

Writing historical fiction for mastery of 21st century social studies and language arts skills: Writing history like it was back then

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Knowing how to read and recreate the past through writing about it helps students develop historical perspective, as well as to adapt and cope with significant events and societal changes in their own lives. Historical fiction writing involves an interdisciplinary, collaborative approach to teaching that will include not just social studies and language arts teachers but may also include art and music teachers. A study module with five lesson plan steps and a mastery chart are provided to aid in meeting Social Studies and Language Arts Standards for fifth grade teachers.

As an educator and author, I am often asked: “What is the point of having students writing stories like it was back then? Why can’t they learn about history in social studies textbooks?” The critique I hear is that kind of story writing is generally not a language arts writing standard for specific grades. I am also told social studies teachers are not expected to teach writing. However, if provided with some guidelines for teaching historical fiction writing teachers of both disciplines have a perfect opportunity to help students master the 21st Century Social Studies as well as Language Arts skills by working together.

The challenge of combining the academic disciplines of social studies and language arts to communicate American historical periods captured my attention ten years ago when I wrote my first historical fiction story for tweens (Webb, 2003, *Manning the Light*). When students read this story, they wanted to know “what happened next” to the characters. So, three more stories followed (Webb, 2005, *Weathering the Storms*, 2007, *Mystery and Mishap* and 2008, *Leaving the Lighthouse*). As a 21st century author, educator and researcher, the skills I employed are the same social studies skills today’s upper elementary and middle school students must practice and master.

Of the ten themes that form the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) standards, historical fiction meets three of these: Time, Continuity and Change; People, Places and Environments; and Individuals, Groups and Institutions. The definition for Time, Continuity and Change bears repeating:

Human beings seek to understand their historical roots and to locate themselves in time. Knowing how to read and reconstruct the past allows one to develop a historical perspective and to answer such questions as: Who am I? What happened in the past? How am I connected to those in the past? How has the world changed and how might it change in the future? (NCSS, 2010, 3, The Ten Themes)

For the purposes of this article, I consider two additional questions: (1) How might I adapt or cope with big events such as new inventions, natural disasters or wars that lead to lifestyle changes?; and (2) How did my ancestors adapt or cope when new inventions, such as the invention of the printing press or the electric light bulb, natural disasters or a war changed the way people lived?

Before writing, cave dwellers painted pictures on cave walls that told stories of events that happened during their time. Tribal elders told stories that happened to them or their ancestors while seated around a campfire. Today, photojournalists record stories of events as they happen by taking photographs and putting them on Youtube. Onlookers to events – such as political revolutions – pass along information about what is happening through Facebook or e-mail. They might Tweet their message, as one American teacher did in Japan when he answered questions about what had happened to school children after the tsunami in March 2011. These storytellers want others to know what it is like to live an historical moment and how people coped.

However, suppose the historical event happened in the past before your students were born. How do they know what it was actually like? Reading historical accounts in textbooks alone may not interest them. According to Zarillo (2008), social studies education is a study of people. In the process of learning about people, students acquire knowledge and become active citizens. During historical periods of massive change some persons stand out who rise to the occasion by adapting or facing hardships with courage and fortitude. When students study and write about them, these persons become their role models for citizenship.

Students who put themselves in a scene, tell about people who were there in the moment, or create original characters have the makings of historical fiction writers. Their writings can be in the form of short stories, diary entries, drama, letters and even poems. Thom (2010) states that “A historical (fiction writer)...seizes the past and forms a story out of it” (p.6). In the remainder of this article, I will summarize the steps I took in writing historical fiction and apply their principles to a classroom setting. Students can complete the following lessons as an individual assignment or collaboratively with other students. My own process is in italics at the end of each lesson.

Writing History Like it Was Back Then

Lesson 1: Students Will Read and Analyze an Example of Historical Fiction Writing

Students will read an historical fiction writing piece on the appropriate age level, or the teacher will read one out loud to the class. The format the teacher chooses will be similar to the format he or she wants students to write. This format might be a letter or series of letters, a diary or entries in a journal, a short story, a poem or scenes in a drama with real or imaginary characters.

Teacher and Student Expectations

When the teacher selects a historical fiction writing piece it will be important that the analysis of the piece be easily attainable by students within the time constructs of the school day and other subjects that must be learned. After reading the writing piece the teacher will discuss the plot with students and how characters meet and react to challenges or conflicts asking these questions: “How do the characters evolve or change and how do they cope when unexpected events happen?” and “What point of view-first, second or third person perspective - has the author chosen to tell the story?”

Graphic organizers, such as a Venn diagram or a T chart, are tools the teacher can prepare for each student or groups of students so they will be able to identify and place which portions of the writing piece are real historically and which are fictional. Another helpful tool for teachers to prepare is a three column hands-head-heart chart so that students can determine and place in the appropriate column how each character acts (hands), thinks (head), and feels (heart).

As I prepared to write each of my historical fiction stories I read many writings about either the period of history or the subject matter. For example: in order to understand what it was like living on a ship or in a lighthouse I read fictional and non-fictional stories about lighthouse keepers from

the turn of the century and the diary entries of a Skipper's wife who accompanied her husband aboard his ship on his travels in the early 1900s. In my stories I wrote I had my characters feel, think and act according to his or her point of view. I chose to have my troubled characters evolve and change.

Lesson 2: Focusing on the Time Period Selected

The social studies teacher will collaborate with the art teacher so that students will prepare time capsules to take them back to the period of history that the teacher has selected based on the social studies curriculum. Students may choose to meet a historical person or persons or enter into an event in that time period.

Teacher and Student Expectations

In art classes, the students will design and create a cardboard time capsule. Along with the time capsule the social studies teacher may want to post on the wall a timeline for the students to place events for the historical period selected.

In addition to the historical events identified, students may share family stories- if they have them- from that time period and place them in the time capsule. As they learn more and more about what happened during that time period both from their family stories and from historical events or persons it will be the task of the teacher to find out what peaks student curiosity to want to learn more. When family stories from that time period are shared, students can imagine out loud what it might have been like if they had been alive then and lived in the story, too. Students will prepare questions to ask a person they meet before entering their time capsule. Meanwhile the teacher will be preparing a parent or a staff person from a museum from that time period to visit the classroom on the day that the students are ready to board the space capsule.

*After reading all the elementary and middle school stories I could find about escaping slaves and Civil War battles that had been written, I decided against writing yet another similar story. Instead, I chose the first year during the period of Reconstruction as my time period for *Costly Freedom*. Because Reconstruction has been defined as the tragic era of American History, the dreadful decade, the age of hate, and the age of political turmoil secondary sources, such as text books, have tended to minimize telling about the reality of this historic period. I wanted my 12-year old characters to tell what it was like, the good, the bad and the ugly, how real people behaved and treated each other- not as some text books might describe that time period. In order to experience the trauma for my characters during the actual War, I included flash backs.*

Lesson 3: Research, Visit and Interview

With the teacher, students will research and explore as much as they are able to about the specific time period selected, the events in that time period and/or a historical person or group of persons from primary and/or secondary sources or interviews.

Teacher and Student Expectations

Documents that were written by an actual person who was there are called primary documents or eye witness accounts. These could be diaries, letters, journals, or family stories passed down through the generations. Historic documents are accessible for teachers and students in collections from the Library of Congress, **Teaching with Primary Sources Program** website.

If field trips are in your school budget there may be a museum or battlefield nearby that you could take your class to visit that will have a collection that pertains to the time period or events

selected. Another option that has been mentioned in Lesson 2 could be a visit from a museum docent or volunteer or parent dressed in period costume who will act in the role of a person who lived during that time period and be prepared to answer students' questions when they visit in their capsule.

In addition to these suggestions, collecting and displaying artifacts and old photos from that time period in the classroom help students see what life was like back then.

If you have a computer lab, students can explore the following internet web sites: www.loc.gov/teachers/tps/, www.digitalhistory.uh.edu, and www.cybersleuth-kids.com making notes on index cards to familiarize themselves about the time period. Another option could be to select a historical person or persons in that time period, research about that person or persons on the internet and ask students to imagine being that person at the students' same age.

My grandmother's sister's written account of their family life in Marietta and Savannah, Georgia before, during and after the Civil War had been shared at each of our family reunions. Her written account became my primary source. I imagined that his oldest son accompanied him on his chaplaincy visits to confederate soldiers on the front lines and as he ministered to them when they were wounded.

I visited the Kennesaw House Museum and interviewed old timers at the Atlanta History Museum. I explored the archives at the church where my great grandfather had been the pastor before, during and after the War.

Since historical persons and fictional characters have to speak and act as they would have spoken and acted back in that time period, I also researched dialect and idiomatic expressions and vocabulary words of the mid-1860s and explored the Slave Narrative Collection in the Library of Congress. For my 1900s historical fiction stories I added the meaning of names and unfamiliar terms at the end of each chapter and made them into bookmarks.

Lesson 4: Developing the Story

But you're a social studies teacher and writing is not your forte. Now is the time to collaborate with your colleague who is teaching language arts to the same class of students. If the two of you decide that your students will write a short story they will begin with an opening paragraph and end with a closing paragraph with other paragraphs in between. If you decide on writing poems or lyrics to a song the writing will be more creative. If, on the other hand, they will be writing a diary or journal entry or a letter(s) only one person speaks and tells the story from his or her point of view. In writing a drama characters -whether real or fictional - will speak, act, think and feel in dialogue. Each character will tell the story from his or her perspective and personality. Students will need to limit their characters to one main character and no more than two or three others. Usually the main character has a conflict or problem to solve. In historical fiction sometimes the event decides which character faces the conflict. The same is true for developing a plot. Real events may determine the plot or the author may create events that seem real to the reader. Happy endings are rare in historical fiction.

Teacher and Student Expectations

The most important lesson to be learned in language arts is to write the first few opening sentences or paragraphs so that they capture a reader or listener's attention. Teachers will want to remind students to write so that when readers or listeners first hear these sentences or paragraphs they will want to continue reading or listening. With journal or diary entries students will need to write scenes and situations so that readers and hearers will experience what is happening.

Writing so that readers or listeners identify with a story's characters will be another important lesson for students. Teachers will need to emphasize that when students develop their characters, to make them come alive so that readers or listeners will like them, dislike them or say "that's just like me." They can see, smell, taste, touch, be scared, be happy, be sad or be mad with the characters.

Finally, when concluding the story students will need to be true to what really happened or may have happened because of the circumstances of the time period.

For the age of my characters in my stories I chose mostly boys from ages 12-13 who would be the age and have the same interests as my potential readers. Thus reluctant boy readers in that age group would be able to identify with the characters. Their feelings, developmental stages, reactions in situations and how they coped needed to be similar to those of 21st century students.

*Keeping in mind that middle school boys would rather play exciting computer games and sports, I knew that I had to make my characters not only real to them but the story needed to be fast moving and have good guys and bad guys. Therefore, in my lighthouse stories readers will find a ship wreck, a body washed up on shore, and the characters attend the first World Series games in Boston. In *Costly Freedom*, readers encounter a hanging, lynching and a house burning. In several of my stories the bad guys are put on trial. The boy characters study and read books appropriate to the time period. There are characters from single parent families, from dysfunctional families as well as former slaves experiencing bigotry and prejudice. There are plenty of good guys rescuing and doing good deeds, involved in creative problem solving and modeling citizenship... In *Costly Freedom* the Freedmen's Bureau are the good guys, the Ku Klux Klan are the bad guys, and the idealistic carpetbagger teacher newly arrived from the North to start a school for former slave children gets hurt. He tells about the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution that abolished slavery and entitled citizenship rights for all persons in America, regardless of color, as well as providing equal protection under the law.*

Lesson 5: Edit, Revise and Polish

After students have completed all their research, filled out all their Venn diagrams and charts next comes writing what some teachers refer to as "sloppy copies." The teacher will supervise the editing, re-editing, re-writing and use of correct spelling and grammar, check their facts and make sure that their idioms, words, dress, and events are true to that time period. Teachers will need to be wary that students may want to have their characters play video games or use cell phones even if they weren't available during the chosen time period!

Teacher and Student Expectations

A great way to help students realize what it takes to get a story published is to ask an author to visit the class and describe the process of finalizing a story to be ready to be read by others. Writing projects need editing, correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar; then, revising and polishing.

However, classroom teachers will not have the time to work with each student to edit, correct and revise. Pairing high achieving students with students who need more attention in order to help proof read, check spelling and vocabulary for appropriate word usage will be essential; even student teachers and teacher's aides or other volunteers will be helpful in the editing process. However, classroom teachers will need to proof the final copy.

If there are computers in the classroom or a computer lab, students may word process their stories, adding graphics, illustrations or old photos that will visually add to the story, drama, diary or journal.

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I'm often asked the question about how long it took me to write a certain story. If one asks me how many drafts I wrote before the story was finished, I usually smile and respond, "Too many to count."

*As an author I've found that my best proof readers and critics are students at the same age as my characters. In the process of final editing and proofing of *Costly Freedom*, I sought the collaboration of a seventh grade reading class at my local middle school. Their language arts teacher, Mrs. Memory D'Agostino, was delighted to have her students work with a real life author. She divided her class into teams of ten students each. Each team was given a copy of the manuscript. The students' assignment was to find grammar and spelling errors and to write reviews of the story. Her students really became involved with the characters, one wrote, "If I read one more racist comment from {this character} I'll scream."*

Table 1. A Mastery Chart

Student Objectives	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
Read and/or listened to historical fiction writing pieces.	Listened to or read one piece	Read and/or listened to two historical fiction pieces	Read and/or listened to 3 or more historical fiction pieces or biographies of a historical persons
Differentiated fact from fiction on graphic organizer	Was able to accurately separate one fact from one fiction	Was able to accurately place 2 or more facts from 2 or more fiction in story(ies)	Was able to complete a similar chart for all books read or listened to
Researched primary (eye witness accounts and stories) and secondary sources (history books) for that time period	Needed help from teacher with research and compiling notes	Researched and took notes on one primary and one secondary source and placed them on chart	Researched and took notes on more than one primary and secondary source and placed them on chart
Created a conflict or problem to surmount or solve	Needed assistance from teacher in creating conflict or problem to solve	Created problem or conflict with minimal assistance	Self-directed without any assistance
Wrote in appropriate format for writing piece selected	Needed assistance from the teacher in writing the story and developing opening and closing	Wrote the story and opening and closing with minimal assistance from teacher	Needed no assistance; was self-directed
Proof read, edited and then used a computer to word process the project as well as added any illustrations or graphics	Needed assistance from teacher, other adult or students in editing spelling and grammar	Went over own work for correcting spelling and grammar. Used dictionary to look up words; asks fellow student or teacher to check work	Proof read and edited own writing; helped others proof read and edit theirs
Shared his writing project with others	Needed encouragement to share writing in front of class	Shared writing willingly	Shared writing and encouraged others to share
Prepared and Engaged	Needed help in staying on task	Consistently prepared and visibly engaged	Always prepared and highly engaged in researching and writing

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