



Writing Good History

- Parts of An Historical Narrative
- Avoiding Bad History Writing

Writing Good History

What does it mean to *write* good history? Writing history, a non-fiction genre, differs from other kinds of writing in significant ways. Unlike fiction, it adheres closely to known facts (and occasionally well-founded inferences) and generally argues a point based on those facts.

Unlike other kinds of non-fiction, however, good history writing should tell a compelling story, usually peopled by complex individuals set against richly described backdrops of time and place.

PARTS OF AN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The word *narrative* means a **story or account of events**. A narrative has an identifiable beginning, middle, and end—the basic structure you learned in grade school—and leads the reader to some new understanding of the world around him or her.

One way to begin thinking about any historical narrative—whether a very brief story to go along with a small number of photographs or documents you’ve digitized, or a lengthy narrative that supports a major exhibit full of images—is to ask some questions that will help shape the direction and flow of the true tale you seek to tell.

The following helpful “Writer’s Checklist” comes from *A Short Guide to Writing about History*, 3rd edition, by Richard Marius (Longman, 1999; p. 61). (We have taken the liberty of separating Marius’s list into beginning-, middle-, and end-type questions.)

If you, as the main writer, can work with others in your group and do this as a team exercise and jot down the answers as you discuss them, so much the better.

(Beginning Questions)

- Why am I telling this story?
- Where do I want to begin?

(Middle Questions)

- What happened?
- When did it happen?

- Who or what caused these things to happen?
- What details must I tell about these events, and what can I leave out?
- Who were the major characters in the drama?

(End Questions)

- What is the climax of the story?
- Where do I want to end?
- What does the story mean?

The **beginning, or introduction**, of your narrative should establish the overarching ideas you will discuss throughout the text. While it truly should be introductory, we encourage you to include a very specific “hook”—a small, but captivating, part that can in some way stand for the whole. This might be a salient detail of a story, a powerful image, or a provocative question, anything that captures your readers’ imagination and gives them a small glimpse of the direction in which your narrative will move.

The **middle, or body**, of your narrative is the main part of the journey—all the detailed parts you wish to highlight. The middle should always have echoes of the introduction behind it—resist including paragraphs on subject matter that was never addressed in the introduction.

For example, if you are writing about your town’s history and the introduction focuses on three main topics—the river, industry, and immigration—don’t suddenly introduce new subjects within the body that have nothing to do with those main topics. Whatever you write about in the body of your narrative should flow in some way from the themes you introduced in the beginning.

The middle of your narrative must also push your reader toward the **end, or conclusion**. Everything you discuss in the body must be in service of the overall points you wish to make—it must be driving toward a concluding response to the questions or provocative ideas you addressed in the introduction. The end should leave readers feeling that they know more about the topic than when they started reading. By the end, readers should be able to answer the questions you posed in the beginning or explain how an image or salient detail symbolized the whole journey.

Staying Objective: Here are some reminders to keep your history writing fact-based:

- When writing local history, we often have reasons to want to make our history "positive" or avoid certain topics. Be sure to think carefully about what you are not telling and why. The history will not be "complete" under any circumstances, but be sure you think about whether any topics you have avoided would help make your history more complete and compelling.
- It's not necessary to add judgments to your history: good, bad, unfortunate, sad, regrettable, etc. You can let the reader decide how to view what you present. Your job is to explain it: what happened, why, who was involved, how did the various parties act and react?

For instance, your history doesn't have to say that it was shameful that the sardine canning industry employed children as young as five. Instead, explain why families found it necessary for five-year-olds to go to work, why industries wanted them, how children did at work, and what the various effects were—according to them, their parents, "experts," etc.

AVOIDING BAD HISTORY WRITING

It may be insightful (not to mention enjoyable) to think of writing good history in the reverse—what does history written *badly* look like?

H. P. R. Finberg takes that tack in his essay, "How Not to Write Local History," (from Finberg and V. H. T. Skipp's *Local History, Objective and Pursuit*, David and Charles, 1967). The essay opens:

Anyone who wishes to avoid writing local history will find it perfectly easy to do so: he has only to switch on the radio or television; or he can just go to sleep. For present purposes, however, let us assume that somebody, somewhere... is determined at all costs to write the history of a local community... I shall try to show him how to reach the standard of performance that is expected of him: in other words, how to achieve the monumental flatness, tedium, and lack of acceptance which has been the hallmark of local history as too commonly practiced. (p. 192)

This charming tongue-in-cheek introduction leads to ten “rules” of how to succeed at the practice of writing flat, tedious text that no one really cares to read. In fact, it cleverly highlights the very opposite—everything you need to do to write local history well.

We have listed his “rules” in bold, followed by our own comments.

- **Assume an equal enthusiasm in the reader.** Not everyone will come to the writing with your single-minded focus. Imagine your reader as someone bored with or skeptical about your local history—how will you convince him or her otherwise?
- **The element of comparison is lacking.** Don’t assume your community is the most important place that ever existed. While it is unique, it should be put into the context of its region, the state, and even the country’s history. Readers will be turned off by the lack of awareness of how your community exists in relation to other places.
- **Treat the history as a heaven-sent opportunity for airing [personal irritations].** Whoever is doing the actual writing of your community history must keep personal opinion out of the text. History should be written as fairly and unemotionally as possible.
- **A feeling for romance... can do wonders in putting the reader off.** Avoid sentimental anecdotes, flowery writing, and tangents or trivial details not directly related to the subjects at hand.
- **[Distort] historical perspective.** Badly written history sometimes treats time periods unevenly. Make sure you write about your town’s historical eras in a balanced way. Don’t cover 200 years in one paragraph, and spend the rest of the essay on the last decade. While some periods will be more pertinent than others, investigate each as deeply as possible and give them all the weight they deserve.
- **Don’t provide a map.** When you’re writing about a place, support the text with visual images. Highlight your narrative with historic maps if at all possible. (Or any other visual “guides” that might help the reader imagine the place about which you are writing.)
- **Assume that the reader is on par with yourself.** This rule, which echoes back to the first rule in the list, refers to the language you use to write your narrative. Remember, this writing is meant for a general audience. Avoid erudite, academic, or technical wording. Write in descriptive, but plain and straightforward language.

- **Exclude all that matters.** This is the complement to Rule #4. While you don't want to include every trivial detail that you uncovered in your research, you should, in fact, make certain you haven't left salient points out. What vital information must people know about your local history? Make sure you tell them.
- **References... [don't] give any** – Or, says Finberg, if you do, make them erroneous or unhelpful. Simply put: Cite your research and make sure it is all—to the letter—correct!

Finally, the 10th rule of bad local history writing, which Finberg says is “the most important matter of all”:

- **Never use one word where you can possibly use four.** Remember the rule about plain and straightforward language? Be efficient. Don't say in a paragraph what you can say in a sentence.

MORE INFORMATION

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