



Writing Historical Fiction for Historical Literacy and Empathy

Anna McHugh

WE BEGIN WITH STORIES



THE REASONS

There is no understanding of the past without personal experience, without reliving it in imagination. A word is nothing unless it has values and an atmosphere, unless you grasp its historical significance. Stefan Zweig

To achieve joined-up thinking by immersion

To establish stretch targets in writing, reading, and researching

To find out how it really was – to them

To boldly go beyond the *papier mâché* castle and the Letter from the Trenches

To limit the influence of The Google

To have fun!

DESIGNING THE WORKBOOK

Different initial premise from subject English creative writing: sources, not themes

The plot structure should be familiar from other plotting exercises

Discrete text construction should occur at each step

Students should be given maximal choice over writing

Students should explore their own persona as a historical thinker

Examples of short historical fiction were essential

Selecting a great source

We can only reach into the past through things that are left – the sources. This can mean a book, the story inside it, objects that people have intended to preserve, things that just happened to be preserved, and even the people themselves. Using a source as the foundation of your story gives you a really solid core to work from. You can ask questions of your source and find out facts, use your imagination to fill in the missing bits or connect it to other sources. Before you know it you've got a little spyhole into the past, which you can be the expert about.

Answer these questions to help you choose the type of source on which to base your story.

Are you interested in how things look and feel?
Do you enjoy designing things and making them?
Do you like solving tasks with practical tools?

You should choose...

An **object** from your historical society.



List three objects which interested you in the study of this society.

You can choose everyday things like toys, cooking utensils, writing tools, furniture, even houses.

Are you interested in how situations turn out?
Do you enjoy planning and organizing events?
Do you like finding out what happens in a plot?

You should choose...

An **event** from your historical society.



List three events which have interested you in the study of this society.

Events don't have to be really famous. You could choose a private event, like an ordinary person's wedding, or the day a house was built.

Are you interested in what makes people tick?
Do you enjoy examining the reasons behind people's choices?
Do you like understanding how people use their strengths and weaknesses?

You should choose...

A **person** from your historical society.



List three people who have interested you in the study of this society.

You don't have to choose important people. You could use other sources, like objects, and imagine the person who used or wore them, or their maker.

EXAMPLE PAGE

You can make each section as long or as short as you want, as you'll see from the story, 'The Aten', which accompanies this task. Look at the sentences below and draw lines to the correct section of the story.

When one day his officers needed him, they had to look high and low because he changed his bedroom every night to thwart assassins.	Orientation
So they volunteered for an expedition to search for the elixir of immortality and left China for the Eastern Islands – which we now call Japan.	Complication
Although the emperor Qin Shi Huang ruled most of China, he was terrified of dying, and took all kinds of ridiculous precautions to avoid it.	Climax
When they finally found him they realized that the mighty Qin was actually a coward, and not worthy of their loyalty.	Conclusion



Some events are so dramatic that they seem to mark a natural climax in a story, like Halley's comet. It appeared when Harold Godwineson was crowned king of England. People believed that it prophesied a disastrous conclusion to Harold's reign, and this may have contributed to how the Battle of Hastings turned out.

Fill in the empty boxes to complete the outline of the story.

EXAMPLE PAGE

Orientation	A huscarl (warrior) with a French mother and English father is at Harold Godwineson's coronation.
Complication	
<i>What problem might crop up for this person?</i>	
Climax	Halley's comet appears and is taken as an ill-omen for Harold's reign.
Conclusion	
<i>What might he do as a result of seeing the comet?</i>	

CHAPTER LIST

Chapter	AC Outcome
Choosing a historical period	ACHHS148, 149
Task 1: Write a postcard from the past	ACHHS157
Selecting a great source	ACHHS153, 152
Task 2: Interviewing your source	ACHHS153, 154
Consolidating your knowledge	ACHHS149
Task 3: Write a display card	ACHHS156
Elements of your story	ACHHS155
Task 4: Choosing a point of view	ACHHS155
Plotting your story	ACHS156,
Task 5: Plotting the story	ACHHS156, 157
Getting started	ACHHS156, 157
Task 6: Orienting your reader	ACHHS156, 157
Complications	ACHHS156, 157
Task 7: Complication and climax	ACHHS156, 157
Resolutions and windings down	ACHHS156, 157
Task 8: Writing the end	ACHHS156, 157
Reviewing your story	ACHHS156, 157
Original story: <i>The Aten</i>	
Original story: <i>The True Man</i>	
Original story: <i>Alfred Had me Made</i>	
Original story: <i>Burning Bright</i>	

WHAT WE LEARNED

1. Some historical empathy is achieved simply by doing the task – it doesn't need to be made explicit

2. Students are heavily influenced by texts around them which they will reproduce – the imitative factor must be seen as a plus, not a weakness

3. The aspect of visual learning is more pronounced in Australia, in the absence of environmental evidence of the medieval / ancient past. Supplementing the visual with smells, sounds, and haptic experience can help

4. Creative tasks are an excellent diagnostic for weak skills and shaky knowledge while allowing the student to succeed at another aspect of History, and to create something enjoyable

5. Even low ability classes can still produce narratives which run to the 2,000 word mark

ONGOING QUESTIONS

- Some periods of history don't attract middle schoolers. Why?
- What would boys do?
- What indigenous students do?
- How would the quality of the final product change if the workbook was digitized?