

Writing History That People Want to Read

Research and Writing Methods

Historians take many different approaches to researching and writing.

There are three main methods:

We know exactly what we want to write about and set out to locate supporting evidence.

We don't start writing until we have located every possible source of information.

We start writing as soon as we've located some evidence and just keep repeating this process.

I've always used this last method as its ideal for processing lots of research material.

Finding Your Writing Voice

When we write, we write with a particular tone or voice, so our writing tone or voice should fit the type article or book we're writing. With magazine articles for instance, a carefree, humorous and informal style informal can be an appropriate tone. For history articles and books however, our tone or voice needs to be authoritative and confident. We get to sound confident and believable by providing facts and information as experts, even if we're not. If we use slang & phrases like *its poss that..* or *its likely that...* too often, our readers will not believe what we're writing.

Many writers include historians get hung up on finding their "Voice." So let's check your writing voice. Write 3 quick sentences describing a past person or event, then read you sentences aloud. If your sentences sounded stilted or over formal, or you stumbled over the sentences, or somehow it just didn't sound right-*you have not found your voice*. It's usually because we're trying to write like someone else, or writing to some preconceived idea on what an historian should sound like. If your sentences and the words in it flowed naturally however, *you have found your voice*. So what is your writing voice? It's the voice that flows and allows you to talk to your readers in an easy and relaxed way.

The Importance of Detail

If we want our writing to have the ring of truth, we have to permeate it with details. This is what brings our history writing alive and makes it believable for our readers. Our writing can never have enough detail, because it's the heart and soul of non-fiction writing.

Consider this 'learning the ropes' reading from *Cannibal Jack* and just consider for a moment what the paragraph accomplished. Firstly the readers are drawn into the scene and the larger narrative, and because they know the author has done his research, they can trust the writing. Secondly, the author has shown that he has mastery over the facts he's located, and combined them to create a convincing portrayal of the challenges confronting new sailors.

One of the more interesting outcomes of researching and writing non-fiction is that we become experts on, or at least extremely knowledgeable about, all sorts odd and unusual subjects.

Use *some* informed speculation but don't overuse it.

Informed speculation is when we make a reasonably valid assumption based on evidence. I use some informed speculation but warn my readers in the introduction and before the relevant paragraph. But don't overuse terms like *she may have.... she could have.... Its possible that she....* or you'll undermine your credibility with your readers

Don't Be Politically Correct

There is the old saying that 'a turtle makes no progress until it sticks its neck out.'

In 2008, Paul Moon's book on Maori cannibalism *This Horrid Practice*, caused an outcry. He was accused of racism and having an anti-Maori agenda. Any publicity proved good publicity however, and Moon's book, like Nicki Hager's controversial expose's, flew off shelves.

Never be put off by a controversial topic. Like archaeologists, our role is to dig up information about past people and events. Like journalists, we write about them truthfully, whether they were positive, negative, good, bad, or both. Well researched and written history always offends some people as it challenges their entrenched perceptions about the past.

Currently, I am researching and writing for a book to be titled 'White Slaves, Maori Masters.' My research located more than 100 ships attacked by Maori and 1200 Europeans enslaved during the 1800s. Contrary to established written histories promoting a co-operative past, I will argue that in pre-treaty New Zealand, Maori and Pakeha slaughtered and enslaved (for sex, labour and exhibition) each other with great enthusiasm. NZ's early white slave trade is an integral part of our intertwined history, but it has been neglected by previous historians.

Referencing

Academic historians acknowledge the primary and secondary sources they draw on by referencing. General readers dislike reference numbers, but they are not a form of snobbery. Referencing shows the foundations and building blocks of our own historical writing project. It allows us to write in our own words, without endlessly naming other authors and titles. We acknowledge our debts to other writers, it shows integrity and it's just good manners. It assists and guides other writers and historians interested in our subject area. Many secondary sources are copyrighted and we could be sued for breach of copyright.

We acknowledge our sources by adding **numbers** at the end of relevant sentences or paragraphs. These numbers correspond with numbered **footnotes** at the bottom of the page or **endnotes** at the end of the chapter, or book. They acknowledge our sources of information.

If we do a lot of general background reading, but have not borrowed specific words/ideas from anyone, we can include a **Bibliographical Essay** at the end of our book. These often appear under a heading like 'Acknowledgements and Further Reading,' where the author discusses the value of the works consulted. Otherwise a simple **Bibliography** will do.

We can reduce reference numbers by: naming newspapers/dates and placing a single number at the end of paragraphs. We then list the various sources in order in the Endnotes eg. This paragraph is informed by the following works...

Plagiarism - ‘Credibility can take a lifetime to achieve, but only a moment to destroy.’

Plagiarism is presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, or pretending that someone else’s words are yours. I learned very early that citing many/varied sources, adds to your credibility. Writers in **all genres** including fiction and historical fiction, must acknowledge the words and ideas borrow from other writers and failure to do this is **plagiarism**, or literary theft.

It’s considered academic fraud in both the universities and in the public arena, and the consequences for both popular and academic writers are severe, not just humiliating.

In 1990 Sarah Fergusson, Duchess of York, was accused of plagiarism. Her children’s book *Budgie The Little Helicopter*, was found to have many similarities to *Henry the Helicopter* (1964). Also accused of racism as the book has two dark men kidnapping a blonde woman.

In 2009, Witi Ihimaera, one of NZ’s favourite fiction writers, lifted 16 passages from other writers without acknowledgement. The book was called *The Trowenna Sea* and Witi, an Auckland University English professor, was publically vilified by academics and the media for weeks. A *Listener* reader discovered the plagiarism when she Googled specific sentences. Don’t plagiarise: Someone will always recognise it and it might just be your well read editor!

Recommended Online Research Sites

Since 1990s computers and the internet have completely changed our research methods. We no longer have to spend long days researching in the NZ room at the Tauranga City Library. My five favourite free online research sites are:

ENZB - Early New Zealand Books

This research site has been created by Auckland University and it;s ongoing. It s an archive of 300 eBooks published about NZ, by people who lived in the 1800s. The books include published journals and diaries mainly by men. but some women. Caution: This site is highly addictive.

NZETC – New Zealand Electronic Text Centre

This research site has been created by Victoria University it is also ongoing. It’s an archive of 1600 eBooks and includes magazines, and literary journals. A few books also appear on the ENZB website, but not many.

New Zealand Papers Past

This wonderful archive is a National Library website and I use it extensively.

It has five sections, newspapers, magazines, journals, letters and diaries, parliamentary papers. The newspapers cover the decades between the 1840s & 1940s.

Trove: Early Australian Newspapers- National Library of Australia

Old newspapers, but also gives access to books, manuscripts, journals, magazines and music.

The Dictionary of NZ Biography

This archive was created by the Ministry of Culture & Heritage

As historians we deal with the dead and the site contains bios for over 3000 dead people.

The 5 original published volumes starting in 1769 have been put online and added to.

A great site for quick background info on main/minor characters in your historical period.

Currently edited by Claudia Orange who wrote a Treaty of Waitangi bestseller in the 1990s.

Recommended Visit and Research Locations

Tauranga and Waikato University Library NZ rooms are ideal research locations. They are local, accessible, have great resources and knowledgeable librarian/historians.

Auckland City Library's George Grey Collection and Auck Museum **Library** Ideal for a one day research Auckland Uni Library has a great NZ hist section and NZ Room.

National Archives, the National (includes the Turnbull) and Hocken Libraries

These are NZ's main manuscript libraries so there's little point in going there to browse.

First, go online, ID the various manuscripts or typescripts you want to read and Email the list in advance with the date of your visit, The material will be there when you arrive.

Downsides: horrid plastic gloves, use pencils only and they are always cold. Dress warmly!

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National, Regional and Local Museums

Most now have their collections online. To see or examine a particular artefact, contact the curators. I have found them without exception, very helpful.

Writing History, Writing Exercise Six - Narrative Writing Practice.

Jack Marmon, New Zealand's most notorious Pakeha-Maori, was a runaway convict and sailor who joined Ngapuhi at the Bay of Islands and Hokianga from 1817. Initially a mokai Pakeha (pet European Slave) he served his tribe as a gun trader, tohunga Pakeha (white priest) and Pakeha toa (white fighting man). Marmon was famous in his own day for his ta moko, fluency in te reo, reliability as a translator and trader go-between, courage in battle, supernatural powers, but above all, his participation in post battle cannibal feasts. In 1880 he died in his whare at Rawhia on the bank of the Hokianga River. Two sources state that he was so feared by local Maori and Pakeha, that he was buried head first and upside down to confine his supernatural powers.

Task:

In October 1836, Cannibal Jack, began attending Wesleyan church services at Hokianga.

Read the descriptions then rewrite some of these sentences. Try to bring some detail, colour and additional drama to the incident. Try to write as if you are telling this story to a friend. If you have time, speculate on why, Marmon who was raised as a Catholic in Sydney began attending Wesleyan church services.

He crossed the tidal Hokianga River to the Wesleyan church at Mangungu in a small canoe. Marmon wore an old black suit and top hat, The Christian Maori attending the service were shocked and terrified by Mamon's entry. The pastor, whom Marmon had formerly threatened, was shocked and paused the sermon. No Maori ever sat in the pew where Marmon sat, even when the Pakeha-Maori was absent. Marmon's going mihenerere (missionary), caused a sensation among local Maori and Pakeha.