

Beyond bias: making source evaluation meaningful to Year 7

In this article, Heidi Le Cocq demonstrates how to introduce Year 7 pupils to sophisticated techniques for evaluating sources. Taking up Seán Lang's criticism of the inappropriate use of the term 'bias', she shows how even very young pupils can be encouraged to move beyond this wearisome response to questions about a source's reliability. Firmly based on good classroom practice, her article indicates ways in which pupils can learn – can be taught – to broaden this method of enquiry and to extend it to questions of interpretation and utility. Heidi Le Cocq argues that the avoidance of trite and formulaic responses to questions about evidence is vital if pupils are to feel that the questions are meaningful. History, she suggests, is simply too exciting, and important, to be abandoned to the cynical manipulation of timeworn phrases.

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Introduction

My year 7 group is a lively bunch. Their enthusiasm and willingness to contribute are inspiring, and the care and attention that they pay to their work is most encouraging. My task, as their first secondary school teacher of history, is to nurture these precious raw materials and harness them for the development of specific historical skills. What I don't want to do is deaden this early enthusiasm through a series of bland and mind-numbing activities tagged on to the end of each unit. In the past there have been attempts to focus on skills and knowledge in history as two separate entities that require discrete treatment and assessment. However, it seems increasingly evident to me that the two cannot be divorced, and that many attempts to do so revert to an endless journey of read the page (to gain the knowledge) and answer the questions at the end (to gain the skills) lessons. When entering the realms of source work, this can translate into, as Michael Riley has often put it, 'death by sources A to F'. Sources are flung at students, at the end of each topic, in the vain

hope that the sheer quantity of source work will automatically teach skills, perhaps through some sort of osmosis.

My quest was to identify the skills required in source work, to establish how pupils' thinking needs to develop in order to secure progression, and finally to implement strategies that will ensure this progression in a coherent and motivating manner. Over a period of six months I have targeted the skills of comprehension, analysis and evaluation. This has enabled pupils to understand and interpret source material and use it as evidence to support a theory. They can also analyse the merits of particular sources as reliable evidence – identifying and articulating their strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate their usefulness to the historian through a reconsideration of what evidence they provide. Yet all of this was part of a radical experiment – a deliberate attempt to teach pupils about evidential principles without ever mentioning the 'b' word. Once pupils grasp the word

'bias' it so often becomes a hackneyed catch-all, blunting and limiting their evaluative work.

STEP 1: COMPREHENSION

Understanding what the source is telling you

It is Term One. Twenty-two eager faces are waiting to learn about the Norman conquest and an opportunity arises for a first taste of source work. Through a mixture of drama, picture stimuli, and card sorting, the main events have been secured in the pupils' minds. From the beginning we have sought to achieve more than a basic grasp of the narrative. We have approached the story under the big question – 'Who was likely to win the Battle of Hastings?'. Thus pupils have been involved in a process of selection and analysis already. With the Battle of Hastings won and the victors revealed, the pupils are encouraged to go back to their notes and to use them to answer the, not dissimilar, question – 'Why did the Normans win the Battle of Hastings?' As a class we came up with three big reasons for William's victory: Norman skill, English weaknesses and lucky circumstances. The pupils then found examples from previous work to go in each of these categories. They were almost ready to write their first essay but first we needed some proof that these conclusions were correct. We discussed how the textbook author would have gathered the information and this led on to the idea that there must be evidence from the time.

The pupils were then given a range of sources (mostly primary, with some secondary), about the Conquest, which they were required to read in pairs and match to the three categories. The question they had to ask themselves was which of our three big ideas does the information in the source support? This was source work at its simplest – reading and understanding the text and matching it to an idea shaped by prior knowledge. The second part of the task was designed to prevent pupils presenting long, regurgitated chunks of sources as evidence. Through a sequence of underlining, feedback and discussion, pupils became more discriminating about what particular section of the source constituted *relevant evidence* for each idea. They really began to see the wood for the trees. They gained the ability to select pertinent quotations to support their points.

All that remained was for me to equip these pupils with the *language* needed to present these conclusions, now substantiated, in writing. Some simple sentence starters, which we practised in class, were enough to instil confidence. By enabling pupils to express their findings clearly, phrases such as, 'this idea is supported by ... who claims that ...' or 'evidence to back up my conclusion can be found in a source written by ..., which says ...', prevent them from falling at the last hurdle.

STEP 2: ANALYSIS

Questioning what the source is telling you

This step required careful thought. I needed to guide my pupils sensitively through the thorny issue of reliability. I needed to take them from unquestioning acceptance of the sources towards a healthy tendency to challenge them. However, I had to nurture this scepticism without promoting the cynicism and exasperation that can switch pupils off the idea of studying sources that, in their minds, become so flawed as to render all study meaningless. Seán Lang's revealing article¹ gave me the idea that definite attention had to be given to unlocking skills of critical analysis, whilst avoiding the disaffection caused by too much uncertainty. I also wanted to avoid the formulaic, low-level responses that are often parroted in response to any source deemed 'untrustworthy'.

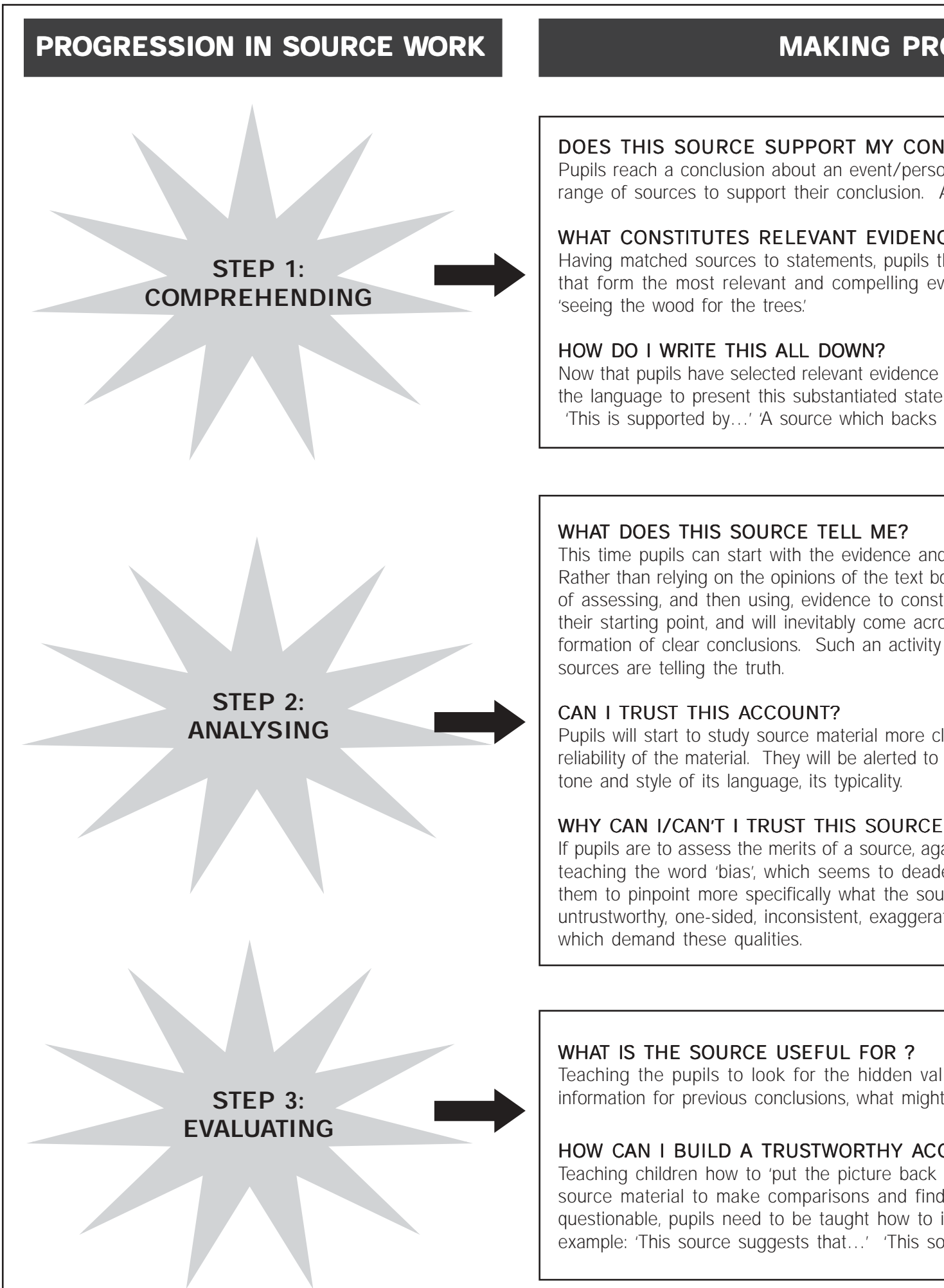
My first strategy was, therefore, to experiment with the idea of teaching them reliability *without reference to bias*. In other words, to make sure that pupils got beyond the task of labeling a source 'biased' (after all, as Lang points out, aren't they all?). I wanted to move them on to a more sophisticated analysis of the reasons why certain sources may be deemed unreliable, and to the factors that alert our suspicions. If the pupils are not given the word 'biased' to fall back on, they have to search for other, and more accurate, adjectives to describe the source's shortcomings.

Blue Murder at the Convent: Arresting pupils' attention

Any study of King John's reign perfectly introduces the reliability of evidence issue, but I decided to explore the basic points by using a more modern, but entirely fictitious, example that I modelled on an idea developed by Pamela Kilbey, the Head of History at Deacon's School, Peterborough. The pupils were immediately intrigued by my announcement that a book on the history of Beaulieu Convent school states that Mazie Briggs was its worst-ever pupil because she was responsible for the death of a classmate. We discovered that the evidence for that conclusion came from the statements of two former pupils. One claimed, 'Mazie frightened all the other girls with her rough behaviour', while another stated that Mazie 'fought and kicked Gemma Rondel until she lay on the ground and did not move'. Our initial discussion centred on whether these two statements provided conclusive evidence for murder. The pupils were then presented with further evidence which revealed that, despite being removed from the school after a physical incident, Gemma Rondel was alive and well. Mazie Briggs had in fact been the target of bullying herself by Gemma, and our two original witnesses had an axe to grind because of a feud between their families. After this investigative

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Figure 1: An analysis of the literacy skills developed by historical source work in Year 7



PROGRESS HAPPEN

WHAT ARE THE SKILLS?

CONCLUSION?

... in history and then try to find evidence from a ...
At the simplest level this is a matching exercise.

EVIDENCE?

... then attempt to select those parts of the source
... evidence for their statement. It is an exercise in

... to support their conclusion, they need to be given
... ment in writing. Sentence starters such as:
... up this conclusion is ...' will help expression.



Comprehension: understanding the information and matching evidence to ideas



Selection and deployment of evidence



Accuracy of expression

... and use it to form, rather than support, conclusions.
... book author (which allow pupils to skip the process
... ruct conclusions) they will work from sources as
... ss inconsistencies/contradictions that hinder the
... will **generate questions** about how to tell which



Scepticism and critical analysis

... osely and will learn about ways of examining the
... such issues as the provenance of the source, the



Questioning and assessing reliability

QUESTIONING?

... ain they need the language to do so. Rather than
... en, rather than encourage, critical analysis, help
... rce's weaknesses are. Give them words such as
... ted. Ask them to find examples from the source



Explaining and substantiating accusations of unreliability

... ue in a source. If it no longer provides reliable
... it provide evidence for ?



Evaluating usefulness, reassessing

CONCURRENCE FROM CONFLICTING SOURCES ?

... together again.' Pupils need to be given enough
... relevant information. For evidence that is still
... nclude it using the 'language of uncertainty'. For
... urce implies that...'



Interpreting, comparing, constructing

They used their historical knowledge to spot the language features that alerted them to unreliability.

exercise we pulled together what we had learned about evidence. These were the key learning outcomes:

- One account is often not enough. A variety of accounts is needed for comparison to take place, so that similarities and differences can be found.
- The difference between fact and opinion in a source is important.
- The background of the person writing the source needs to be established so that we can detect what their relationship is to the person or event they are describing. Might they have a reason to lie, exaggerate or omit information deliberately to give us a different picture?

Bad King John?

Developing the concept of reliability

These early ideas about checking for reliability were revisited and reinforced in our work on King John. The enquiry – ‘Was King John the worst King of England?’, immediately raised questions amongst pupils. They believed that such a statement could never be proven, and so many began their source work anticipating evidential problems. Following the pattern of the previous activity, the pupils were given a statement about John’s wicked reputation plucked from J.R. Green’s book, which has influenced many modern textbook writers.² Next, they were given the only primary accounts in existence, written by Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris (who obtained most of his information from Roger of Wendover). Through a series of questions this collection enabled us to explore problems with the range and typicality of the sources. We were able to establish where fact and opinion were being offered, and to express doubts about the sympathies of Roger and Matthew (see Figure 2).

Finally, additional sources were given to aid comparison, and to detect contradictions, inconsistencies, alternative viewpoints and additional information. Final responses by the children demonstrated a mature consideration of the issues. One girl commented, ‘The sources do make John out to be a bad King but a lot of the information comes from just a couple of people who have reason to hate John and might want to make him look bad. Many other Kings like William the Conqueror also treated their people cruelly.’ Pupils were again helped to put this high-order thinking down on paper through a list of useful words and phrases. They were encouraged to use their historical knowledge to spot the language features that alerted them to the possibility of unreliability.

STEP 3: EVALUATION

Reconsidering what the source is telling you

Offering final judgements about a source’s value is another rung up the progression ladder. This process is naturally linked to the issue of reliability and, if approached cautiously, can prevent the defeatist attitude that over-emphasis on bias can foster. Too often the detection of bias is automatically equated to lack of usefulness. The source is effectively dismissed by the pupils. A more positive approach to evaluation should enable pupils to acknowledge that even if a source no longer provides reliable evidence for their previous conclusions, it may well provide useful evidence about another issue.

Playing devil’s advocate: When is a source ‘useful’ ?

When we moved on to study the Church, and to study a medieval doom painting, I asked the pupils if this was an accurate representation of Hell. The looks of disbelief on the pupils’ faces were lovely to see. I let them patiently explain to me that no one knows what Hell looks like, as no one who has been there has come back! My reaction to this was to switch off the OHP and apologise for showing them sources that were not accurate and therefore of no use to us. This time the looks turned to disgust, and several girls, rather militantly, pointed out that ‘of course the picture is useful because it shows us what medieval beliefs about Hell were!’ There are all sorts of opportunities to reinforce this ability to identify the value of a source.

Our next progression in source work will come at the beginning of Term Three. I intend to confirm the pupils’ faith in historical sources by showing them how to construct a trustworthy account from a variety of conflicting sources. Jamie Byrom gives a perfect example of this type of work in action. His lesson on the Peasant’s Revolt enables even the weakest of pupils to compare a number of written sources, find common ground and create an accurate account.³ In order to include those colourful but questionable details, pupils will be taught to use the ‘language of uncertainty’ – ‘this source suggest that /implies that/claims that.

Not every pupil, of course, will immediately be able to operate at this sort of level. But by encouraging them to sort through the evidence for themselves, establishing ways in which sources can help our understanding and – as important – those ways in which they cannot – we shall be doing all pupils a service. And if we can avoid the slow and terrible ‘death by sources’, we shall be doing History a service as well.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Lang, S. (1993) ‘What Is Bias?’ *Teaching History*, 72
- ² Green J. R. (1874) *A Short History of the English People*.
- ³ Byrom, J. (1998) ‘Scepticism or cynicism: putting the story back together again’ *Teaching History*, 91

Figure 2

How Year 7 pupils learnt about reliability without using the word 'bias'.

WAS KING JOHN THE WORST KING OF ENGLAND?

What do the sources tell us and can we trust them?

- 1) Read **SOURCES 1 – 5** and find three **OPINIONS** about what kind of man King John was. (Remember to write down the source number and the author's name and to use quotation marks when using words from the source.)
- 2) From how many different people did J. R. Green get his information? (think carefully) What is the problem of basing an account on this number of people?
- 3) Is there evidence in **SOURCE 2** that J. R. Green did use Roger of Wendover's account? If so, what phrases give you the clue?
- 4) What do you know of Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris' background that might make you question whether they are telling the truth?
- 5) Why might **SOURCE 4** be considered untrustworthy? Use the words in italics and one other source to help you answer the question.
- 6) Which source contradicts (says the opposite of) what is written in **SOURCE 5**? Explain your answer.
- 7) Find two **sources** which support the idea that John was a **good king**. For each one pick out a sentence that shows this good opinion.
- 8) Which source tries to give a balanced view of John and how do you know?
- 9) Is it possible to **prove** whether or not John was an evil king?