By the time most students are in the middle years of primary school they are very familiar with both the oral and written interpretation (reading) and construction (writing) of narrative texts. Students can readily retell stories about their own lives or the lives of others. They are familiar with plots, characters and settings and are developing awareness of empathy and the mental states of characters.

In this article, I look at how teachers can take the narrative to the next level by using historical narratives or historical fiction, as it is sometimes known, to further enhance reading and writing skills. Annandale et al. (2005) maintain that the author’s primary objective should be to tell a compelling story first and to convey historical information second. Hence, one of the difficulties teachers face when contemplating using historical narrative is the divide between the text as a work of art, or the text as a teaching tool for content knowledge or reading and writing skills. I will advocate for exposure to historical narratives as both a model for crafting and enhancing narrative writing skills, and as a source of valuable content knowledge about Australian history. Whilst I focus on Years 4 and 5 curriculum descriptors, there is no reason why the literature and ideas suggested in this article could not be applied to older and indeed younger students.

Historical narratives differ from general narratives because they are usually based on real events and people from the past, often more than 50 years ago, but not necessarily confined to this time frame. Whilst the characters can be real or imagined, the world of the story must be accurate and authentic. This requires authors (students and teachers) to do a great deal of credible research about the given time, context and perspectives. Thus, the historical narrative provides realistic and meaningful opportunities to extend students’ reading and writing skills whilst also integrating and developing important content area knowledge from science, technology, the arts, history and/or geography. Indeed, historical narratives provide readers with ‘lived through’ experiences that enable greater understanding and insight into human nature and historical patterns.

**Links to curriculum**

To begin an investigation of historical narratives you will need to determine relevant key outcomes according to the Australian Curriculum and/or the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (Western Australia), for both History and English. I chose to focus on historic knowledge and understandings and skills for Years 4 and 5, which essentially cover Australian history from the late 1700s through to the late 1800s. Year 4 content focuses on indigenous lifestyle prior to European discovery, early world navigation, stories of the First Fleet and early contact and impact of Europeans on Aboriginal people (ACHHK 078, 079, 080). Associated skills include being able to sequence events, use historical terms, pose questions, identify sources and points of view, and develop narrative texts using a range of communication forms (ACHHS 081, 082, 083, 216, 084, 085, 086, 087). The Year 5 content focuses on the thinking behind the establishment of British colonies, the experience of convicts, settlers and Indigenous peoples, and the significant roles played in shaping the colony (ACHHK 093, 094, 095, 096, 097). Year 5 skills include sequencing events, use of historical terms, questioning historical inquiry, identifying and locating relevant sources, comparison of information and points of view, and developing texts in a range of multi-media communication forms (ACHHS 098, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106).

In terms of the English curriculum, at both Year 4 and 5 levels students are expected to identify and use text structures and language features to comprehend, interpret, create and present multi-modal and media texts for a range of purposes and audiences. They are also expected to understand more complex grammar, use more sophisticated vocabulary, spell and punctuate accurately, and edit work to improve meaning and structure.
Getting started

One of the most common practices teachers use when introducing a genre is immersion in that text type and as such, historical narratives should be no different (Annandale et al., 2005; Cambourne, 1988). This is usually achieved during the shared or modelled reading time in the literacy block (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The texts used during the shared or modelled reading session are usually texts that are beyond the instructional level of students, hence they require the teacher to do most of the reading. In fact, this is where the text, as a work of art, can be more fully enjoyed because students do not have to rely on their own skills to understand the nature of the text. Teachers can also provide powerful examples of the inter-disciplinary themes and content knowledge. This is also the time when the skilled and informed teacher can identify teachable moments. The order in which students are taught about the language and structural features of historical narrative is very much dependent on the presence or absence of these features in the texts you choose. Teachers are encouraged to read historical narratives with post-its on hand, ready to highlight a great sentence or phrase, a simile or metaphor, any unusual uses of vocabulary, or ways authors choose to develop a character. Don’t spoil the reading for yourself by trying to analyse the reason for your post-its—do that later when you have finished reading. Be sure to also look for examples that may confuse readers so that students become aware of different points of view, interpretations and ambiguity.

I use a learning wall (Figure 1) to record what students discover as they embark on their investigations into historical narratives and the selected historical period (Harste & Vasquez, 1998). A learning wall is a type of audit trail that publically records data collected as evidence of thinking and learning about historical narratives and content (or any other inquiry). It is displayed as a bulletin board with artefacts such as photos, references, posters and concept maps. The wall represents theories, issues, critical conversations and actions and it helps everyone to be critical and reflective. If teachers were to use their assessment criteria as headings for their learning wall, it also acts as a tool for assessing and evaluating students’ understandings.

Plots and themes

Beck et al. (2000) proposed that quality historic narratives were well-told stories with believable settings and characters, and a historically evidenced plot. The plot is made up of many scenes that can stand on their own, but they are also part of a much larger overall theme. Themes are different to plots and they represent the bigger picture. As in good quality narratives, historical narratives often have a number of multi-level themes. In Pennies for Hitler (French, 2012), for example, we find abstract themes such as fear, hatred and prejudice running parallel to hope, strength and resilience, and more concrete...
themes such as World War II, Australia in the 1930s, refugees, and the roles of women and children during war time. The themes in historical narratives are often timeless whilst the plot is firmly anchored in time and place. Martin (1995) recommends spending time consolidating the theme and thus the quality and quantity of books used during the shared reading schedule is important in the development of the key ideas.

One book I have found particularly useful for finding themes in Australian history is Australian story: An illustrated timeline (McCartney, 2011). It presents events in chronological order with single sentence summaries (sometimes in question and answer format), and has supporting visual images.

The period of history studied in the Year 4 and 5 Australian Curriculum deals with themes such as industrialisation, poverty, deportation, discovery, exploration, settlement in a new country, climatisation, resilience and survival to name but a few (ACARA, 2015). To generate understandings about themes I give students the titles of books or even chapters in a book that I will be reading. I ask students to make predictions about themes in the book, who is telling the story, where it takes place, what happens or is likely to happen and to note what students already know about that time period. In conducting this activity you also gain valuable information about your students’ background knowledge of Australian history (ACELA 1488, 1489, 1502, 1797; ACELT 1603, 1605, 1609, 1610; ACELY 1699).

### Characters

Historical narratives are characterised by the use of a narrator through which the author chooses to represent and interpret the story (ACELA 1490, 1504; ACELT 1602, 1604, 1605, 1608). Likewise it is not the plot that readers remember but the character(s) and their responses to events, both good and bad. It is important for authors to know their characters well—not so much what they wear but rather what they say, think, do or not do, like or dislike, and with what or whom they surround themselves. The character depicts the ‘voice’ or perspective of the story (ACELT 1604, 1610, 1795; ACELY 1698, 1794).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Titles (and/or picture of cover)</th>
<th>The legend of Moondyne Joe (Greenwood, 2002)</th>
<th>Lost: A true tale from the bush (Reeder, 2009)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated themes</td>
<td>Bushrangers in early colonial Australia. Injustice Identity – Belonging Deportation</td>
<td>Survival Relationships Adversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who could be telling the story – from whose perspective?</td>
<td>Moondyne Joe A modern day relative; great, great grandchild Policeman</td>
<td>Oldest child Journalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting – time and place</td>
<td>Western Australia – south west Late 1800s Pistols that smoke Bush camps – rough living</td>
<td>Colonial Sydney Late 1800s Bush</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters – major and minor</td>
<td>Moondyne Joe Law enforcers – governor, policeman Other convicts</td>
<td>Three children – brothers and sister Dad and Mum Police, Aboriginal tracker other settlers/farmers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>Early settlement as a convict. Commits numerous crimes without getting caught. Helps other settlers or convicts. Big shoot out Becomes a hero.</td>
<td>Three children get lost in the bush. Face survival against adversity – dingoes, hunger/thirst, weather Find their way home or get rescued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content knowledge vocabulary</td>
<td>Ball and chain Conviction – sentence Penal colony Jail/gaol Horse and carriage – stagecoach</td>
<td>Pinafore, bonnet, three-quarter trousers Australian flora and fauna Bush tucker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Examples of titles, themes, and predictions about characters, setting and plot
knickers (French, 2010), for example, was actually quite invisible, but her activities influenced the type of knickers the narrator’s mother made. In My place (Wheatley, 1987), there are different characters, or narrators, on every full page spread. The consistent narrator is a child between eight and twelve years of age who must face the everyday challenges of the decade being described. It is equally important that teachers are mindful of the culture, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic portrayal of characters and character traits.

Table 1 gives an example of two books relevant to Australian history in the late 1800s and early 1900s, with examples of the sorts of predictions and problem solving students might engage in, when considering elements such as plot, theme and characterisation. When doing this activity, teachers should also encourage students to justify their responses.

The structure of historical narratives

It is pertinent to make comparisons between known narratives and expectations about the nature and structure of historical narrative. Findings can be audited on the learning wall recording how different books conform to, or contradict expectations. This audit also allows for students and teachers to critically reflect on how these changes influence the effectiveness of the writing. In making a comparison between the regular narratives and the historical narratives under review, teachers and students will find a variety of structures (ACELA 1504, 1797; ACELT 1797). Some historical narratives unfold chronologically whilst others develop in spurts of time, have flashbacks or flashforwards, and may include detailed sub-plots of events or perspectives. As a result, historical narratives can also incorporate several different genres within the main text such as poetry, diary or journal entries and artefacts such as photographs, art, newspaper clippings, personal letters, postcards or invoices (Wolfer, 2009, 2013). Some historical narratives include historical notes as a prelude, epilogue or as footnotes to give credibility to their stories (Greenwood, 2010; Reeder, 2009, 2011; Walker, 1988).

In order to develop a story line, students and authors must research and read widely about the time period they are exploring. An easy way to do this is to get students to think about their own lifetime and the things that make living in 2016 unique. Students could brainstorm for example, the impact mobile phones have on our everyday life: bullying, car accidents, instant information and help, need for access to Twitter and Facebook, and phone covers. Mapping of students’ lives can then be traced backwards by asking questions such as, ‘How did the first settlers communicate with family, friends and the constabulary?’, ‘What might have been some impacts of receiving news three months after it had happened?’

The structure of the historical narrative begins in a similar manner to other narratives, with an opening. Corbett and Strong (2011) refer to the opening as a ‘hook’ because its purpose is to entice the reader to want to read on. Martin (1995) proposed that openings should achieve all or most of six conditions. Openings should: go straight into action by setting the scene and time; create the atmosphere by using all the senses; establish who the main character is; suggest the theme of the book; trigger the actions; and engage the reader’s curiosity. The opening is followed by a sequence of unfolding events and a conclusion. The plot development can be enhanced by students examining quality literature in order to compare, contrast and potentially innovate on, or get ideas for, their own writing.

Students can find support for developing their narrative by using a pre-writing planning stage to sketch out the plot and the historical details. Teachers and students can use diagrams, and apps such as Kidspiration and Popplet, for brainstorming and developing character profiles, news reports, timelines, story maps and story grammar. Elaborations of the plot can be refined using frameworks such as storyboards, story ladders and plot profiles (Johnson & Louis, 1985), and apps such as Photo Story.

The language features of historical narratives

Finally, students need to know about the language features associated with historical narratives (ACELY 1694, 1700, 1701; ACELT 1602, 1603, 1605, 1690). There is no real hierarchy for teaching the language features of historical narrative, rather teachers should use the opportunities and examples provided in the historical narratives read to students. In looking across a range of historical narratives and curriculum resources, some of the more common language features are included in Table 2 (Annandale et al., 2005; Wing Jan, 2009).

As these features are identified in the books you read, add them to your learning wall with exemplars for easy reference. In Tom Appleby, Convict Boy (French, 2004), for example, we can identify exemplars of the language features of historical narratives. The story is told in third person and past tense but includes present tense through the dialogue of the characters and self-talk by Tom. French also makes an interesting authorial decision to refer to the main character as Tom, when he recalls his younger days, and Thomas when he describes his present and elderly stage of life. In
in order to put forward the best examples of quality teachers being avid readers and writers themselves literature and literacy. I emphasise the importance of level of understanding, by exploring language, writing of narratives to the next, more sophisticated for ideas. I have used this backdrop to take students’ love of a clever story plot using history as a backdrop phrases.

and dependent clauses, and adverbial and adjectival sentences, complex sentences that use independent short two word impact sentences, compound different sentence structures including exclamations, and compare and there is a range of examples of ‘white limbs, reaching up to the sky’ (p. 2) and hyperbole; ‘starved of sleep’ (p. 1). Connectives are used to clarify and compare and there is a range of examples of different sentence structures including exclamations, short two word impact sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences that use independent and dependent clauses, and adverbial and adjectival phrases.

In this article I have endeavoured to reignite the love of a clever story plot using history as a backdrop for ideas. I have used this backdrop to take students’ writing of narratives to the next, more sophisticated level of understanding, by exploring language, literature and literacy. I emphasise the importance of teachers being avid readers and writers themselves in order to put forward the best examples of quality writing to students.

References

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>First or third person (ACELY 1698)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tense</td>
<td>Usually past tense, but can be present tense (dialogue) or a mixture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of language</td>
<td>Descriptive language such as adverbs, adjectives and use of similes, metaphors, hyperbole, analogy, onomatopoeia and alliteration (ACELA 1493, 1495, 508, 1512; ACELT 1611)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facts/opinions</td>
<td>Mixture of fiction with facts, including dates, proper nouns and real people (ACELA 1504; ACELY 1688, 1692, 1702)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectives</td>
<td>Time sequence (then, next, afterwards, finally, later, until, then) Cause and effect (so, consequently, for this reason, due to, because) Clarification (in other words, for instance, in particular, namely) (ACELA 1491)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence structures</td>
<td>Variety of sentence structures from short simple sentences for effect to complex sentences that start with adverbs or conjunctions – independent clauses (co-ordinate) and dependent clauses (sub-ordinate) (ACELA 1507; ACELY 1705) Use of dialogue, letters, journaling (ACELA 1492)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Common language features in historical narratives

the first two pages, French uses words that hint at the time frame and place with vocabulary like chamber pot, chimney sweeps, pull the bell, maid, ahoy and downstairs. She uses several similes; ‘gumtrees looked like old, bent men’; ‘looked like girls with long white limbs, reaching up to the sky’ (p. 2) and hyperbole; ‘starved of sleep’ (p. 1). Connectives are used to clarify and compare and there is a range of examples of different sentence structures including exclamations, short two word impact sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences that use independent and dependent clauses, and adverbial and adjectival phrases.

In this article I have endeavoured to reignite the love of a clever story plot using history as a backdrop for ideas. I have used this backdrop to take students’ writing of narratives to the next, more sophisticated level of understanding, by exploring language, literature and literacy. I emphasise the importance of teachers being avid readers and writers themselves in order to put forward the best examples of quality writing to students.

References


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