

10 practical ideas for teaching significance

This paper draws heavily on a range of contributions from Hartington's original work, through Martin Hunt and Rob Philips' developmental work, to Christine Counsell's own take on the issue. [Terry Haydyn's website at UEA](#) offers much more practical support and I have used a number of his ideas in the text that follows.

Idea 1 The significance of events of the Second World War (Terry Haydn)

The following is a list of 10 of the events in the Second World War. Take each in turn and discuss why it was a significant event. Which of them do you think was the most significant event. Give reasons for your choice.

1. The replacement of Neville Chamberlain by Winston Churchill as British Prime Minister
2. The evacuation of British troops at Dunkirk, 1940.
3. The Battle of Britain, 1940
4. Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of Russia, 1941
5. Hitler declares war on the USA, 1941
6. The Battle of El Alamein, 1942
7. The Battle of Stalingrad, 1942-3
8. The D-Day landings, Normandy, 1944
9. Hitler commits suicide, 1945
10. The dropping of the atomic bomb, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 1945

OR Tudor times

Henry VIII became Supreme Head of the Church
 The Dissolution of the Monasteries
 The Pilgrimage of Grace/Wales had to accept English laws, 1543
 The reign of Mary I
 The Elizabethan Church Settlement
 The 1601 Poor Law
 The growth of London (50,000 to 200,000 in the 16th Century)
 The opening of the Globe Theatre in 1599
 The execution of Mary Queen of Scots
 The defeat of the Spanish Armada
 The death of Elizabeth I, 1603.

Idea 2-

Explanation cards - from Terry Haydn's website

Encouraging explanation of why an event is significant. This can be done with a list or set of cards for group work, which could include some 'dummies' - less likely explanations, and the pupils have to select the more likely ones and be able to explain their choice.

Example: Why was the Great Fire of London a significant event in history? From the following, choose the 3 best explanations of the importance of the Great Fire in history.

More hygienic housing meant that London never suffered a Plague again. Lessons learned for other towns and cities.	People learned how to make better use of their natural resources. The Fleet River was less polluted and water was used more effectively for fire-fighting.
Showed the need for a proper fire brigade and also for house insurance schemes.	51 new churches were built, many by the architect Christopher Wren, including a new St. Pauls, built between 1675 and 1710.
The newly built London was no better placed for its role as a commercial centre with the growth of banking and trade.	More permanent buildings were erected, showing the value of red brick and stone replacing the old timber building. More fireproof, but still elegant.
Wren had plans to create a planned city with wide streets and more elegant buildings, but these were not to be as the need for rapid rehousing meant that the old street system was retained.	London missed a great opportunity to build a modern new city. Had they followed Wren's plans, there might have been fewer traffic problems today. Note lack of vision and the effect of individual self-interest which hampered progress.
Through the primary evidence of the time, such as Pepys' diary, we can learn about how people organised themselves in a crisis.	Catholics were accused of starting it. Showed how rumour and false information can be used by propagandists for a particular cause.

Idea 3: Precis: What is significant to write on a plaque, a monument, a short entry in a historical dictionary etc. Pupils are asked to write a short paragraph of about 100 words in which they describe, explain and analyse an event. Much of the value of this exercise lies in the preparatory work of selecting and rejecting content as the pupils come to realise just how few words are available to them and really have to focus on those aspects which they feel to be most significant. This approach also encourages the virtues of writing both precisely and concisely.

Idea 4: Weighing statements. How significant is the evidence in relation to the question set . Pupils are given between 8 and 14 statements that could be used to explain the significance of Arkwright's achievements as King Cotton. Pupils have to give each piece of evidence a mark out of 10 and then write the case for Arkwright placing greatest emphasis on those statements they think should carry most weight. Half the class could, of course look at the reasons for Arkwright

being King Cotton, whereas the other half might think he is just a spin doctor and have to find the most telling evidence to support their argument

Which evidence should you use to back up your idea that Arkwright **does not** deserve the title of "King Cotton"?

He was only a barber/wigmaker after all

2 He had no real knowledge or training in the cotton industry so he must have got his ideas from other people

3 He simply stole other people's ideas, especially Kay the clockmaker's .

4 He didn't care about other people, as long as he got rich

5 In 1785 he lost a case to have some of his inventions patented because others claimed to have invented them before him

6 He only became rich because he made his factory workers work such long hours

7 He was clever at persuading other people to tell him their secrets, which he then used to make his fortune.

8. He does not deserve to be called King Cotton. He just knew how to make money.

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Which evidence should you use to prove that proving pupils' Arkwright deserves the title "King Cotton"?

1.He had as many as 5,000 people working for him and organised them very well

2 He showed people the importance of using water power

3.He was made a knight , "Sir Richard", by King George 111

4.He wore silk waistcoats

5.He built a really big house Willersley Castle

6.His funeral was watched by 2,000 people

7.He lived in Derbyshire

8.He kept going when others would have given up, working 16 hours a day

9 He was able to adapt other people's techniques

10 He was an effective fundraiser and was prepared to take risks

12 He knew how to treat his workers

13 He knew how important it was to have his inventions patented

14 He saw that factories were needed and built the first cotton mill at Cromford Mill in 1771

Idea 4 Terry Haydn's site: You are a reporter working for The Times in 1913. It is your day off and you decide to attend The Derby at Epsom. From your position near Tattenham Corner, you witness Emily Davison throwing herself in front of the King's horse, with fatal consequences. You immediately contact your editor, who asks you to write a brief account of the incident and why you think it is important.

Idea 5: Significance of issues: This activity comes from Martin Hunt. The study of the slave trade and its abolition is important because:

1.It explains how black people came to live on the American Continent.	2.It explains how cotton was produced cheaply for the new machines and factories.	3.It makes us make our own minds up about what we think of slavery.
4.It helps us to understand why there was a civil war in the USA.	5.It shows how money from the slave trade created most of Liverpool's banks, which provided loans for the development of railways, mines and factories.	6.It helps us to understand why people like the abolitionists worked to bring an end to the slave trade and then slavery itself, what motivated them.
7. It makes us think about how black people were treated and how the traders and slave owners tried to justify what they did.	8.It helps us to understand how public opinion can be used to bring about change-use of pamphlets, poems, pottery, petitions, public meetings, speeches.	9.It helps us to understand the role of the Evangelical movement, the Quakers and the humanitarian movements of the 18th and early 19th centuries.
10.It helps us to understand how people could make a lot of money by using a cheap labour force bound by law not to run away (slaves and mill apprentices).	11.It helps to explain the background to the Civil Rights movement in the USA and the underprivileged position of black people in America and Europe.	12.It helps us to understand further words such as freedom, liberty, profit, cheap labour, humanitarianism.

Task 1: Study each of the 12 explanations carefully and then place its number in one of these 5 categories:

A. Explanation of other events in history	B. Understanding historical vocabulary	C. Helping us to decide what we think is right and wrong	D. Understanding how and why people did what they did.	E. Understanding the meaning of evidence.
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Task 2: Which of the above 12 explanations do you think is the most important? Explain your choice.

Idea 6: Deciding what is historically significant in a source

Read the following source and decide (i) which sentences are, for you, of historical significance; (ii) state what that significance is for you and (iii) select the one, which is, for you, most historically significant, giving reasons for your choice.

'The reduction of the hours that children may work from eight to six hours a day will, in the opinion of many, be a great evil. It will either force mill-owners to dispense with the use of children altogether by the adaption of machinery to do the work or it will reduce the proportion of the wages of the children in proportion to the reduction of their work or

it will be a new tax on the manufacturer compelling the master to pay as much for six hours as he has done for eight hours. If the wages of the children should be reduced, the parents will scarcely think it worth while to send their children to the mill for the scanty pittance as will be earned, especially in the woollen mills, where the oil used (which, however, helps their health by preventing dust), renders it necessary to change the children's clothes, when they leave the mill. And if the same wages should be paid for six hours' work as for eight hours, it will of course be a new tax on manufacture, which will increase the price for the goods, injure trade and pull down profits and wages. We think it a false-short-sighted humanity that would limit the hours of children of the working-classes to six hours a day until they reach 13 years of age. Most of the practical men we have seen declare that it will only give the children so much time to run about the streets and do mischief. Three hours a day are however to be devoted to school, which in itself is a great, undoubted advantage, but then arises another most serious objection to the new Bill, namely that it provides for schools which will be thoroughly church schools and entirely under clerical control.'

How could you adapt this source for use with Year 8 pupils to draw out the historical significance of the issues raised?

Idea 7 Evaluating how well a TV programme has captured the significance of an event. Students are asked to consider where a TV programme on the significance of a topic should place its emphasis. They then watch the programme and discuss how well the programme captured the event's significance. How could it have been improved.

Idea 8: Assessing the historical significance of the Black Death: Terry Haydn

One of the more challenging, though welcome, features of the National Curriculum is the requirement that pupils should be asked to assess the significance of events, people and changes. This is difficult for pupils because they lack the widespread knowledge and the abstract levels of thinking which is needed to achieve this requirement. For some pupils you may feel that this particular requirement is too difficult with many topics. They also need to know the difference between the results of an event and its significance. For example, using text-books, it is relatively straight-forward to identify the results of the Black Death, but what of its significance?

Consider the following approach.

1 Discuss with the pupils why we need to understand the significance of an event, why was it important and how does it help us in our understanding of history. Why can some events in history be said to be more important than were others? In order to judge its importance we need to look at not only what happened immediately after the event but sometimes centuries later. We can at times ask, how has that event affected our lives today?

2 Having dealt with all the usual aspects of the Black Death, try this activity with a Year 7 class and find out just what they are capable of understanding.

3 Begin with a brainstorm, have they got any ideas why the Black Death might be an important event in history? [It will be interesting to note whether they mention any of the points on the worksheet. They may have others, which are as good! One can never underestimate what pupils are capable of given the opportunity]

4. Distribute a copy of the worksheet to each pupil. [See note on differentiation, '5' in this list]
Explain the layout and then go through each item in turn, explain the meaning but try not to give too much away.

5. Explain their task. In groups, they are to find out information from the selection of text-books, some old, some new, and other information that might be available [e.g a print-off from a CD-ROM on the 'Black Death']. The pupils have then to try to find out events and other information which supports (backs-up/ substantiates) the statements on the left hand side of the sheet. The pupils then fill in the box on the right-hand side. To help them they will need to be told to look for 'key words' in the contents pages and index, such as 'feudal', 'monasteries', 'wars or quarrels' with the king. Differentiation may be achieved by giving some pupils precise page references, while the very able could be encouraged to be critical of the statements presented and, if possible, make some suggestions of their own.

6. Feedback from the groups. Use the board to gather all the points, adding yourself anything omitted. Pupils to complete any gaps on their own sheet.

7. Set the final task. To use the information on the sheet to write a piece of extended writing (at least one side) as an answer to the top of the sheet, 'Why was the Black Death an important event in history?' Encourage them to use the 'back-up' information to support the general statements. Encourage the able to use their initiative to include extra information or additional reasons for the event's importance.

Why was the Black Death an important event in history?

Using the text-books and any other reference material available, try to complete the boxes on the right with information, which supports the statements on the left.

The Black Death was important because:

It helped to bring about the end of the Feudal System.

Back-up information

It led to the decline of the monasteries - monks were particularly hard hit- easier to take away their lands.

It encouraged increased criticism of some people in the church (though not of its teachings) as it was difficult to replace educated priests.

It led to disputes of lands which increased the

quarrels between the barons themselves and also the king and reduced his control and respect.

It shows how people's explanations of the causes of events is affected by the ideas, beliefs and the knowledge of that time.

It showed the extent of trade routes in the fourteenth century.

It led to many deserted villages, the extent of which has only been discovered since the use of aerial photography.
It showed the contribution of economic factors to changes in history: e.g wages rise if there are fewer workers; prices rise if less goods are available.

Idea 9: Evaluating aspects of significance

Cards for sorting into military, political, economic and social significance.

Economic	
The German economy was ruined by the war. Inflation made people's life savings worthless.	The USA became a major economic power but the economy grew at a pace that could not be sustained.
During the war there was full employment in Britain, including many jobs for women in traditionally male industries.	New businesses grew all over Europe and the USA, with the money they made from supplying the war effort.
Britain lost much of its overseas trade during the war. After the war, this meant that many jobs were lost, especially in the coal industry.	Ordinary soldiers were angry at the economic conditions they discovered in Britain when they returned.

Military	
This was the first war in which air combat, tanks and gas were used.	Machine guns and artillery had shown their effectiveness.
WW1 had shown that in order to raise large armies conscription was needed. (This was introduced early in WW11).	Medical improvements resulted from the lessons learned by militia doctors and surgeons, which would benefit medical

	science in the 20th century.
People raised questions about the militia leadership of WW1.	Trench warfare was the main method of warfare used but it was largely a failure. Future wars would be fought differently.

Social	
Many soldiers coped with their experiences by writing poetry. Several such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves became famous poets.	Women worked in munitions factories to help the war effort. They kept their sense of independence after the war.
There are over 60,000 monuments to the war dead in Britain. The dead from every war are remembered each year on Remembrance Day, 11th November, the day WW1 ended.	Over ten million people lost their lives in the First World War.
This was the “first” world war, with people from all over the world involved. It was supposed to be “the war to end all wars” but sadly this did not happen.	Many words we use today originated in the First World War. For example “Pal” (Friend) “Stunt” (Attack)

Political	
In Britain all men over 21 and women over 30 received the vote. This made Britain a mass democracy.	The League of Nations was formed to allow countries to solve arguments without any more wars. However it lacked power and was often ignored. It failed to stop WW1.
Many Germans were unhappy with the post war settlement. One of them was an ex soldier, Adolf Hitler. He set up the Nazi Party, with the aim of recovering the land Germany had lost. This was to eventually lead to WW1.	The map of Europe was redrawn at the Treaty of Versailles. The old empires which had ruled for hundreds of years fell and were replaced by new countries like Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary.
Winston Churchill became unhappy with the post war settlement and warned of another war. He was to be Prime Minister of Britain during WW1.	The pressures of WW1 were a major factor in the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviks seized power from the Tsar. Russia remained communist until 1991.

Idea 10: Hindsight.

Year 9 pupils are asked to look back at an event from the past from different perspectives. Some pupils look back from 15 years or so after, another group 50 years and another group 200 years. From these varying perspectives, would the issue of significance change and if so why? Great for more able pupils and for the end of the key stage.

*This is just a list to whet the appetite. Soon a more developed version of this article will appear in the **teaching** section of the site.*