

IAN MORTIMER

Twelve hints for writing history for the general public

[based on notes drawn up for a lecture at the University of Nottingham, 9 March 2011]

1. Remember that history is an art

- Academic history – following the lead of Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) – is about the past *as it was*. Writing for the public is much more than this. It is about making the past meaningful to today's readers.
- If you have a perfect interpretation of the causes for the Hundred Years War and you say it alone in the forest, it is meaningless. It only becomes meaningful when communicated with an appreciative audience.
- Original research is not necessarily meaningful or significant. An original 'history of the bus ticket' will not be an international bestseller because it lacks significance for most people.
- Consider the 'So what?' test. Whatever you write must have at its heart something that the reader can also be interested in or excited by – something that means something to him or her.
- History as an art should be mindful of 'the eternal truths' of human life, seen through the prism of the past, or through the lens of a particular period. It should also show the story of humanity over time, demonstrating how we change or stay the same, thus providing a description of some element of understanding humanity that is deeper than just the way we seem to be in the mirror of the present moment. One of these – or, ideally, both – should be the ultimate purpose of what you write.

2. Use Poetic Resonance

- Key lines, especially last lines, of great poems and speeches have a resonance that makes you remember them. Many Shakespearian phrases simply drip with meaning. Leave the main message you want to get across to people ringing in your readers' minds.
- First lines are equally important. Consider all the great first lines of literature – from 'Now is the winter of our discontent...' to 'Mother died today...' Few people can cite the first lines of a history book – yet a dramatic impact is just as important in history. It creates the excitement that makes the reader want to read on.

3. Employ dramatic set pieces

- Battles are dramatic events. Describe them dramatically.

- Think of the various forms of dramatic writing, from the drama of suspense (something is *about to happen*) to the drama of the event that *has just happened* (raising the question as to what the consequences will be). Remember – there is no law that says a historian cannot withhold information from the reader for the sake of creating suspense.
- Following from poetic resonance, one can employ dramatic rhetoric to engage the audience, for instance in describing the ravages of plague or war.
- A combination of suspense and dramatic writing can be very powerful – in describing a murder or a battle, for example, or even a pivotal meeting. Use plenty of description in these ‘set pieces’ so that the reader can ‘see’ what is happening and at the same time is kept in suspense.
- Just as it is fitting to use dramatic language to describe dramatic set pieces, so too it is fitting to use sympathetic language to discuss tragic or sad events. The death of a loved one is such an instance: it is highly inappropriate to use neutral, objective language to discuss the death of a spouse or a child.
- If a set piece works well, one can move straight from the drama to an in-depth scholarly analysis of what has happened. The reader will be hooked – and the sheer contrast of drama and analysis will accelerate interest in the more subtle workings of the event and its repercussions.

4. Show, don’t tell

- The oldest and the best piece of advice in the book. Saying ‘Henry IV and Richard II hated each other’ is unengaging. In what ways did they hate each other? How do we know? Describe the occasions when their hatred became evident. Give description. Over a series of events this will become more powerful and more significant.

5. Escape the tyranny of ‘objective neutrality’

- Academic objectivity is an important lesson to learn – but do not let it govern your writing (unless you are writing purely for an academic audience). It is hugely constraining, like a language with no words for love, lust, fear – or any other emotion.
- Remember EH Carr and his mountain metaphor in *What is History?* The same mountain looks different from different perspectives. There is no one ‘objective’ position but a whole spectrum (see my *Medieval Intrigue*, pp. 13-15). Therefore it is up to you what objective ground you decide to occupy.
- You can choose the *form* in which you write to suit your subject. In my case I used a guidebook form, written in the present tense, to introduce people to Medieval England. I used a day-by-day approach to treat a year of Henry V’s life comprehensively in *1415*. These forms raise questions that people tend not to have thought of previously, and so

are valuable in themselves. They also allow people to see the familiar past in different ways.

- Similarly, a sympathetic biography can have positive spin-offs by explaining why someone did something *from his own point of view*. No biography of Richard II is adequately going to explain why Henry IV took the throne from him: that is a different point of view, a different side of EH Carr's 'mountain'. In this way we can have many simultaneous and equally true different versions of the past.

6. Never neglect academic research

- Remember that you cannot stop short of academic excellence. Great writing cannot make up for a lack of knowledge or understanding. Rather you must reach the academic frontier – and then go beyond it.
- Never stint on endnotes and appendices. Good citations show that your work is rooted in evidence from the past and will give your text lasting value.
- Relegate technical issues to endnotes or appendices where too technical for easy discussion in the text, or if they threaten to distract the reader from the deeper meaning of your work.

7. Always opt for clarity and simplicity over complexity

- Do not underestimate the power of narrative. Everyone understands it – that is a great asset for a historian – so use it.
- Academic hedging of bets is not a popular technique with the public. It muddies waters. Nor is it always justifiable. If you want to bridge a chasm, and the engineer says 'it can't be done', even if he is absolutely correct you are still left without a bridge. So too with historical problems. It is better to form a coherent portrait that is well-argued and *might* be right – even at the risk of being wrong – than hedge your bets and beat about the bush. You can put caveats in the endnotes. This is arguably the biggest difference between writing for the public and writing for an exclusively academic audience. Writing for academics requires you to err on the side of caution. Writing for the public requires you to have the courage of your convictions.
- Always use simple language. At least, don't use unnecessarily complicated structures. Remember the pyramid of understanding applies to language as well as logic. Few people understand complicated language and those who do not are not impressed by people who use it. Easy-to-understand words and phrases allow for maximum comprehension and thus constitute the best sort of style – an 'unnoticeable' style (as Boris Pasternak put it).

8. Be original

- Take ideas from what you see around you. If you want to describe a street scene, look at a modern street. Today's builders might be using steel scaffolding – what might they have used in your period of study?
- Learn from TS Eliot (especially his introduction to the poems of Ezra Pound) that true originality derives from life, not from literature. Draw from your own experiences to inject our own originality into your view of history. Your experiences are as valid as any others.
- It is your originality that gives you a real voice – and until you have a sense of your own originality and are confident in yourself as a writer, you will struggle to employ most of the techniques mentioned here.

9. Surprise people

- People get bored easily. A steady objective voice is often a monotonous one. Inject variety into the text through 'light and dark'. Change mood regularly. Employ changes of pace regularly.
- Be aware of the power of the objective correlative. Juxtapositions of events can be very powerful.
- Be aware of the potential of the historical correlative (see my *1415*, pp. 530-1). Just saying something that seems remarkable to modern readers can have a powerful effect: everyone automatically compares any historical period with the norms of their own time.
- Tackle received wisdom wherever possible. If you know that a general assumption is XYZ, and XYZ is demonstrably wrong, then show this. As soon as someone else shows it is wrong, your work will be out of date.

10. Bring your story to a satisfactory resolution

- People always remember endings – they want to be satisfied, they want ends tied up neatly and ideally they want the person they have been reading about to get his or her just deserts. Therefore it is important to resolve the story you are telling in a way that is complete, final and fair.
- If you are writing about a confrontation, it helps to write from the point of view of someone you can sympathise with. This is so you can provide a positive resolution at the end – a victory in the final battle after a struggle – or a honourable defeat for a great cause. Choose your subject carefully.
- Winners sell better than losers – especially if they die young.

11. Reflect on the journey that is a history book

- It is important to remember that readers of history books, like readers of poems and novels, are on a journey. The more variety of scene and setting you can employ, the grander the journey.
- Use flashbacks to remind readers of how far they have come at important junctures in the book. For example, when a key character dies in a biography, remind the reader of all they shared with the main subject at the heart of the book. Flashbacks will illustrate the journey that the characters and the readers are both on.

12. Above all else, think of 'The Passenger'.

- 'The Passenger' is a poem by Bertolt Brecht. It appears in Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913-1956*, edited by John Willett and Ralph Manheim (Eyre Methuen, 1976), p. 257.

When, years ago, I learned
To steer a car, my teacher made me
Smoke a cigar, and if it went out
In heavy traffic or on sharp corners
He relieved me of the wheel. Also
He told jokes as I drove, and if
Too occupied with steering, I did not laugh, he took
The wheel from me. I feel unsafe, he said.
I, the passenger, am frightened when I see
The driver of the car too preoccupied
With driving.

Since then, when working
I take care not to get too absorbed in the work.
I pay attention to all sorts of things around me.
Often I interrupt my work to talk to someone.
Driving too fast to be able to smoke
Is a habit I've got out of. I think of
The passenger.