Case study

# Strategies for teaching A-level history

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A-Level students often claim that history is their most challenging subject, and, in some ways, they are not wrong! With the vast amount of content at GCSE and the challenges of the pandemic, the development of the skills of the historian at A-Level has become ever more important. This case study will focus on how we can develop our post-16 students and shape them into inquisitive and independent historians who are ready for university. I will explore strategies for bridging the gap between GCSE and A-Level, looking at how we can help students to engage critically with historians in both exam papers and the NEA, as well as building up their research skills in preparation for university.

In many ways, teaching Key Stage 5 students is not dissimilar to teaching their younger peers. What works at Key Stages 3 and 4 also tends to work at A-Level: retrieval practice, modeling, etc. However, we need to remember that we are not just preparing our older students for their examinations, but for the world of university. As such, we need to take the most successful teaching strategies we already use, but think critically about how we can use these to increase students’ resilience and independence.

There are a number of key principles that underly my teaching at Key Stage 5. Over the past 12 years of teaching A-Level, these are the ones I have found to be the most effective in preparing students both for their examinations and for university:

1. Introducing academic writing as early as possible
2. Modelling historical writing / backwards fading
3. An enquiry-based approach
4. Opportunities for structured debate / role play
5. Providing university-style learning opportunities
6. Working with historians

## 1. Introducing academic writing as early as possible

The first time my A-Level students are exposed to academic writing at sixth form is in their baseline assessment, given to them on enrolment day. It is a brilliant opportunity to check for understanding and give students a taste of what is to come.

**Why give students a baseline?**

* It is important to get to know pupils in terms of their academic ability
* You may have new starters / pupils you have not taught or a completely new cohort
* GCSE examination results do not necessarily equate to how well students will perform at A-Level

**What am I looking for when I set a baseline assessment in year 12?**

* Ability to comprehend academic writing
* Ability to extract key information
* How well they can distinguish facts from interpretations
* How well they can express themselves
* Ability to write succinctly
* Handwriting

**What do I use?**

I set a piece of text they should be unfamiliar with and ask them 2 questions about it in order to gauge their understanding of the text. This means that it is both manageable for the students to complete and for me to mark. Once I have their responses, I am then able to better understand how I may need to adapt my teaching of grappling with historical interpretations. I don’t provide a score but do give some feedback either individually or whole-class depending on the size of the group.

Following this, there are various strategies I employ to help students to engage with longer academic texts.

**Why is it important to use longer academic texts at A-Level?**

* It helps students to prepare for university, where they will be dealing with material of this type on a daily basis
* Working with such texts helps them to understand the process of good history writing
* It will prepare them to better analyse texts in their examinations / Non-exam Assessment (NEA)
* It helps to promote reading fluency by dealing with complex language

When using academic texts at A-Level, the strategies used at Key Stages 3 to 4 are just as useful. However, at A-Level you often want students to be engaging with significantly longer texts which may be daunting.

First, it is important to think about how you present the text to the students. Instead of giving them a whole article or chapter, use strategies like Simon Beale’s (@SPBeale) excellent guided reading technique, or including relevant images, maps or symbols to break up the text and provide an anchor for students. As the students progress through year 12 and into year 13, I use backwards fading to gradually reduce the support available to them.

## 2. Modeling historical writing / backwards fading

In addition to dealing with longer academic texts, one of the challenges many A-Level students face is how to approach higher tariff questions. Whilst to us as teachers, it may seem easier to answer 3 questions in 2.5 hours than 10 questions in 2 hours, for many students looking at a 25 or 30 mark question can be overwhelming. To combat this, I model the process of historical writing and continue to use backwards fading when teaching students how to answer exam questions.

By employing the strategies below, you will be able to increase students’ resilience and they will also produce better historical writing:

* Try using a visualiser to model writing an essay or paragraph; speak out loud, cross things out, talk about what is going through your mind as you write.
* *I do, We do, You do* (see Greg Thornton’s work on this @MrThorntonTeach).
* Get students used to reading the mark scheme (or an adapted version of it).
* Give examples of essay sections and ask students to decide why they are good or how they could be improved.

## 3. An enquiry-based approach

As with Key Stages 3 to 4, an enquiry-based approach is vital at A-Level. It builds on what they are familiar with from years 7-11 and engages them with important historical questions. It can also enliven the drier sections of the specification!

At A-Level there is a lot less freedom than at Key Stage 3 when creating enquiry questions. However, by using the specification and your own wider reading, it is possible to create bespoke and engaging enquiries for your students. If your NEA unit is not a free choice for students, but a taught unit, then this is an excellent place to embed fantastic enquiries.

## 4. Opportunities for structured debate / role play

I like to use structured debate and role play or simulations at A-Level, much like at Key Stages 3 and 4. Sixth form students still enjoy activities like this and it is often a good way to engage them and provide a bit of variety. Structured debates and discussions also help to prepare students for seminar-style teaching at university which can be a big change for them.

Below are somethings to keep in mind when using these:

* Make sure it is tightly focused on the topic / issue you want them to be learning about.
* Ensure there has been some pre-teaching otherwise they are likely to go off topic and it will waste time as you will end up re-teaching.
* Give students clear parameters.
* Make the success criteria and expectations very clear.
* Plan it into your Scheme of Work (SOW)
* Give the debate or discussion enough time for it to be meaningful.
* Pre-reading for homework is a brilliant way to put into practice the techniques you have been teaching them for dealing with longer academic texts and will save time. This means you will have more time in class for discussion and debate.

## 5. Provide university-style learning opportunities

Building on other strategies, I try to include a range of university-style learning opportunities across Key Stage 5. No matter what subject your students read at university, they will be exposed to a range of different teaching styles that they possibly haven’t come across much in school (seminars, lectures, presentations etc.). It is part of our role as A-Level teachers to prepare them for this.

Below is a list of some ways I have included this in my A-Level teaching:

* Lectures: these can be really powerful, but need to be thoroughly planned and not used all the time. Note-taking needs to be pre-taught before any lectures (we teach Cornell note-taking as well as some short-hand tricks).
* Practicing note-taking skills by listening to podcasts in class (*In Our Time* etc.)
* Seminars: depending on the size of your class, it might need splitting into two (one lesson for prep), give pre-reading and discussion questions. Get students to come up with some of their own.
* Discussions: I track individual contributions and questions and then show this to students under a visualiser. I’ve found that this encourages my students to engage more with their peers.
* Presentations: as above, they need to be clearly focused with success criteria. It is important to think carefully about which topics are set to ensure they are manageable.
* Doing ‘real’ history: using sources and data sets can be especially powerful. The NEA is a fantastic way into this.

## 6. Working with historians

One of the ways my practice has most changed over recent years is by working more closely with professional historians with my students. It is so important to do this as these people may be their tutors or lecturers when they start university and it helps students to feel more confident talking to them. In addition, these people are the experts and they are usually very keen to work with schools.

**How to work with historians:**

* Encourage students to get in contact for NEAs (maybe offer to proofread emails / give them a model).
* Contact local academics and ask if they are willing to talk to your students.
* Get involved with the Virtual History Society. I run short monthly online talks for students from academics across the UK. We cover a vast range of topics and students can ask questions as well. Follow me @vhistorysociety to get links and be put on the mailing list!
* History Teacher Book Group: this is a great way to improve your own subject knowledge, make contacts and join a wonderful community of fellow history teachers (@historybookgrp)

Overall, the key thing to remember is that A-Level teaching is very much like teaching students at Key Stage 3 to 4, but we also need to bear in mind that we are preparing them for university as well as examinations.

# Further reading \*

Carroll, J. 2016. [‘The whole point of the thing: how nominalisation might develop students’ written causal arguments’](https://www.history.org.uk/publications/resource/8794/using-nominalisation-to-develop-written-causal-arg), in ‘Teaching History’, Issue 162, April 2016, pages 16 to 18

J Carroll, [‘“I feel if I say this in my essay it’s not going to be as strong”: multi-voicedness, “oral rehearsal” and Year 13 students’ written arguments’](https://www.history.org.uk/publications/resource/9214/i-feel-if-i-say-this-in-my-essay-its-not-going-t), in ‘Teaching History’, Issue 167, June 2017, pages 8 to 17;

J Carroll, [‘Couching counterfactuals in knowledge when explaining the Salem witch trials with Year 13’](https://www.history.org.uk/publications/resource/9446/couching-counterfactuals-in-knowledge-when-explain), in ‘Teaching History’, Issue 172, September 2018, pages 18 to 29;

C Massey, [‘Asking Year 12, “what would Figes do?”: Using an academic historian as the gold standard for feedback’](https://www.history.org.uk/publications/resource/8994/historical-scholarship-and-feedback), in ‘Teaching History’, Issue 164, October 2016, pages 29 to 37;

K Murray, [‘How do you construct an historical claim? Examining how Year 12 coped with challenging historiography’](https://www.history.org.uk/publications/resource/8549/how-do-you-construct-an-historical-claim), in ‘Teaching History’, Issue 160, September 2015, pages 50 to 57;

M Fordham, [‘Slaying dragons and sorcerers in Year 12: in search of historical argument’](https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/resource/2434/slaying-dragons-and-sorcerers-in-year-12-in-searc), in ‘Teaching History’, Issue 129, September 2009, pages 31 to 38.[↩](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-history/research-review-series-history)

\*Subscription to ‘Teaching History’ magazine is required to access these.