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History

How to get a H1 in the Leaving Cert History Exam



by **Vicky B.**

Vicky got a H1 in her higher Leaving Cert History paper. She's hoping to study English at UCC. Here she shares what she learned.

To some, History can appear a challenging subject. The amount of information that you're expected to know by the end of 6th year might seem overwhelming - or at least that's what I

thought at the beginning of 5th year! I quickly learned, however, that once I broke down the subject into topics, and each topic into a select number of essay titles, that the information required is actually much more manageable than it seems!

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The Research Study Report (RSR)

This was perhaps my favourite aspect of the entire history course. This was because, despite one or two restrictions, you can basically do your RSR project on anything in history that suits your specific interests!

- ▶ Do what you love: **When picking your research topic, do NOT choose something just because it sounds impressive! Instead, choose something that you're really passionate about or have always wanted to learn more about. The RSR project is all about independent research and trust me, you will not be motivated to research a topic you couldn't care less about!**
- ▶ Keep it niche: **The more specific your chosen topic, the better. Even if you think your topic is entirely unprecedented, chances are the examiner has already seen it before! If in doubt, ask your teacher for advice! Chances are they've corrected dozens of RSRs before and will be able to steer you clear of the most commonly seen topics! Otherwise, you can try to approach it with a unique stance.**

This way, the corrector will appreciate a fresh take and will probably be more generous with their marks!

- ▶ Keep the criteria in mind: **Always remember the restrictions to avoid losing yourself valuable marks! The dates of your research study must be before 1993 if your subject relates to Irish history and before 1992 if your subject relates to the history of Europe and the wider world. The wordcount of your main essay will vary depending on your level, but as a general rule of thumb, 600-800 words for Ordinary Level and 1200-1500 for Higher. Also, make sure you keep track of the sources you use, because you need to be able to cite them in your write-up!**
- ▶ Get it done early: **Try to get the bulk of the project done ASAP!**



Preferably in 5th year, or even throughout the summer break between 5th year and 6th year, when you still have some semblance of free time. The last thing you want is to leave it till the last minute: the project is usually due around the time of the mock exams and the orals, and it will

just be another added source of stress if you procrastinate, and you could end up submitting a rushed project that won't achieve the marks you deserve! This is your opportunity to guarantee 20% of your overall marks before you even sit the final exam - so, seriously: take advantage of it!



Section I: The Document Based Question (DBQ)

The document question is probably the second easiest way of gathering marks, so long as you don't underestimate them! If you think a certain topic won't appear because it came up the previous year, there are no rules explicitly stating otherwise, so be prepared for ALL three!

- ▶ Know the format: The DBQ Case Studies are worth 100 marks (20%) in total and will be examined in a question with the following format:

Section		Ordinary	Higher
1.	Comprehension	40	20
2.	Comparison	20	20
3.	Criticism	20	20
4.	Contextualisation	20	40
<i>Total Marks</i>		100	100

As you can see, they are not 'just a comprehension' and actually require a lot of preparation. Here is my advice for tackling the DBQs:

- ▶ Practice makes perfect: Practice document style comprehension questions regularly: it's imperative that you become familiar with the questions they typically ask. For example, the questions in Section 1 typically only require a one-line answer that you can take directly from the text. Learning how to compare two different documents is very important for Section 2, and you need to know key terms such as 'bias' and 'secondary source' to answer many of the questions in Section 3.
- ▶ **Make a quick plan:** For Sections 2 and 3, you'll need to be writing about 2 pages in total in order to get full marks. And, as always, when it comes to writing, you should plan anything that's longer than a page. I



would suggest reading the passages carefully and planning your answer in points before writing. Be sure that you know what they are asking for and highlight the sections of the document that you're planning to reference in your answer beforehand so that you can easily locate them later!

- ▶ My tip on planning applies to the short essay in Section 4, too.

Personally, I wrote a rough essay plan on the three topics with a clear bullet-point structure well in advance of the exam, so that I would have something to follow on the day. The titles themselves are generally uncomplicated and do not require a long time to grasp, so you should be able to use your plan to fit any question!



Section II & III: The Essays

Section II and III of the Leaving Cert History Exam require you to write long (3.5-6 page) essays in response to a prompt. Depending on the category of your DBQ, you will either have to write two Irish History Essays and one European History Essay, or two European History Essays and one Irish History Essay. Either way, each of these essays are worth 100 marks, so pay close attention!

- ▶ Know the marking scheme: When it comes to the essays, they are scored in a very particular way. You will receive a Cumulative Mark (CM) out of 60 for historical content. This is usually the sum of the scores each of your paragraphs receives. Your essay can have a minimum of five paragraphs in order to achieve the maximum of 60, but it is incredibly rare that a student would receive a 12/12 per paragraph. The best thing to do with your essays, therefore, is to make sure you have many (8-12) paragraphs, including a relevant introduction and a strong conclusion, from which to obtain marks. That way, you can score as low as 5 or 6 per paragraph and still get a very high CM!
- ▶ The other 40 marks go for Overall Evaluation (OE), which rates the quality of the answer out of 40. To get a high mark here, you have to give a detailed answer that shows the examiner that you have not only given great thought to your analysis, but really studied this topic in depth and perhaps even devoted a bit of extra research to it. A simple way to show this is by including quotes in your answer - it really impresses examiners!
- ▶ Know what to expect: History is a subject that you can be prepared for, even before you sit the exam. What I initially did was study the past exam papers in order to truly get a sense of the frequently asked topics so I knew what to focus my time on. The papers generally follow some sort of pattern and so you can look out for any repeated essay questions. (However I would not over-rely on these patterns as they are not guaranteed to appear!)



- ▶ **Do what you love:** After studying the past papers, the second thing that I did was select 4 essay titles per topic (12 in total) that interested me the most. Again, similar to the RSR project, there is no point in forcing yourself to learn off information that you have no interest in, as it is unlikely that you'll end up remembering it in the long run, or that you'll have any desire to learn it in the first place. I cannot remember the number of times I tried to force myself to learn the "significant developments in US foreign policy from 1973-1989", only to forget it hours later. I eventually gave up and admitted defeat, promptly switching my attention to 'Race Relations', something I found more interesting and ended up learning 10 times faster. Similarly, I chose to learn anything and everything about the 'Cultural Revival' as it was the one aspect of the Irish history course that I enjoyed and found it show up in some way or other every year without fail.
- ▶ **Alternatives to study:** To further prepare for the essays, I would definitely recommend doing outside reading and research. Personally for 'Europe and the Wider World', I found there to be an abundance of documentaries and biographies that really immersed me into the time period much more effectively than merely studying facts from a textbook.
- ▶ **Get organised:** My next tip would be to dedicate a separate study folder to history, and split it into the different topic questions. This folder will be specifically for your essays, essay plans, or whatever you find easiest to study from. This way, there will be no issues when trying to locate a particular essay that you plan to revise.
- ▶ **Get it done early:** Finally, I would advise you to have all your preparations complete before Christmas break so that afterwards, it is merely a matter of grabbing the essays and revising the content.



Tips & Tricks

1. Before the exam

- ▶ Find out what suits you: Everyone studies in a different way: some people find that flashcards help them retain the information easier, some prefer to learn from bullet point essay plans, and some like to watch historical documentaries on Netflix or YouTube! Personally, I used a study method that was quite alternative, but it was the only method that worked for me in the long run. Since I am a visual learner, I took an essay and illustrated it into a graphic novel or comic book style. I typically had three cartoon images per paragraph and I would write the key dates or statistics in bold or bubble writing throughout the comic. It may have taken slightly longer to prepare than flashcards but once I had them drawn I could easily recall them without any issues. Perhaps if you struggle with the more familiar study methods then you could give this one a try!
- ▶ Practice your timing: This tip is vital. You could have everything else planned and prepared to perfection and still end up falling at the final hurdle if you do not consider timing! History may be one of the most demanding subjects out there with regard to timing, having to write 3 long essays, 1 short essay and answer a comprehension all in the space of 2 hours and 50 minutes and so it's crucial that you know the exact length of time that it takes you to write out the content. You should dedicate no more than 40 minutes to each question.
- ▶ **Practice writing essays by hand and time yourself:** If you find that you're going over the limit of 40 minutes, cut the essay down. Remember that this is not an English essay, so no need for flowery prose and filler language. History essays are fact based and you should easily be able to fit an essay into the given



time.

2. During the exam

- ▶ **Watch your timing:** On the day of the exam, the first tip I would give would be to bring a watch with you. As previously mentioned, the exam is heavily time dependent and so you do not want to be wasting precious time craning your neck and squinting your eyes to the giant clock on the wall of the exam hall!
- ▶ **Keep calm and carry on:** Next is to breathe and remain calm, the more stress you place upon yourself, the less clearly you will be able to think and recall facts. Take the first 10 minutes of the exam to scan through the paper and highlighting the essay titles that you're capable of doing. If there are more than one per topic then choose the question that you feel more confident in answering and that suits your particular range of knowledge better.
- ▶ **Fail to plan...:** One of the most important tips I have for you is to plan all three essays in accordance to the question before you even start the exam. Remember, your OE will be based off of how well you answered the question so you must be aware of what the question is asking of you. You could write 100 pages on the Moon Landing but end up getting 0 marks if you don't accurately answer the question!
- ▶ **What I did was write out bullet points** which were simply brief sentences describing what each paragraph is about, followed by the key dates and statistics. This way you can easily reference the plans later on in the exam, when you will likely be exhausted and less focused. You will not have to worry about wasting time trying to recall a certain date mid-way through writing the essay and thus lose your train of thought.



► Finally, if you do happen to write all the content very quickly and find that you have extra time at the end, do NOT leave early! Revise the essays that you have written. Fact

check and date check that everything is accurate and you did not omit any information. You can always improve your essays or DBQ responses in the extra time.



Finally, I would like wish you the best of luck in the exam!

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You're going to do amazing!

