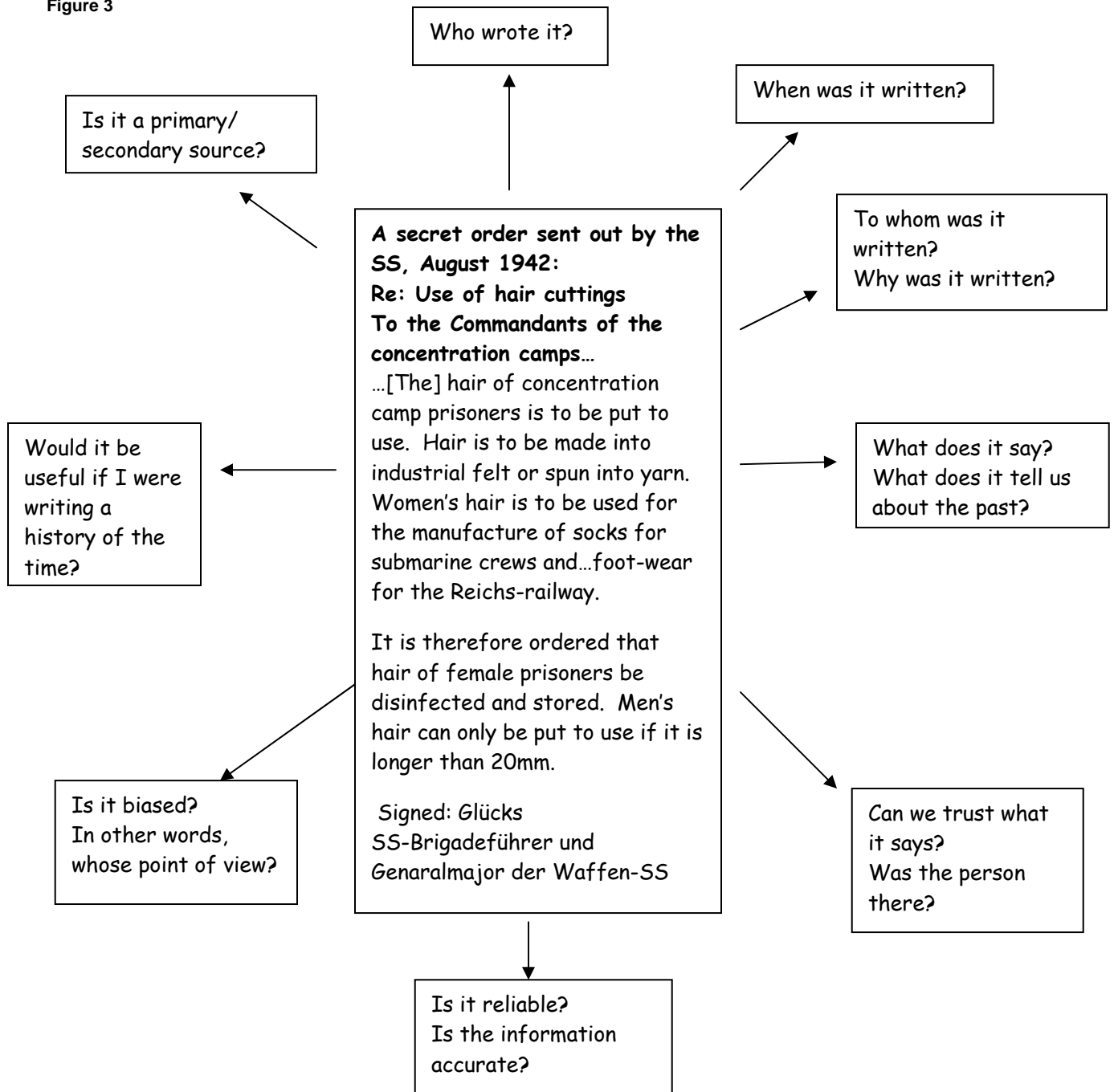


Figure 2

There are some important questions to ask about historical sources as illustrated in the diagram<sup>3</sup> (Figure 3) below (DoE September 2005: 29). The questions around the source help you to understand and use the information in the source. You will need to think about these questions when you also use other sources.

Figure 3



<sup>3</sup> Adapted from NCS Subject Assessment Guidelines: History. September 2005.



#### 4. What does this mean for teaching and learning?

It is far more interesting to work with original historical sources than reading from a textbook or listening to a lecture according to Barton (2005: 751). These sources can create personal connections to history, as students read the words written by living, breathing humans like themselves. Furthermore audio, visual and audio-visual sources and material artefacts can be popular additions to the classroom. Much the same could be said for historical fiction, games and simulations or role plays and dramas. What then are the implications and unique contributions of working with historical sources? What does this mean for teaching and learning?

We need to remember that in all cases the aim of working with historical sources is to guide learners in the process of constructing their own piece of history and to create a usable sense of the past. It is in this context that it is important that they know whether it is a primary or a secondary source and that they understand issues of bias and the reliability of sources. If we accept that, then there are several implications, all of which we are grappling with when we engage with source work in history.

- **The enquiry process or investigation needs to be directed by key questions**

Learners must be encouraged and taught to ask questions about the past.

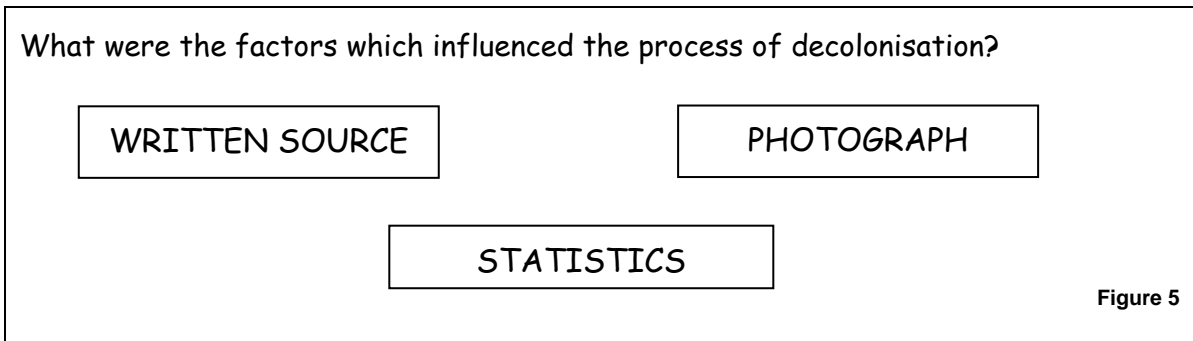
Educators and learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) need to provide questions for learners. Included in Figure 4 are two examples of key questions.

Why did the South African Government impose the State of Emergency in the 1980s?  
Did the formation of NATO increase the tension of the Cold War in Europe?

Figure 4

- **Historical sources need to be provided and grouped**

The enquiry process or investigations must be set up using sources. Educators and learning and teaching support materials (LTSMs) must provide authentic sources for learners to find answers to the questions. It is also important to group a number of different types of sources (Figure 5) that focus on a topic. Use a key question to guide the research/ enquiry process.



- **All sources need to be properly contextualised**

The more information given about a source, the better the questions that can be asked based on this source. The context-setting of a primary source includes the author/creator of the source, date, the event (e.g. a speech at a rally) while the context-setting of a secondary source should include the author, title and date of the book. The newspapers and the date published need to be identified for both written newspaper reports and cartoons. Identifying people in a cartoon or photo should form part of the context-setting. It is not a historical skill to ask learners to identify people. See the examples included in Figure 6.

**SOURCE 5A**

This is an extract from *Turning Points in History Book 4* edited by Bill Nasson. It looks at the nature of Afrikaner nationalism and identity in the 1930s.

**SOURCE 2C**

This is a photograph of the Great Trek centenary celebrations in 1938. Thousands of Afrikaners greet the trek wagons as they make their way down Pritchard Street, Johannesburg, in December 1938. Note the Africans in the foreground. The centenary celebrations of the Boer trek came at a time when thousands of Afrikaners had trekked from the rural areas to the cities. The romantic reconstruction of a brave and independent past, 'The Great Trek' struck a deep chord in many struggling to survive in the city, and helped to promote the Afrikaner nationalist movement.

**SOURCE 4B**

This is an article entitled 'Houses of Hessian' which was published in a local newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 8 April 1944.

Figure 6

- **A variety of sources should be used**

Although it is possible to use only one source in an investigation, it is more usual to use more than this. If two or more sources are used they need to be selected in order to support, complement or contradict one other in the investigation. One should try to combine audio, visual, and audio-visual material, oral and written sources if possible to enhance the value of the investigation (Figure 5). Use fewer but lengthier sources to answer and interface with the key question. If the focus is on working with photographs or artefacts a number of the same type of sources e.g. photographs or artefacts should be used.

- **Sources need to have enough in them**

Sources need to speak to the learners. Learners seem to be more attracted to sources of a more personal nature such as diaries, oral testimony or a newspaper report about what happened to people. Official government documents tend to be difficult reading matter for some learners. Sources that are two and three sentences in length (Figure 7) should be avoided. Sources need to have enough in them so that significant questions may be asked and also need to be a reasonable length in order for learners to be able to do something meaningful with them (Figure 8).

**SOURCE 6C**

Soviet Russia set up communist governments in all the countries they controlled. The following extract from a BBC documentary, 1985, quoted Wolfgang Leonhard, an East German Communist Party official:

...You had the state planning system everywhere...You had communist parties... central committees, Politburo, Stalin pictures. You had the same party education materials...

Figure 7

**Remarks on Figures 7 and 8**

Figure 7 is a source that was included in the National History HG Paper 2 November 2003. It is properly contextualised, but very short. The dots indicate that parts of the source have been left out and broken into very short quotes to form a

source. This source does not have enough in it on which to base significant questions and, furthermore, there is not very much in the source with which learners can do something meaningful.

Figure 8 is a source that was written by a news reporter about residents and students in Soweto during the Soweto Uprising in 1976. It is a lengthy source, but has very interesting reading matter. This very rich source tells about the fears of the residents and it gives a clear indication of the mood of the students. There is a great deal in this source on which significant questions may be asked and it is also a source that can be used on its own for something meaningful.

#### **SOURCE 4A**

This is an extract from a book entitled *People on the boil* which was written by Harry Mashabela - an African news reporter - reflecting on the 1976 Soweto Uprisings. Read the extract and answer the following questions.

Something was burning inside a side street above. We could only see dark smoke shooting into the air. I ran up the road to see what it was.

'Get back', a band of students a distance away shouted. I stopped almost instantly, looking at them. They waved at me to get back. There was no other way. Defiance would spell trouble, I thought. As I retreated I had a brainwave. Glancing to see whether they watched, I jumped into a yard, then into another, joining an elderly woman. 'Oh, our children, what are they doing?' She shook her head in disbelief. A van belonging to the West Rand Administration Board (WRAB), the notorious regional authority governing Soweto, was on fire. Pupils had set it alight. She did not know what happened to the poor driver. He must have escaped, she said somewhat wistfully. She seemed stricken with fear, fear of what might happen as a result of what was happening, I thought. I wondered whether she blamed the children or the police for what was happening.

'P-o-w-e-r!' shrill voices pierced the air for the umpteenth time. I got back, waited outside. I went into the house of Dr Matlhare. I was still phoning inside the house, talking to the news desk at the office, when the servant banged the door, shouting. 'Come out; they will kill us. They are burning the house,' she screamed plaintively. Without thinking, I also shouted into the telephone: 'I'm phoning from Dr Matlhare. They are burning the house,' I hung up, running behind the servant, out of the house.

A mob of youngsters lingered in front of the house. 'It is his car,' the servant mumbled, pointing at me. And the mob surrounded me. 'Is that your car?' someone shouted, pointing at a Volkswagen parked near the motor-gate.

'No, it's not mine. It belongs to *The World newspaper* and I work for *The Star*.'  
'It's a lie; We're burning it if it is not yours, can we?'  
'If you want you can burn it. It's not mine.'  
'It belongs to the police, we understand.'  
'You can burn it if you want, but it isn't a police car; it belongs to *The World*.'  
They looked at one other.  
'*Los hom* - leave him,' someone said.  
'Okay, Daddy,' they scuttled away in a pack.  
A little later, however, someone came to fetch the car. It was not a member of *The World* staff! Had I mistakenly saved a police vehicle? I felt ill at ease.

Figure 8

Figure 8 continues

- 1.1 Extract three phrases which illustrate the mood of the students. Why did you select these phrases?
- 1.2 What impact did the mood and actions of the students have on the reporter?
2. Why do you think it was important for Harry Mashabelo to report on these events?
3. 'Harry Mashabelo was a police collaborator.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement.

- **Questioning in activities should keep various aspects in mind**

A key question and sources should form the basis of an activity that encourages an investigation. The question should furthermore provide the opportunity in class for individual and paired work, discussions and debate. It is also important that the nature of the question should help to develop language and communication skills. These are important skills and need to be taught continuously.

Try to avoid technical questions about sources that are not related to the ultimate aim of creating an extended piece of writing in history. Questions about sources are only useful if they help learners to construct the history at the end of the set of sources. The type of questions included in Figure 9 are in themselves of little value.

- Is this a primary or a secondary source? Give reasons for your answer.
- Is there enough evidence in the source about the event? Substantiate your answer.

Figure 9

Learners must be encouraged to make judgements based on evidence and defend their judgements or point of view on sources. Question 3 in Figure 8 is a very good example. Learners must also be able to recognise and understand different points of view in sources. This skill will help them to construct a piece of extended writing. All the questions within an investigation need to ensure that the main key question is answered in the end.

Appendix A includes various sentence beginnings to source-based questions. It is a useful tool to help with setting questions. Questions in an investigation should include various levels of questioning (Figure 10)<sup>4</sup> from extracting evidence, through the steps to using the source to create a piece of extended writing, however short that piece might be.

#### LEVELS OF QUESTIONING (DoE 2002):

- Level 1:** Extract evidence from sources.
- Level 2:** Straightforward interpretations by using evidence from **one source** and broader knowledge to show an understanding of the period/event/issue.
- Level 3:** Straightforward interpretations by using evidence from **more than one source** and broader knowledge to show an understanding of the period/event/issue.
- Level 4:** Complex interpretations often involving more than one source. These questions look at aspects such as bias, reliability, usefulness, the use of organising concepts (similarity and difference; cause and consequence; chronology; change and continuity) to explain contrasts, comparisons, etc., empathy and extended writing in history.

Figure 10

- **Investigations need to focus on skills and concepts**

Working with sources develops a number of key history skills; therefore the enquiry process (LO 1 in GET and FET: ask, acquire, organise, analyse, and communicate) should be followed. They can be grouped into four broad areas:

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from the National Senior Certificate Examination Guideline Document: History from 2002.

analysis, evaluation, synthesis (including judgement and extrapolation) and communication.

By using these key history skills one would be able to determine similarity and difference, continuity and change, cause and consequence, chronology and time, bias, empathy, reliability and other concepts (LO 2 in GET and FET).

- **A classroom-based activity and an examination question need to be structured properly and to have a clear layout.**

The classroom-based activity or examination question should be based on a key question and sources should form an integral part of the activity or question. It is also very important that the questions on the sources link to the assessment standards and key question. These questions about the sources should be varied and should end with an extended writing question. Extended writing could require learners to use their own knowledge as well as aspects of information from or about the sources.

The following example (Figure 11) of the layout is taken from the NCS Subject Assessment Guidelines (DoE September 2005: 28).

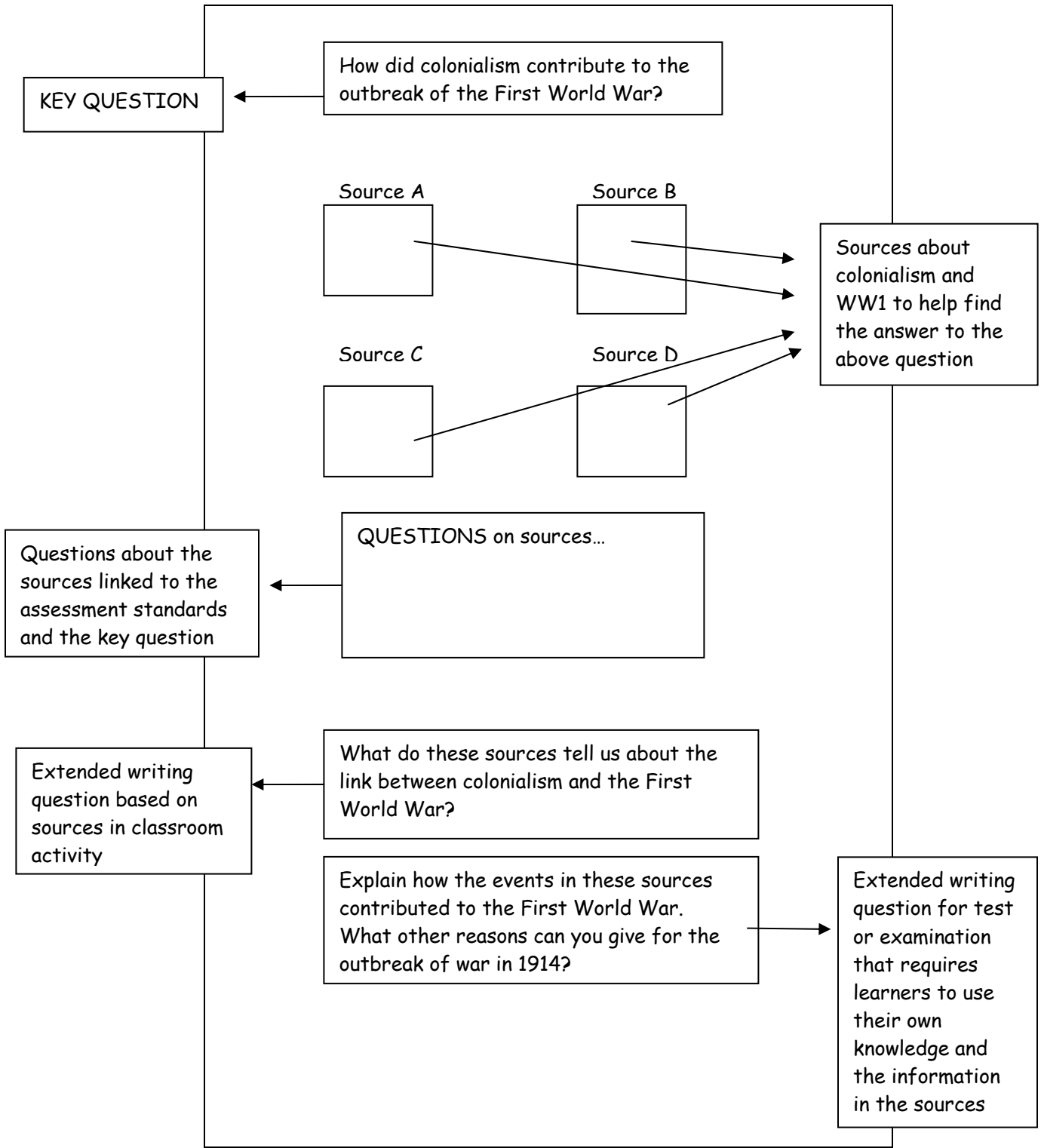


Figure 11



## 5. What is the scope of assessment of source work?

It is accepted that history is a process of enquiry into past events leading to the writing of history. This has become the focus of history teaching in the last decade. The learners' ability to construct knowledge and to apply the related historical skills and concepts needs therefore to be the focus of assessment in history.

Content plays an extremely important role in history and, in the National Curriculum Statement, it is the context for the learning outcomes and assessment standards. In the National Curriculum Statement, assessment activities will be derived from the learning outcomes and the assessment standards, but the content will provide the context for assessment. With this in mind, a relevant assessment strategy needs to be chosen.

The choice of assessment strategies is a subjective one, unique to each teacher, grade and school and dependent on the teacher's professional judgement. It is important that the strategy chosen is appropriate for the specific learning outcomes being assessed and should emphasise the learner's individual growth and development (DoE April 2005: 20).

Aspects of the learning outcomes will be used in all work done in the history classroom. The selection and combination of assessment standards (included under the learning outcomes) will not only define the nature of the activity, but also the focus of the assessment. Assessment should therefore be criterion-referenced so that the learner's ability to construct knowledge is assessed.

The history teacher needs to use the assessment standards to develop assessment criteria (See Figure 12) which may then be organised in assessment tools or instruments such as checklists (See Figure 13), rating or assessment scales (See Figure 14), holistic rubrics (See Figure 15) and analytical rubrics (See Figure 16).

<b>ASSESSMENT STANDARD 11.1.1</b>	<b>ASSESSMENT CRITERIA</b>
Identify issues within the topic under study (e.g. imperialism) and ask critical questions about the issues.	Learner is able to <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• identify issues within the topic</li><li>• ask critical questions about the issues</li></ul>

Figure 12

CHECKLIST	Yes/ No
I have identified issues within the topic.	
I have asked critical questions about the issues.	

Figure 13

RATING SCALE	1	2	3	4
Learner is able to				
identify issues within the topic.				
ask critical questions about the issues.				

1 = not at all    2 = to some extent    3 = to a great degree    4 = completely

Figure 14

<b>HOLISTIC RUBRIC to assess the learner's ability to take and substantiate a relevant point of view</b>		
<b>LEVEL 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not make a choice.    or</li> <li>• Made a choice, but has not justified the choice in a way that relates to the evidence in the sources or shows an understanding of the situation/event/issue.</li> </ul>	<b>Marks: 0 - 3</b>
<b>LEVEL 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A relevant point of view has been chosen.</li> <li>• Valid reasons for the choice have been given.</li> <li>• The justification, the use of evidence from the sources and own knowledge show to a certain extent an understanding of the situation/event/issue.</li> <li>• Shows an awareness of a certain attitude or belief as being typical of a certain period or place.</li> </ul>	<b>Marks: 4 - 8</b>
<b>LEVEL 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A relevant point of view has been chosen.</li> <li>• Logical, clear and valid reasons for the choice have been made.</li> <li>• The justification relates very well to the situation/event/issue.</li> <li>• Evidence from sources and own knowledge has been used effectively to show an understanding of the range of attitudes within a person or group being typical of a certain period or place.</li> </ul>	<b>Marks: 9 - 12</b>

Figure 15

The holistic rubric gives a global picture of the standard required. It assesses the overall impression at the end of a process that needs to be assessed. A holistic rubric is therefore very much 'an end of the road' assessment instrument.

<b>Extract from an analytical rubric</b>					
	1	2	3	4	5
<b>QUESTION OR PROBLEM</b>	Question has been fully answered or problem has been properly and fully solved	Question has been answered or problem has been solved	Question has been answered or problem has been solved to a great extent	Question or problem posed is recognisable in response	Question or problem posed is inadequately addressed or not addressed at all
<b>PLANNING AND STRUCTURE</b>	Planning and structure of response outstanding	Very well planned and structured response	Response planned and structured to a great extent	Response planned and structured to a certain extent	Little or no evidence of planning and structure
<b>KNOWLEDGE OF THE TOPIC/ EVENT/ ISSUE</b>	Thorough understanding of the topic/ event/ issue	Understand the topic/ event/ issue very well	Handling of the topic/ event/ issue shows some understanding	A basic knowledge of the topic/ event/ issue	No knowledge of the topic. Off the topic
<b>OVERALL CODE</b>					

Figure 16

The analytical rubric should give a clear picture of the distinct features that make up the criteria. It is a developmental assessment instrument and it assesses specific points. It can show one the present level of competency of the learner as well as what the learner still needs to do to improve. The analytical rubric consists of scoring criteria (the points for assessment), scoring levels (the range of assessment choices) and the criteria descriptors (these describe expectations for each criterion).

It is evident that source-based work should be assessed in a holistic manner by using assessment criteria that are organised in an appropriate assessment tool. It helps the assessor to move away from focusing solely on content and advantages learners because it focuses on the process of enquiry.

Teachers need to use these tools to collect evidence of learner performance. These tools need to be in place prior to the learner participating in any of the history activities which involve the assessment of learner performance. It is crucial that a teacher shares the assessment tool(s) for the activity with the learners before they do the required activity.

The assessment tool clarifies what both the learning and the performance should focus on. It becomes a powerful tool for self-assessment.

It is still important to mark source-based answers by using ticks and a conventional marking guideline to determine whether the requirements of the question have been addressed. In order to get a holistic view of the learner's competence regarding the application of historical skills and concepts it is necessary to use an assessment tool to allocate an overall mark.

In marking all source-based questions credit needs to be given to any other valid and relevant viewpoints, arguments, evidence or examples (backed up by evidence). In the allocation of marks emphasis should be placed on whether the requirements of the question have been met or not. These assessment strategies also provide opportunities for rewarding the demonstration that learners have applied their own knowledge.

## **6. Conclusion**

The effective use of original sources requires careful attention to their educational purposes. Learners need to learn how historical knowledge is constructed and to use evidence to reach conclusions about issues that face them as citizens. In this way they will also learn historical content. They must therefore always use sources within a context of enquiry. Such enquiry requires that learners develop and pursue meaningful questions, that they make informed choices about the evidence that can be used to answer those questions, and that they gain experience drawing conclusions from evidence (Barton 2005: 753). The learner's performance in relation to the selected assessment standards should therefore be the primary focus of the assessment while working with sources.

It is evident that historical sources should certainly be a centrepiece of the history classroom, because they are the foundation of historical knowledge. By working with sources in an effective manner learners are enabled to create a usable sense of the past.

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## APPENDIX A ON SOURCE-BASED QUESTIONS

### Examples of sentence beginnings of questions

1. What differences are there between Sources A & B?
2. Explain the importance of....
3. What point is the cartoonist trying to make?
4. Do you agree with the comments?
5. How useful is Source A to an historian studying...?
6. What message is the cartoonist trying to convey in Source A?
7. Describe in your own words...
8. How useful are the headlines in Source A?
9. Using Sources A & B explain the differences between... &...
10. In your own words explain...
11. Does Source A give a reliable view of...?
12. What do Sources A & B tell you about conditions during...
13. Explain the effects that find...
14. Which would be more useful to an historian studying...?
15. Decide how important...
16. What happened at...?
17. Compare Sources A & B. What different views do they give of...?
18. What does Source A tell you about the effects of...?
19. How reliable is Source A?
20. What attitude to...is shown by Source A?
21. How effective is Source A in getting the message across?
22. Is Source A a reliable view of... (e.g. on the birth of South Africa's democracy)?
23. Why was there growing opposition to...?
24. Explain the main events that took place...
25. Why do you think the newspaper printed this story?
26. What point is the artist trying to make in Source A?
27. What image of... (women) do you get from Source A?
28. What differences are there between these 2 versions of...(Sources A & B)?
29. According to Source A, how serious were their problems that...?
30. How reliable is Source A as a view of...?
31. Does Source B give a reliable view of...?