How to... tackle the interpretation question

Below are examples of questions that ask you to analyse and evaluate two interpretations in different ways.

**INTERPRETATION A** Adapted from the autobiography of an American high school student, 1930, about the impact of the movies in the 1920s; she was brought up in a strongly Christian family:

I was impressed by sadness and wrongs done. A movie about the death of someone’s baby showed how the mother continued with her flapper lifestyle regardless of the baby. How I hated that girl! Movies changed moods, but they never lasted long. From the movies you learn about love but I learned more from actual experience! You do see how the gold-digger or the sleek-haired siren lands the men. You meet the flapper, the good girl, and all the feminine types but I was never in love with my movie idols. I have often imagined knowing a movie hero although that is only while I’m watching the picture. I forget about it when I’m outside the cinema.

**INTERPRETATION B** Adapted from a study by Professor Herbert Blumer based on interviews of nearly 200 American high school students between 1929 and 1932; the research was funded by an organisation that wanted legal restrictions on filmmaking:

Movies show life which is unfamiliar to many people and out of this may emerge attitudes, ambitions, dissatisfactions, desires, and temptations. Movies show the life of modern youth. From such pictures they are likely to derive new ideas of freedom, relations to parents, and of conduct towards one’s friends. Life presented in the movies is shown in an attractive and appealing way, full of romance and adventure, freedom and excitement. Many young people as a result may become dissatisfied with their own lives and may actually rebel.

**Practice Question**

1. How does Interpretation B differ from Interpretation A about the impact of the movies in the 1920s? **4 marks**
2. Why might the authors of Interpretations A and B have a different interpretation about the impact of the movies in the 1920s? **4 marks**
3. Which interpretation do you find more convincing about the impact of the movies in the 1920s? **8 marks**

Explain your answers using Interpretations A and B and your contextual knowledge.
In your exam you will see two written interpretations, which are views of an event in the past. Remember that interpretations can be one sided: every person's view depends on their background and circumstances, so two people, each witnessing the same thing, may have different opinions about it.

1. Start with a basic analysis of the content of each interpretation. What is the author trying to say in Interpretation A? What about Interpretation B?

2. The first question asks you to compare two interpretations and identify ways in which they differ. Can you name a few differences between them?

3. The second question asks you to suggest reasons why the interpretations might differ. Look at the provenance: what was the context in which the interpretations were created? For example, who is Professor Blumer and under what circumstances was Interpretation B written?

4. a. It is important that you answer the first two questions before you answer Question 3. Now ask yourself: ‘Which of the two interpretations best fits what I know about the history of the movies in the 1920s?’

   b. To answer Question 3, start by working out what you know about the movies in the 1920s. What historical facts can support or challenge the author’s view?

   c. Try to summarise the opinions of each interpretation and add any supporting evidence about that view.

   d. Decide which of the interpretations you think is more convincing (that best fits the historical knowledge you have). When writing your conclusion, make sure your decision is based on the history that happened, not on who the author is.

5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the following conclusion to Question 3?

   I think Interpretation B is more convincing because people saw fashions and culture change greatly in the 1920s and older people were horrified by flappers who danced the Charleston in the Jazz Age. They blamed the movies which showed young people new fashions and ways of behaving. They said the movies undermined people’s morality, especially of young people. Hollywood movies were very profitable and by 1930 100 million people a week were going to watch films. The big film companies were scared that if films were banned they would lose money so they brought in the Hays Code. This was a set of strict rules about what could be shown on screen such as how long characters could kiss for. I am not convinced by Interpretation A because flappers did exist and she says that she saw them on screen. Some young women did dress like their heroes but movies changed each week.

6. Can you improve the answer above? Try to answer the question yourself!