

# THE SOURCE-BASED ESSAY QUESTION (SBEQ) IN HISTORY TEACHING FOR THE FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING (FET) PHASE

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## **Introduction**

The source-based approach is inseparably part and parcel of History teaching within an Outcomes-based Education (OBE) context. Working with sources, and especially primary sources, offers learners an exciting opportunity to study and work with the very building blocks of the past. It compels learners to interrogate the past and begin to form their own interpretations and narratives rather than memorize facts and dates recorded by others.

The source-based approach in teaching History at schools, is nothing new. This teaching method has been used in overseas countries since 1910. It was also strongly supported in South Africa in the seventies (Coetzee, 1987: 259-260). Since 1976, for example, the year that is also marked as the first year of differentiation between Higher Grade (HG) and Standard Grade (SG), final History examination papers for standard 10 (grade 12) of the Department of Education from the Cape of Good Hope, reveals evidence of source-based questions (DoE, 1976: 13-14, 22-23).

This teaching approach survived the revision of the History curriculum that started in 1994 as part of the democratisation of South Africa's educational system. Since 1997 the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) seemed to take the initiative even further by not only increasing the amount of sources in their final grade 12 examination papers (DoE, 1997: 10-15), but also later started to categorise them under a certain historical theme. In some of the questions asked in the examination it was even expected of learners to simultaneously consult and interpret more than one source in an attempt to answer the questions (See DoE, 1999: 6-13). In 2003 the first national History examination was written, and all grade 12 History candidates were exposed to different

types of source-based questions, adding up to a total of 50 marks. These questions were based on primary and secondary sources moulded on the same format used by the WCED since 1997 (DoE, 2003a: 4-7).

It is however, important to mention that throughout this whole period the learners had to respond in short sentences or paragraphs answers to the questions posed on the sources. It was never expected of them to utilize all the sources and then respond with a single essay question.

This brings us to the Source-Based Essay Question (SBEQ), also known as the Document-Based Essay Question. It was first introduced in the United States of America in the seventies (Rotschild, 2000: 495; Stovel, 2000: 501). Although the format of these questions has somewhat changed since 1981, it still forms an integral part of the American History Advanced Placement Examination (Rotschild, 2000: 496). In South Africa, however, the SBEQ still remains a possibility that can be implemented in the FET Phase.

Before answering the question *why* we should give consideration to source-based essay questions, it is necessary to elaborate on *what* SBEQ precisely entails.

## **What is a Source-Based Essay Question?**

The typical SBEQ consists of two major parts. In the first part the learner will be provided with six to eight (or even more) primary sources on a particular theme or time period that is related to the topic of the essay question asked. These sources may vary in length and are chosen to illustrate the interactions and complexities of the historical process. They may include: charts, graphs, letters, photographs, maps, interviews, art, speeches, diaries, political cartoons, newspaper clippings, etc. The learner will now be asked to briefly respond to a question asked about each source. This generally involves interpreting the main idea or point of view expressed in the source. These “scaffolding” questions are designed to trigger prior knowledge and construct a foundation for the learner’s response to the essay question. After completing these constructed short responses, the learner will use this information, as well as his or her own basis of knowledge, to correctly answer the essay question in the second part of the SBEQ (Venkateswaren *et al.*, 2004: 13).

## Why Source Based Essay Questions?

The SBEQs offer more interesting possibilities for assessing the historical understanding of learners (Grant, *et al.* 2004: 312).

When compared with the standard essay question, the SBEQ differs in its emphasis of the learners' ability to analyse and synthesise historical data and assess verbal, quantitative, or pictorial materials as historical evidence. The primary aim of SBEQ is not to exclusively test knowledge on a specific topic. It is rather to judge whether the learner can apply a specific set of historic skills to get to the bottom of information supplied by the sources and then to interpret and construct the appropriate information in a coherent and logical way by means of writing an essay. What is desired is a concise essay response that integrates the analysis of sources in an effort to answer the question asked (Stovel, 2000: 502).

The following can be listed as historical skills that the SBEQ requires learners to demonstrate:

- comparing and contrasting particular issues;
- encouraging critical thinking;
- demonstrating comprehension of the sources by using them to support an argument;
- determining the validity and reliability of sources;
- considering bias, point of view and audience, and
- enables learners to realize the importance of considering multiple perspectives (Lintvedt, 2004: 23; Potter, 2003: 372 & Stovel, 2000:503).

The question that now comes to mind is: To what extent does the grade 12 final examination paper, in its existing format, provide for the development and demonstration of these historical skills? It is undoubtedly true that the essay and the source-based questions are formulated in such a way as to assess the extent to which a learner can demonstrate certain historical skills. In practice, however, it seems that in most instances this outcome is not realised.

From personal experience as an ex-WCED History marker and from my discussions with other external markers from other provinces, it is clear that a large majority of History learners still tend to provide rote learning answers when it comes to the answering of essay questions. The trend does exist where learners recognise a word or concept that

appears in the essay question and then indiscriminately write down everything that has been memorised. In most cases the learners do not answer what has been asked and consequently there is no evidence of the application of any historical skills. In other instances, learners extract information verbatim from the documents provided for the source-based questions and then apply it to the essay questions in the hope that the information might correspond.

Above mentioned suppositions concerning the senior certificate have been confirmed in recent examiners reports from different provinces. These were some of the commentaries on the essay type questions:

“...the way that certain candidates answered the question clearly showed that there is still too much emphasis on the memorisation and regurgitation of content instead of the development of an argument within an answer” (DoE: 2003d, n.p.).

“...learners merely regurgitated memorised content without proper interpretation, contextualisation and analysis of the question” (DoE: 2003d,n.p.).

“Candidates mastered the content but could not manage to analyse, evaluate and to follow a line of thought” (DoE: 2004b, 50).

Some of the commentaries on the source-based questions which were presented as short questions totalling 50 marks, were:

“The source based questions rely too much on comprehension only”(Umalusi: 2004: 2).

“They (the candidates) can’t interpret and do not understand some of the questions. A high percentage of the candidates could not answer the source-based questions.”(DoE: 2004, 50).

Although one would like to believe that it is the good intention of the examiners to test historical skills in the way they formulate the questions, it is clear from the above that it does not always happen in normal practice. We can further conclude that our learners of history are still, to a great extent, knowledge tellers, instead of being knowledge transformers by applying their set of historical skills to answer the questions on the past.

## A Methodology on how to Design a SBEQ

The following can serve as a guideline in designing a SBEQ. The historical theme for this question is: Forms of civil society protest, 1948-1990 (DoE, 2003: 27).

### *Instructions:*

The following question is based on the accompanying sources (1-11). Using information from the sources and your own knowledge on South African history from 1948 to 1990, answer the questions that follow each source in **Part A**. Your answers to these questions will help you write the essay in **Part B** which you will be asked to:

Analyse and discuss the extent and nature of resistance against the Apartheid government from 1948-1990. (50)

### *Part A: Short-answer Questions*

Analyse the sources and answer the questions that follow in the space provided. You should spend 15 minutes on this section.

#### *Source 1*

The ANC Youth League under leadership of Anton Lembede, Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo drafted a Programme of Action in 1949 which was adopted at the ANC Conference of 1950.

At the Annual ANC Conference in Bloemfontein (1950), the organisation adopted the League's Programme of Action which called for boycotts, strikes, stay-at-homes, passive resistance, protest demonstrations, and other forms of mass action. This was a radical change: the ANC's policy had always been to keep its activities within the law. We in the Youth League had seen the failure of legal and constitutional means to strike at racial oppression, now the entire organisation was set to enter a more activist stage (Nelson Mandela)

"Every Youth Leaguer must go down to the masses. Brush aside all liberals – both white and black. No compromise is our motto. We recognise only one authority – the people, and our leader can only be he who is with the people..." (Speaker at Congress Youth League Conference, 1949)

(Pape *et al.*, 1998: 318)

1. Name the way in which these proposed protest activities of the ANC differed from their protest activities prior to 1949.

*Source 2*

A photo of a mass protest during the Defiance Campaign of 6 April 1952.



(Pape *et al.*, 1998: 319)

2. State the message that this photo portrayed to the government of the time.

*Source 3*

In “Long walk to Freedom” Nelson Mandela wrote about the Defiance Campaign.

[It] freed me from any lingering sense of doubt or inferiority I might still have felt; it liberated me from the feeling of being overwhelmed by the power and seeming invincibility of the white man and his institutions. Now the white man had felt the power of my punches and I could walk upright like a man ... I had come of age as a freedom fighter.

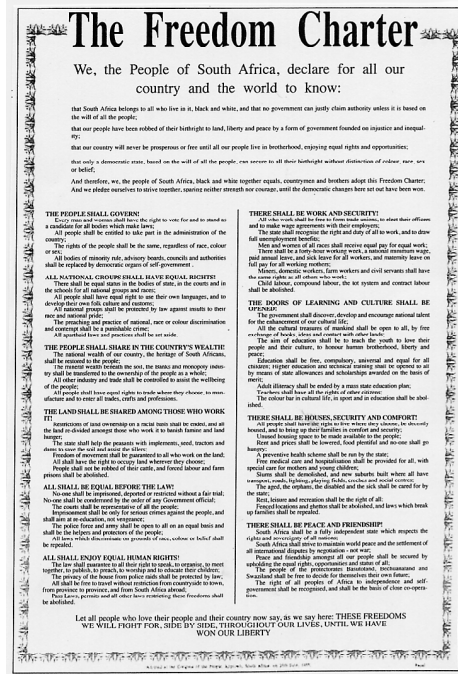


(Seleti et al., 1999: 305)

### 3. Explain the way in which the Defiance Campaign influenced Mandela?

#### Source 4

The Freedom Charter adopted by the Congress of the People in 1955.



(Seleti et al., 1999: 305)

### 4. In which way, do you think, does the Freedom Charter instill a political consciousness and encourage resistance against the Apartheid government?

#### Source 5

On 9 August 1956 women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to deliver petitions against the introduction of passes for African women. Helen Joseph wrote about the occasion:

Four women had been chosen as leaders for the day, Lilian Ngoyi, the African, Rahima Moosa, the Indian, Sophie Williams, the coloured an I,

the white. We reflected the multiracial membership of the Federation of South African Women. We took those piles of protests and left them outside the doors of the ministers' offices, when our knocking brought no response. I suppose we had really expected no less, in view of our four unacknowledged letters announcing the forthcoming visit. It made no difference to us. We had recorded our protest for all time.

(Seleti *et al.*, 1999: 306)

5. Explain the way in which this protest march was different when comparing it to other protest actions at that time.

#### Source 6

On 6 April 1959 the PAC was founded. The leader, Robert Sobukwe, declared:

The Africanists take the view that there is only one race to which we all belong, and that is the human race.... Against multi-racialism we have this objection; that the history of South Africa has fostered group prejudices and antagonisms, and if we have to maintain the same group exclusiveness....we shall be transporting to the new Afrika (sic) these very antagonisms and conflicts. Further, multi-racialism is in fact a pandering to European bigotry and arrogance. It is a method of safeguarding white interests.

(Seleti *et al.*, 1999: 310)

6. State the main reason for the PAC's break - away from the ANC. Explain, in general, how it influenced the resistance campaign.

#### Source 7

Joe Slovo, an ANC and SACP leader reporting at the end of the 1950s:

At the end of the 1950s, I think there was a general feeling of frustration. We'd done a few strikes, we'd had a Defiance Campaign, we'd gotten a Freedom Charter, we'd had continuous bus boycotts, anti-pass campaigns-so what? Apartheid was still in the saddle. It became obvious that we must now search for new ways of challenging the regime.

A pamphlet circulated by Umkonto we Sizwe on 16 December 1961:

The time comes in the life of any nation when there remains only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defence of our people, our future and our freedom.



(Pape *et al.*, 1998: 334-335)

7. Why was Joe Slovo a frustrated person at the end of 1950? State the cure for his frustration.

*Source 8*

A photo of learners marching during the Soweto uprisings in 1976.



(Pape *et al.*, 1998: 345)

8. Comment on the way in which this anti-Apartheid protest differed from other protest marches before 1976. Provide reasons for your opinion.

*Source 9*

A poster distributed when the Congress of South African Trade Unions

(COSATU) was launched in 1985.



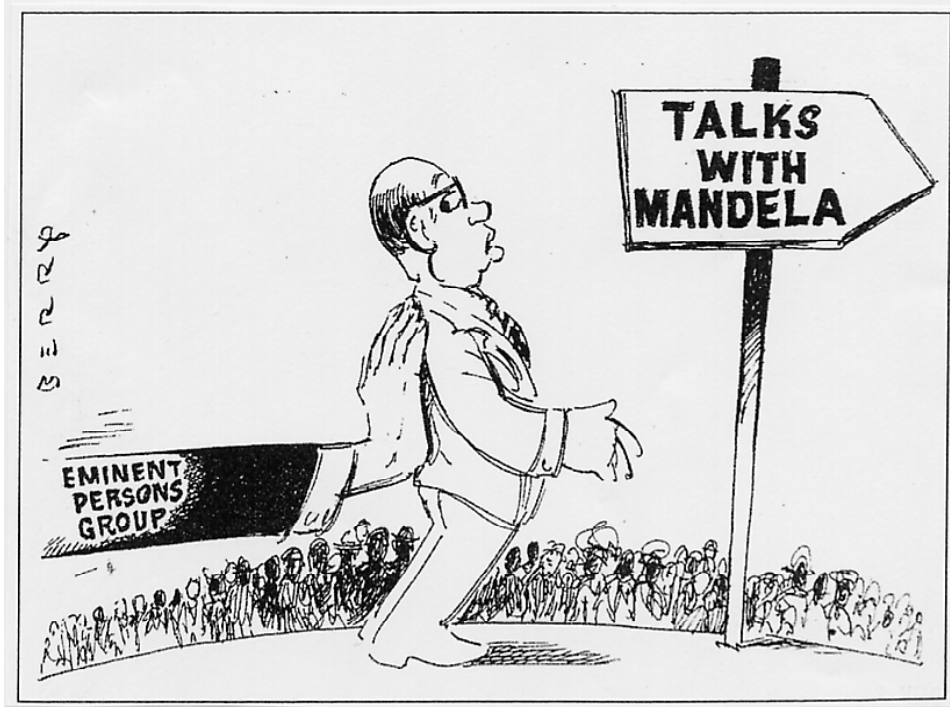
(DoE, 2004: 16)

9. Identify the way in which the information in this poster reflects the trade union.



*Source 10*

A cartoon by Abe Berry showing the EPG pushing Botha towards “Talks with Mandela.”



(Seleti *et al.*, 1999: 341)

10. Determine whether source 10 is accurate in implying that Botha was pushed towards such talks.

*Source 11*

The dismantling of Apartheid by F. W. de Klerk



(Seleti *et al.*, 1999: 349)

11. Assess the role of F.W. de Klerk with regard to the resistance he experienced against the National Party government.

## ***Part B: Essay Question***

### ***Instructions***

- Write a well-organised essay that includes an introduction, paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Support your response with relevant facts, examples and details.
- Include your own knowledge and opinion.
- You should spend 45 minutes on this section.

Using information from the sources and your own knowledge answer the following question:

Analyse and discuss the extent and nature of resistance against the apartheid government from 1948-1990. (50)

## **Important Guidelines to Remember when Answering a SBEQ**

1. Read the question properly and determine the precise requirements of the question. Identify the time period and then break down the question into recognisable parts. It is important that you cover all the sections of the question asked.
2. Organise your response by brainstorming the question before drafting an outline for your essay. Jot down everything that comes to mind, e.g. names, events, people, acts, etc. These terms can later be used as your own information when writing your essay.
3. Now prepare your outline by consulting all your sources. Take into account the social status of the author of each source and look out for the tone, date and change over time in the sources. Take note of any possible solutions in the sources which might be of help when answering the essay question. Remember not to make a document say something it doesn't really say. Read, highlight and add any own information that is relevant to the topic that is triggered by the sources. Do not quote extensively from the sources when answering your question. Rather weave the key ideas from the sources (your answers to your short questions will be of help) into your essay. Remember to also integrate useful and meaningful own knowledge with the analysis of the sources. Always keep the focus on what is

asked in the question.

4. The structure of your essay is also important. Start with a clearly structured introductory paragraph which is not broad or vague. Keep it short and do not include background knowledge and do not restate the question.
5. Hereafter, the body of your answer will follow, consisting of various paragraphs. Your body contains the factual and supporting evidence that is relevant to the question. The information must therefore always be linked to the topic of the question because it needs to substantiate your viewpoint. Hereafter the conclusion will follow.
6. The conclusion should not differ from your argument. Conclusions should draw an argument or discussion to a close. Keep it short and to the point.
7. When referring to sources use the number appointed to each source. Remember it is not your task to explain the sources but rather to interpretate them and use that information to answer your question (Barber, 2003: 1 & Pappas, 1999: 1).

## **Assessing the SBEQ**

Teachers/examiners must accept all bona fida interpretations when assessing a SBEQ. Assessment is based on the student's ability to synthesize and analyze the sources in relation to the question asked as well as to incorporate his or her own knowledge (Kotzin, 2001: 487).

Below is an example of a six point scoring rubric (from 0-5) that can be used when assessing a SBEQ. Learners may score from 0 (worst score) to 5 (best possible score).

An example of a source based question scoring rubric (Adapted from McAuley, 2004: 1):



Criteria	5	4	3	2	1	0
<b>Answers</b>  <b>Question/Line of argument</b>	Question has been fully answered.  Relevant and strong line of argument	Question answered to a great extent. Relevant and solid line of argument	Question has been satisfactorily answered.  Relevant and a satisfactory line of argument	Fails to answer the question adequately. Attempts to sustain a line of argument	Question inadequately addressed or not addressed at all. Line of argument not sustained	No attempt to answer the question. No line of argument
<b>Use of sources/evidence</b>	Uses sources completely and accurately; weighs the importance and validity of evidence	Uses sources correctly, recognizes that all evidence is not equally valid	Uses most sources correctly-simplistic analysis, does not always weigh the importance and validity of evidence	Uses some sources correctly; some only paraphrased, misunderstood or only restate contents; fails to recognize any difference in the validity of evidence.	Fails to use sources correctly, simply paraphrased or misunderstood.	Ignores or misuses the sources
<b>Own knowledge</b>	Include considerable relevant information from own knowledge	Include relevant information from own knowledge	Includes some relevant information from own knowledge	Includes little information from own knowledge-what is included is mostly irrelevant	Includes no relevant information from beyond the sources	Includes no information from beyond the sources
<b>Understanding of topic</b>	Displays a thorough understanding of the topic and related issues	Shows an understanding of the topic and related issues	Shows basic, though simplistic understanding of the topic and related issues	Shows little understanding of the topic and related issues	Shows almost no understanding of the topic or related issues	Shows no understanding of the topic or related issues
<b>Structure/application of skills</b>	Well-planned and structured, applied analysis and historical explanation to a great extent; higher order skills present	Well-planned and structured with minor errors; applied analysis and historical explanation	Weaker organization; essay planned and structured to a certain extent; has attempted analysis and historical explanation	Poorly organised; attempts a structure; technical shortcomings; applied analysis and historical explanation occasionally	Disorganised with no clear structure; no analysis and historical explanation.	Lacks any structure; Little attempt made; blank paper, no analysis and historical explanation
Total score						

Venkateswaren *et al.* (2004: 13) suggest a nine point scale that can also be used when assessing a SBEQ. In such a case the scoring rubrics are generally divided into three categories, the top middle and bottom. The top range of essay have a score of eight to nine, the middle essay score between five and seven and the lower essays have a score of below four. The top essays should have a strong line of argument that is built on a sophisticated analysis of the sources and a wealth of contextual facts. The middle essay might have a solid line of argument, but lacks depth of analysis or the application of own knowledge. The bottom category essay generally has a limited line of argument. It consists of vague generalisations where sources are frequently quoted.

## **An Evaluation of the SBEQ**

The advantages of the SBEQ has been fully discussed throughout this paper. “To learn history from the bottom up”, by doing history with primary sources is what makes the SBEQ unique (Rotschild, 2000:496). It requires from learners to explore multiple perspectives on events or issues by examining, analysing, evaluating and synthesising textual and visual sources, and in the end to write a logic and coherent essay (Grant *et al.*, 315-316). SBEQ represents a shift away from the existing format of the source-based and essay questions in the final examination papers to cater for a more authentic assessment of the learners’ historical understanding and reasoning.

On the other hand it is undoubtedly so that the SBEQ will force History teachers to reassess their teaching and assessment strategies. The availability of primary sources might be a problem although most text books these days include primary sources embedded into the chapters.

There are also books on sources available from some publishers which can be of help to teachers.

The Internet where primary sources can be traced is another option (Kotzin, 2001:487-496). Statistics of 2003 reveal that only 26,5% of schools in South Africa have computers for teaching and learning, which means that the option of an internet search is limited for most schools (DoE, 2003d: 5). The reproduction of sources might also become a costly practice for most school budgets.

The time factor for answering the source-based questions may also be a problem. The learner will need at least 15 minutes to answer the short questions of part A. Another 45 minutes is necessary to write the essay of part B. This will obviously influence the duration of the national History examinations.

## Conclusion

Working with sources is achievement-orientated, activity-based and learner-centered and therefore in accordance with outcomes-based education that has been instituted in South Africa since 1998. In the National Curriculum Statement for History, grades 10-12, the first three learning outcomes with their assessment standards, reflect the process by which learners investigate the past. They develop historical enquiry, conceptual understanding and knowledge construction. Therefore learners will, amongst other things, be expected to “use a range of enquiry skills in order to extract and organise evidence from a variety of historical sources of information” (DoE, 2003c: 11-12).

For this reason, and others stated in this paper, consideration must be given to the SBEQ. A suggestion would be to progressively implement the SBEQ in the FET phase. It can possibly be given as a continuous assessment (CASS) assignment for the grade 10s in 2006, then be incorporate into the internal grade 11 schools examinations of the next year for implementation in the national grade 12 examinations in 2008. This year will also be marked as the first year when OBE will be in full operation for all grades with no more differentiation between higher grade and standard grade.

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