

# 'This extract is no good, Miss!'

## Helping post-16 students to make judgements about an historian's construction of argument

Frustrated that her A-level students were being overly dismissive when asked to judge the convincingness of academic historians' arguments,

Paula Worth drew on previous history-teacher research and theories of history for inspiration.

After noting that her students would unjustly reject esteemed historians' accounts for lack of comprehensiveness, Worth explains

here how she helped her students overcome their cynicism by making clear to them the necessary choices

historians must make when selecting evidence to construct their historical interpretations. She details

how in furnishing them with the language of tentativeness derived from authentic historical discourse

she was able to help her students move from blanket judgements to

reach more nuanced critiques of the particular claims that historians make.

### Paula Worth

Paula Worth is Key Stage 3 Co-ordinator for History and Lead Practitioner at Bristol Grammar School (11–18 selective), Bristol.

### The much-maligned historian

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single student in possession of a reasonable interpretation of the past must want to reject that interpretation on the grounds of fallaciousness. At least, that was what was happening in my classroom. I began teaching a new A-level specification introduced by the exam board AQA in 2015 which requires students to assess how 'convincing' they deem historians' interpretations of the past to be.<sup>1</sup> I became exasperated, however, by how readily my students cast off an interpretation as unconvincing because it was somehow incomplete. My students' focus of study was Britain during the Industrial Revolution and the names of notable writers of nineteenth-century history – including the likes of Ashton, Hobsbawm and Thompson – were mud.

A significant issue that my students appeared to be struggling with was how to comment upon an historian's choice of evidence without damning that historian's interpretation as 'erroneous', 'invalid', 'flawed', 'incorrect' or downright 'wrong'. I have read all of these words in students' answers to practice exam questions (see Figure 1). Despite making it clear to students that historians cannot trawl for every fact in the vast ocean of all documents ever created on the subject, and despite discussing the inevitable influence of an historian's context and purpose, my students still had trouble expressing their ideas about an historian's selection of evidence. Any historian who did not consider regional variation when discussing the standard of living during the Industrial Revolution, for example, was inevitably cast off as an abysmal historian of the worst type.

### Beyond context

The issue of 'interpretations' has been a formal part of England's National Curriculum since it was first introduced in 1991, and it requires students to understand how and why the past has been interpreted in different ways.<sup>2</sup> It is essential to distinguish this second-order concept from the process of a student constructing their own interpretation. So, for example, 'was the Industrial Revolution revolutionary' would not meet the requirements of an 'interpretations' enquiry because the students are constructing their own interpretation instead of exploring the construction of other people's accounts of the past. 'Interpretations' also requires knowledge of two time periods: the time period being studied and the time period of the person doing the interpreting. The teacher-researcher Card used the memorable phrase 'double-vision' to emphasise the importance of knowing details about the socio-historical context when events were being interpreted. She argued that students should focus on how written and visual interpretations of the past reflect the values and preoccupations of the author and the time in which they lived.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1: Example of an extract from the work of an historian that a pupil might be asked to evaluate, followed by a pupil's response

It is altogether unlikely that living standards improved over much of the eighteenth century. It is not improbable that, sometime soon after the onset of the Industrial Revolution...they ceased to improve and declined. Perhaps the middle of the 1790s, the period of Speenhamland and shortages, marked the turning point. At the other end, the middle 1840s certainly marked a turning point.

Hobsbawm, E.J. (1975) 'The British Standard of Living, 1790–1850' in Taylor, A.J.P. (Ed.) *The Standard of Living in the Industrial Revolution*, London: Allen and Unwin

This extract is flawed because he does not say anything about wage statistics or the availability of food. It is pretty much useless because he misses out so much about changes in prices and how people changed jobs.

So time and context matter when it comes to deconstructing subsequent interpretations of past events. The historian Marwick reflected, however, that historians 'argue that far from being prisoners of their own culture, they are, by the very nature of what they study, particularly well qualified to understand the influences operating on them, and, therefore, to escape from them.'<sup>4</sup> As Fordham has pointed out:

*Much of the recent work by history teachers has focused on the use of academic scholarship in the classroom, particularly in terms of moving pupils away from simplistic analyses of interpretations which place too great an emphasis on who the author was, and not on the process by which his or her argument was constructed. Chapman, for example, found 'that many students think too much about who historians are and not enough about the decisions that historians make.' At A-level, teachers have for some years now explored ways in which they can move pupils away from pigeon-holing historians (traditionalist, revisionist, American, Russian, and so on) and towards examining the process by which arguments are constructed.'*<sup>5</sup>

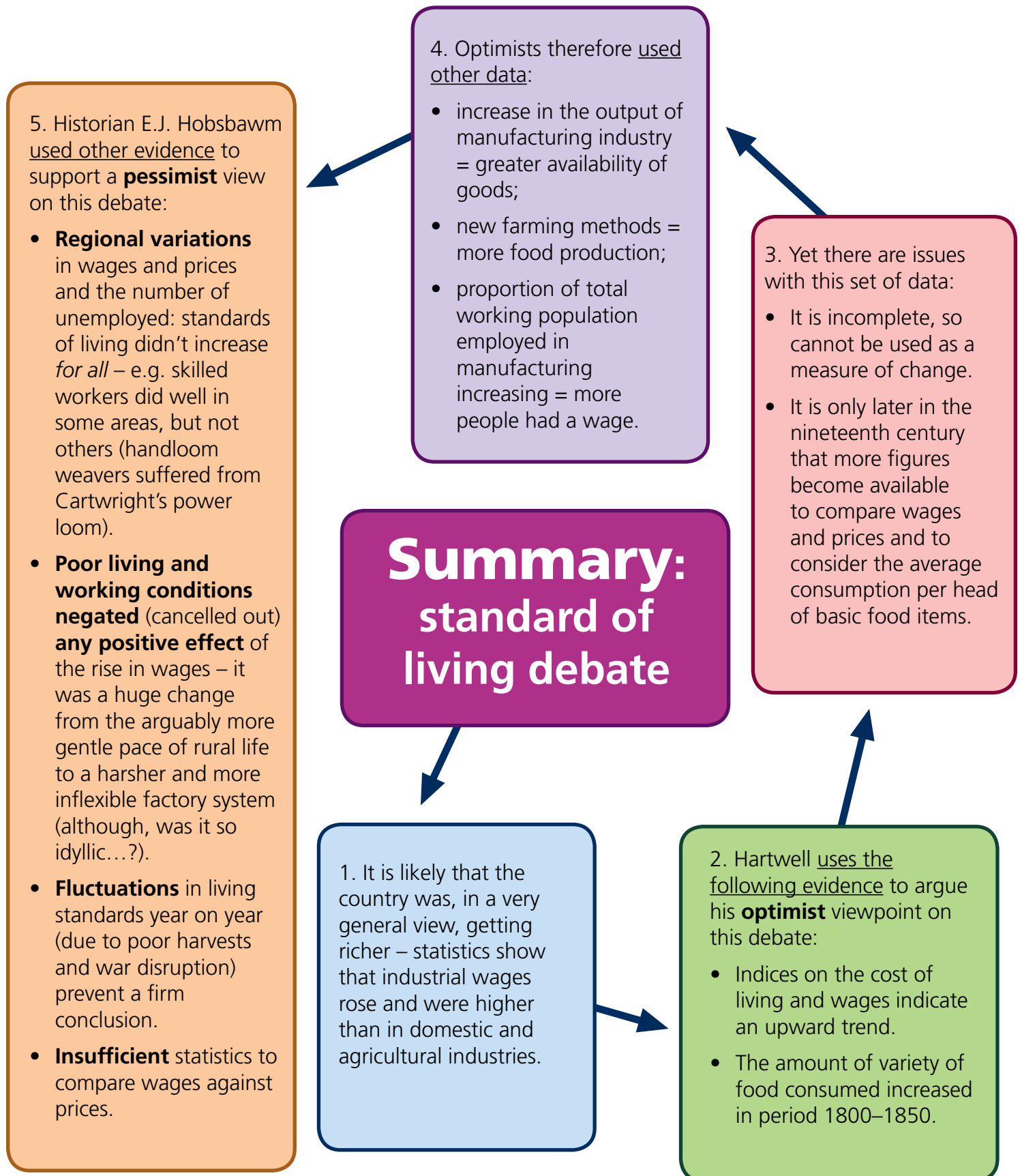
The challenge of helping students to deconstruct an historical interpretation is therefore a curricular goal for Key Stage 3 students (11–14 years old) and may form the focus of examination for older students. It can be helpful to reflect on the challenges that younger students face when it comes to understanding the deliberateness and artistry of an interpretation because, in my experience, these problems can resurface for post-16 students. Counsell, for example, warned against giving the impression of 'determinism' when teaching students at Key Stage 3, so that they do not lose sight of the agency of the author in the construction process.<sup>6</sup> It is a trap which can be easy to fall into. When supporting

my Year 7s (11–12 years old) in an interpretations-based enquiry on the Crusades, I reflected that I needed to avoid a reductive situation whereby:

*...pupils are left with stereotypical approaches to historians, such as: all German historians writing in the 1930s were inevitably pro-Nazi. As Howells reminds those who accept a 'simplified' approach to interpretations, 'the relationship between a person's "background" and their approach to history is by no means direct and clear' and 'there is no one interpretation which dominates any one era.'*<sup>7</sup>

In my experience, teaching about historical interpretations is challenging for both students and teachers, so it is easy to see why it could be tempting to go down the 'Time Period X = Interpretation Y' route. I therefore decided to take a positive view of the demands of Component 1 of the AQA History A-level.<sup>8</sup> For Paper 1, students are asked to analyse and evaluate the views of historians. They are not required to engage in guesswork about the historian's religious or political proclivities, nor are they asked to pigeonhole any of the historians into arbitrary boxes such as 'Feminist' or 'Marxist'. Name-dropping receives no marks. Students are instead expected to use contextual knowledge to determine which historian's extract they consider to be most 'convincing' by comparing the information in each extract to their own knowledge. The exam board has therefore construed the second-order concept of 'Interpretations' in a particular way that is somewhat different to how it is often approached at Key Stage 3. This poses limitations but also opportunities: I reflected that the examination is potentially a valuable opportunity to help students explore the process and artistry of how evidence is selected and arranged to create an historical argument.

Figure 2: A summary of how an historian's selection of evidence led them to argue that the standard of living in the nineteenth century was improving or declining



## A construct that can never be complete

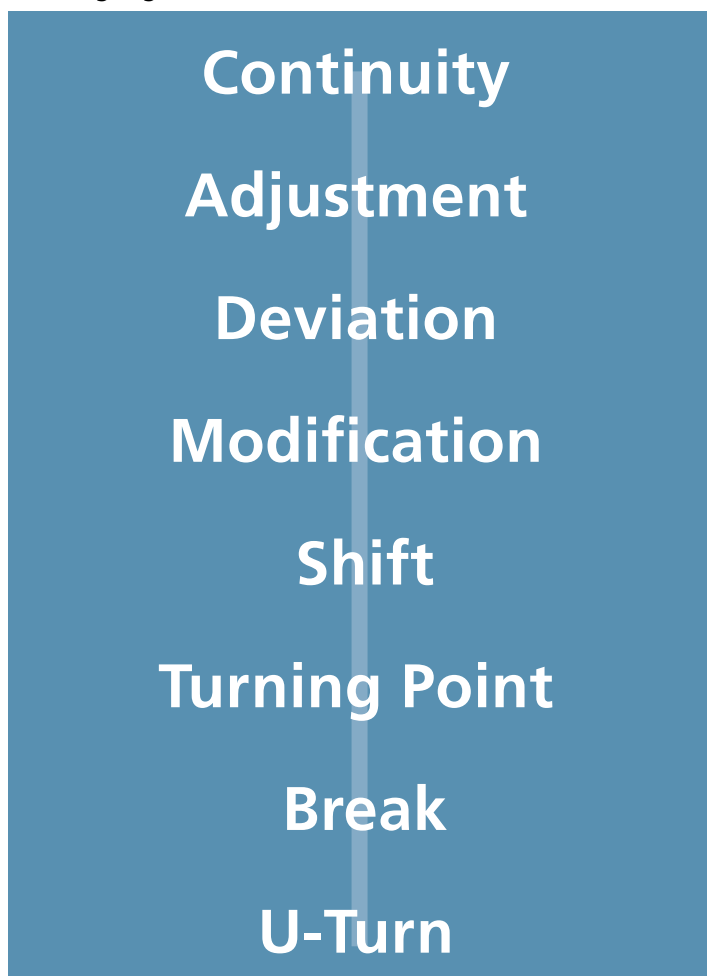
In summary, I decided that I needed to spend more time on helping my students to understand that an historian's interpretation is created by a necessary process of emphasising certain facts and underplaying others. With the Industrial Revolution, there is so much potentially relevant evidence that no one historian could select it all. Every interpretation of the Industrial Revolution could therefore stand guilty of being incomplete. In terms of helping my students to understand this issue, I was inspired by three authors: the teacher-researcher Kate Hammond, the teacher-researcher Thelma Wiltshire, and the historian E.H. Carr.

Hammond wanted her Year 9 students (13–14 years old) to 'move forward in grasping how the seemingly isolated skills of evidence handling and historical interpretation are actually vital to each other.'<sup>9</sup> I wanted to move my own students forward in a similar fashion. I hoped that, by demonstrating how an historian might select one fact over another, my students could understand that this selection of evidence was a necessary and conscious process of artistry and argumentation, rather than an oversight to be snubbed. Hammond introduced her students to two contrasting historical methods – cliometrics and microhistory – and encouraged them to experience for themselves how evidence handling directly informed interpretations.

Inspired by Hammond, I decided that I needed to help my own students to consider the evidence-handling process in more depth, making that process as transparent as possible. In an enquiry on living standards during the nineteenth century, I first asked my students to analyse several different contemporary sources, including a variety of data sets from pictures of working conditions to statistical data about wages and prices. Only then did I introduce different historians' approaches to using those sources. I then summarised how historians used different data sets to support competing views on the standard of living debate (Figure 2). A subsequent classroom discussion suggested that many students had begun to understand this process, but when it came to answering a question about how convincing historians' views were about the standard of living in the nineteenth century, students tended to fall back on unhelpful sentences such as 'this is flawed' (Figure 1). I reflected that students appeared to be able to deconstruct different parts of an historian's interpretation during preliminary discussion, yet often returned to making judgements about the whole extract when asked to write about it. In short, my class's evaluation was one-sided and damning; I read in one student's essay that Hobsbawm was 'incompetent'.

I concluded that I needed to focus on two issues. First, I needed to give more help to students in breaking down each extract into smaller parts to avoid them rejecting the whole. Second, I decided that I needed to help students to communicate their responses to the historians' extracts. In terms of the first issue, the historian Carr, in his ground-breaking text *What is History?*, neatly exposed the necessary simplification process that an historian must engage in when he or she writes about the past: 'History thrives on generalisations.'<sup>10</sup> I reflected that my students should perhaps

Figure 3: A word continuum designed to help pupils analyse the language an historian has used to make an historical claim



consider how acceptable they deemed each individual process of generalisation to be. I hoped that this would encourage students to consider different parts of the extract in a potentially positive and negative light, rather than telling the examiner that this one big 'erroneous' extract should never see the light of day again.

By asking students to identify and evaluate 'generalisations', rather than searching for phrases they could agree with and phrases they could challenge, I hoped to make their responses more sophisticated. An historian's construction of argument does not stop at selecting one fact and rejecting another, the argument must then (in the area of academic scholarship) take the form of words. Hobsbawm, for example, in the short extract in Figure 1, used the phrase 'turning point' to describe when living standards began to rise. He did not use words such as 'the beginning' or 'a change' or 'an upward trend'. His word choice therefore places a great deal of importance on the 1840s, and this decision process provides rich pickings for the student of history. I asked my students the following questions: do you agree that there was a change in 1840, and how much emphasis would you place on that change? Do you agree with Hobsbawm's 'turning point' or does your understanding of British living standards suggest that it was more of a small 'adjustment' to an ongoing trend? The importance of deconstructing an historian's use of language led me to use a word continuum (Figure 3) to help students make their analyses more sophisticated. By providing alternative options to describe an historical phenomenon,

Figure 4: Some 'clever' starters and endings to help students to communicate their ideas about how an historian has used evidence to construct their argument

E.H. Carr quotation	Sentence starters and endings
<p>'The most effective way to influence opinion is by the selection and arrangement of the appropriate facts.'</p>	<p>The historian <b>appears</b> to have arranged facts about X and Y into a picture of Z...</p> <p>...yet this arrangement is <b>perhaps</b> in danger of ignoring W.</p>
<p>'The facts speak only when the historian calls on them.'</p>	<p>The historian <b>seems</b> to have called on X and Y to present his picture about Z...</p> <p>...yet his <b>apparent</b> silence about W means he is <b>in peril of</b> over/under emphasising V.</p>
<p>'He [the historian] decides which facts to give the floor, in what order or context.'</p>	<p>The historian <b>appears</b> to have given the floor to X and Y...</p> <p>...yet this means that he <b>risks</b> pushing Z too far into the background.</p>
<p>'I have seen too many examples of extravagant interpretation riding roughshod over facts not to be impressed with the reality of this danger.'</p>	<p>The historian's argument about X therefore <b>appears</b> convincing...</p> <p>...yet it is also <b>potentially</b> a rather extravagant interpretation that <b>risks</b> riding roughshod over the facts of Y and Z.</p>
<p>'The past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present.'</p>	<p>The historian's selection of facts X and Y has led him to argue Z, and allows him to shed light on W...</p> <p>...yet <b>potentially</b> at the expense of leaving V in the dark.</p>
<p>'Facts...are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use.'</p>	<p>The historian's focus upon X makes Y <b>seem</b> to be the big fish in the history of Z...</p> <p>...yet, by leaving the facts of V and W outside of his net, <b>it could be argued</b> that the historian's interpretation is too unbalanced.</p>



I wanted students to see that each historian's extract was the product of several decisions, involving the selection of facts and the selection of words, in the hope of avoiding the situation where students would reject the extract as one big ('bad') decision.

## Helping students move from certainty to caution

Now I needed to tackle the second issue: helping my students to select appropriate wording to communicate their responses to the historians' extracts. Hammond had asked her Year 9 students to create a film to reflect the findings of a particular historian's method, yet my post-16 students were required by the exam board to make a judgement about an historian's writing by putting pen to paper themselves.<sup>11</sup> This was, I reflected, no mean feat. In my experience of working with them in the classroom, my students preferred the language of certainty: this is good but this is bad; this is fair but this is outrageous; this extract is wrong but this one is even worse.

I decided, as Woodcock and Wiltshire and scores of history teachers before me, that offering students some new vocabulary might give them new ideas, and in turn might improve their analysis of historians' extracts.<sup>12</sup> In the words of Woodcock:

*Words are tools for precise, nuanced thinking, understanding and communication. Ultimately, if students have a refined and diverse vocabulary, and develop expertise and confidence in its use, they will be able to think and communicate in a more sophisticated manner, and that can only make them better historians.*<sup>13</sup>

By exposing her students to cautious language such as 'implies' and 'suggests', Wiltshire helped Year 6 students (10–11-years old) to become more precise in thinking about the status of the conclusions they could make from contemporary sources.<sup>14</sup> By focusing on choice and positioning of words, Wiltshire found that her students were able to come to more sophisticated conclusions. Could a direct focus on specific vocabulary help students to become more sophisticated in communicating their ideas about how convincing an extract is? Might modelling a language of uncertainty, as Wiltshire did with Year 6, help my Year 12 students to avoid falling back on simplistic notions of 'complete' and 'incomplete'? Where might I find such vocabulary?

I decided it was time to dust down Carr's book again.<sup>15</sup> Carr used a memorable analogy of a fisherman to describe the process by which an historian selects (and rejects) facts in order to construct his or her argument:

*The facts...are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation.*<sup>16</sup>

In re-reading Carr's seminal text, I quickly found a veritable mine of phrases that I could adapt to show students how one might express ideas about historians' selection of evidence. Two principles guided my adaptation. Inspired by Wiltshire, I first adapted Carr's phrasing by using cautious language (or 'hedging'), shown in bold in Figure 4.<sup>17</sup> Second, I split the phrases into starters and endings so students could comment upon both opportunities and drawbacks in each historian's selection of evidence. Both principles would, I hoped, help students to avoid making sweeping and misguided statements about whether the historian was right or wrong.

## The scaffold as a double-edged sword

Some informal reflection on students' practice exam answers was encouraging. My students appeared to comment more frequently on the opportunities provided by an historian's selection of evidence and turn of phrase, as well as observing how an historian may have underemphasised other evidence. As a result, many students' exam answers demonstrated more balance, although the impact of the teaching intervention differed for individual students.

In general, my students love a sentence starter, much like my daughter loves her (now rather revolting) soft-toy comforter. Such writing scaffolds do, however, come with risks. They can lead to empty phrases and thoughtless banalities and even stifle students' creativity.<sup>18</sup> Used sparingly, however, and perhaps at the beginning of Year 12, they may be just the thing to start a student off on a thoughtful and balanced journey of deconstruction that can lessen the terror of the blank page. Then the stabilisers can come off, the comforter can be thrown away, and the rules can be broken...

### REFERENCES

- 1 AQA (2014) *Specification AQA A-Level History (7042)*, pp.74-75. <http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/history/specifications/AQA-7041-7042-SP-2015.PDF>
- 2 National Curriculum Council (1993) *Teaching History at Key Stage 3*, London: NCC.
- 3 Card, J. (2004) 'Seeing double: how one period visualises another' in *Teaching History*, 117, *Dealing with Distance Edition*, pp. 6-11.
- 4 Marwick, A. (2001) *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language*. London: Palgrave, pp. 46-47.
- 5 Fordham, M. (2014) '"But why then?" Chronological context and historical interpretations' in *Teaching History*, 156, *Chronology Edition*, p.33; Chapman, A. (2011) 'Twist and shout? Developing sixth-form students' thinking about historical interpretation' in *Teaching History*, 142, *Experiencing History Edition*, pp. 24-33.
- 6 Counsell, C. 'Protecting the curriculum jewel of interpretations', Schools History Project Annual Conference, 11–13 July 2014, Leeds.
- 7 Worth, P. (2014) '"English king Frederick I won at Arsuf, then took Acre, then they all went home": exploring the challenges involved in reading and writing historical narrative' in *Teaching History*, 156, *Chronology Edition*, p.15; Howells, G. (2005) 'Interpretations and history teaching: why Ronald Hutton's Debates in Stuart History matters' in *Teaching History*, 121, *Transitions Edition*, pp. 29-35.
- 8 AQA, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-75.
- 9 Hammond K. (2007) 'Teaching Year 9 about historical theories and methods' in *Teaching History*, 128, *Beyond the Exam Edition*, pp. 4-10.
- 10 Carr, E.H. (1987) *What is History?* (2nd ed.), London: Penguin, pp. 63-64.
- 11 Hammond, *op. cit.*
- 12 Woodcock, J. (2005) 'Does the linguistic release the conceptual? Helping Year 10 to improve their causal reasoning' in *Teaching History*, 119, *Language Edition*, pp.5-14; Wiltshire, T. (2000) 'Telling and suggesting in the Conwy Valley' in *Teaching History*, 100, *Thinking and Feeling Edition*, pp. 32-35.
- 13 Woodcock, *op. cit.*, p.14.
- 14 Wiltshire, *op. cit.*
- 15 Carr, *op. cit.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.9.
- 17 Wiltshire, *op. cit.*
- 18 Evans, J. and Pate, G. (2007) 'Does scaffolding make them fail?' in *Teaching History*, 128, *Beyond the Exam Edition*, pp. 18-28.