

What's the wisdom on...



Interpretations of the past

The purpose of this guide

This short guide provides new history teachers with an overview of the 'story so far' of many years of practice-based professional thinking about a particular aspect of history teaching. It draws on tried and tested approaches arising from teachers with many years of experimenting, researching, practising, writing and debating their classroom experience. It therefore synthesises core messages from key *Teaching History* articles, blogs and other publications. The guide includes a range of practical planning suggestions suitable for any key stage and signposts the basic reading essentials for new professionals.

A summary of the wisdom

How often do your pupils actually look at the products of historians – their scholarly writing, their debates, their to-and-fro of argument? And how often do they look at the products of others who interpret the past – a local mural in a railway station much prized by the local history society, a special museum exhibition or perhaps a feature film made about the past?

And how often do you teach them about how and why these products were constructed? This 'how and why' really matters, and for two reasons:

First, pupils need to understand that interpretations are always created for a reason and in a particular context. One interpreter might have been responding to another interpretation that they deemed unbalanced or not warranted in evidence. Another might have been exploring, creatively, a set of events that inspired or disturbed them.

Second, pupils need to grasp that an interpretation is always a social process. It is not a thing that sits in isolation in a four-line gobbet in an exam paper. It is always produced *in response* to something. It is part of a dialogue over time. Many interpretations are produced, in effect, by communities, not individuals – whether that is a huge, annual reconstruction of a battle, a group of historians working together on a particular question or archive, or a town deciding to put up a monument that 'says' something about their interpretation of the past.

The reasons outlined above explain why something called 'Interpretations' first appeared as a technical curriculum term,

on the very first National Curriculum for history, in 1991.

Of course, many great history teachers had always included interpretations in their curriculum. By 1991 the principles of the Schools History Project (launched in 1972) with its emphasis on historical method, were embedded in the discussions of many history teachers. But many were noticing that tackling secondary sources couldn't just be tacked on to tackling primary sources. Secondary sources require a different set of questions and a special kind of attention. Moreover, many argued in the late 1980s that lower secondary school pupils were not being introduced to enough real historical scholarship. They were being asked to think like historians without seeing and enjoying its fruits. This is like being asked to compose music without having listened to much music, or to write creatively without having read any fiction.

And so the first National Curriculum defined a new curricular entitlement called 'Interpretations'. This then gave rise to an extraordinarily rich tradition of practice, debate and research among history teachers that has continued ever since. In this guide we will refer to that tradition as Interpretations with a capital I, to make it clear that we are referring to a special entitlement for pupils, one that can easily get lost. We all have a responsibility to protect and renew that tradition if we, the history education community, are to keep refreshing our understanding of why this matters.

A key early development was the work of McAleavy, who was commissioned by the National Curriculum Council to lead a big project involving scores of history teachers in working out what this part of the curriculum meant in practice. This is why initial teacher

education programmes often require trainees and mentors to discuss the early fruits of that project, summarised in McAleavy's 1993 article in *TH* 72. It helps us to understand a key reference point in our shared professional heritage.

But history education communities, around England and Wales, quickly began to develop and refine McAleavy's principles. Here is some of the practical wisdom that developed.

1) Choose specific, real interpretations and go beyond soundbites

History teachers who experimented with teaching about interpretations of the past quickly realised that you don't get far if you just give pupils a free-floating, out-of-context judgement such as 'The Battle of the Somme was General Haig's fault' or 'Most English villages resisted the Reformation.' Someone's view or judgement, even in a fuller paragraph, if separated from the interpretation itself, won't get you anywhere near the curricular purpose of Interpretations. If pupils are to understand how and why such judgements are formed, they need to engage with real interpretations. There needs to be a clear sense of who created this interpretation, in what circumstances, and for what purpose.

It is also not enough just to briefly summarise the argument of the chosen historian or other interpreter. Pupils need to get a richer feel for the argument and the particular style of a work of scholarship or the sense of a film. Then they can learn about the context and construction of that particular interpretation. Only by getting a feel for what the actual, artefact of the interpretation really is – a work of scholarship, a film, a museum, a modern novel about the past – can we hope to interest pupils in its construction, meaning, intended effects on an audience.

What does this mean for my practice?

When you're deciding to make Interpretations a significant focus for your teaching, make sure you spend a sequence of lessons with a clear 'enquiry question' driving those lessons, so that you can take time to help pupils climb into the nature, construction and impact of that particular interpretation. This is the kind of enquiry question that would work:

Why are statues X and Y (or murals X and Y) so different?

Why do historians X, Y and Z disagree about the effects of Partition on India?

In the 1930s, what were Soviet/Japanese/British school history textbooks trying to achieve in their accounts of earlier centuries?

2) Take time to introduce pupils to real works of historical scholarship

If the ambition of using real scholarship with pupils as young as Year 7 scares you a bit, then a good tip is to choose some scholarship you can't put down. Choose something richly engaging in the way it evokes period detail and whose style is memorable. Well-known examples with which history teachers have had huge success in Year 7 include

John Hatcher's *The Black Death: an intimate history of the plague* and Eamon Duffy's *Voices of Morebath: Reformation and rebellion in an English village*. Each of these works of scholarship paints a vivid picture of village life being profoundly challenged by drastic changes. Each tells a powerful and memorable story which can be easily distilled and which can shape the narrative of a few lessons.

Each of these works is perfect for showing pupils the interpretive process at work, and for giving them a feel for the remarkable combination of rigour and imagination that historians deploy. Each sees an historian working in a context where an exceptional source record survives from the period. By carefully choosing and/or reading aloud or summarising some stories, it is possible to show pupils how Hatcher or Duffy reached their conclusions, and to fascinate pupils with the process as well as the product.

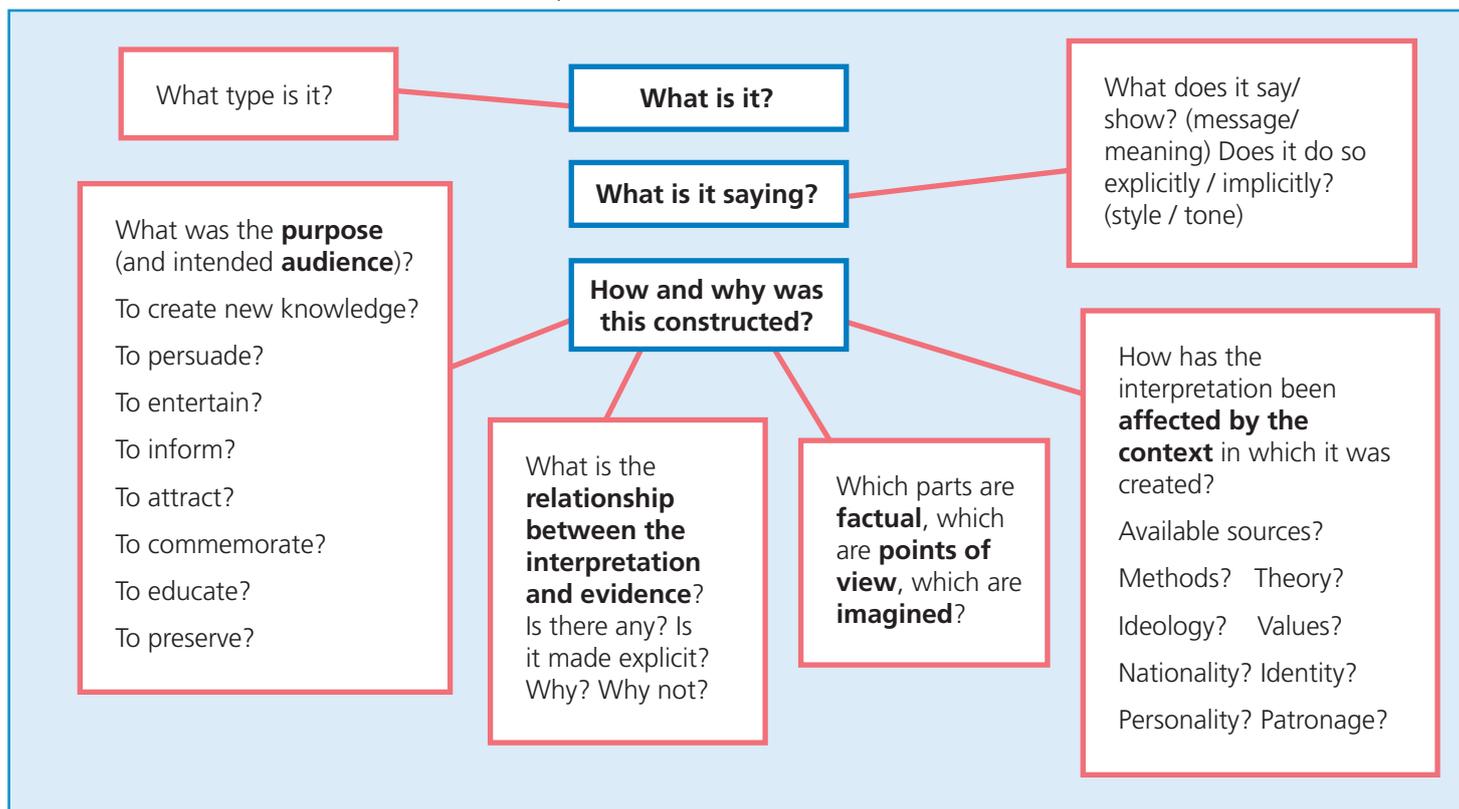
If you read a little of these two historians' work you will quickly see how they interrogate their source material and interpret it. You can then share something of the authentic process of source interpretation by an expert. And neither you nor your pupils will be bored. The windows these historians create into the past through their methodical analysis of sources is breathtaking in its detail, deeply moving and challenging of all sorts of stereotypes of the period.

What does this mean for my practice?

Here are some practical tips for success:

- Choose scholarship you know well. In order to motivate pupils to persevere with real historical scholarship, great history teachers constantly show their own love of reading it, their personal fascination with a particular work or their deep sense of responsibility about establishing the strengths and weaknesses of any historical writing. For example, you might say, 'I read this book and I couldn't put it down. It challenged my view of the whole period!'
- Choose extracts long enough to clamber into the period and into the historical process – perhaps two or three pages.
- Read them aloud. Rehearse the reading so that you read them well.
- After reading, get pupils to think about the text as an interpretation by drawing their attention to places where
 - the historian refers to the source record
 - the historian is sounding cautious, making a suggestion or being clear that he or she is drawing an inference rather than being certain
 - the historian is using imagination to handle gaps in the record
 - the historian is drawing on wider knowledge of the period to make an inference
- Ask pupils to find such places and highlight, shade in or annotate.
- Copy the extract onto a sheet with wide margins so that the pupils have space to write comments or ask their own questions.

Figure 1: A guide to shaping questions in the study of Interpretations (from the 2004 HMI conference on interpretations, Bristol)



Notice how all the above are ways of getting pupils fascinated by the period and by the whole historical process. It takes time to do this properly, so don't rush it. Better to do this infrequently and do it well. Don't do a couple of short exercises and then move on. Taking time to get close to an interpretation will pay dividends in knowledge, in sense of period, in motivation and in all future work on other interpretations of the past.

History teachers who have used Hatcher's work include Rachel Foster and Tim Jenner. You can read about how they used scholarship in Year 7 in *TH 151* and *TH 174*. Each is full of practical approaches.

3) Choose interpretations that were produced well after – or 'substantially subsequent' to – the period being interpreted

Remember, we are trying to ensure that pupils understand the processes involved in presenting the past when the past has gone, and people *who were not there* use (or fail to use) the source record to try to reconstruct, represent, analyse or narrate it. Interpreters who interrogate the source record are not eye witnesses! What they are doing has nothing to do with witness testimony! The interpreter is constituting something from traces left behind. Inevitably, that interpretative process is affected by all sorts of things *within the period of the subsequent interpreter*. These might be methods, viewpoints, sources available, a desire to challenge an existing account, and so on.

Of course, the line between primary and secondary easily blurs. What on earth should we call an account of a Roman

event written by a Roman historian just 15 years later? Rather than getting tied in knots about this, history teachers have developed a simple practical principle which McAleavy called 'subsequentness'.

What does this mean for my practice?

When first supporting younger pupils in work on Interpretations, history teachers have found it sensible to choose an interpretation that was constructed some considerable time after the period being interpreted or at least very different from the period being interpreted. Then you have a better chance of showing pupils how an interpretation is refracted through the lens of an interpreter living in another age.

In addition to historical scholarship, good examples of this working well are the following:

- **Examining popular Victorian accounts of Elizabeth I.** Many Victorian accounts of Elizabeth I were not positive! Elizabeth presented an image of femininity which ran counter to that of Victoria. Pupils with knowledge of the Victorian period can be helped to see, quite clearly, how the values or concerns of a later age can alter the way the earlier queen was viewed.
- **Examining paintings painted at least a couple of hundred years after the events being depicted.** Jane Card tells her pupils that when they are studying someone's interpretation, they are 'seeing double', meaning that they are actually viewing two periods at once. In *TH 117* Card writes about using the very melodramatic Victorian art of Paul Hippolyte Delaroche, with the enquiry question, 'Why did the Victorians choose to show Lady Jane Grey like this?'

Figure 2: History teachers' update of McAleavy's types
(from the 2004 HMI conference on interpretations, Bristol)

A selection of interpretation types commonly examined by history teachers between 1991 and 2004

Academic

- Books, journals, papers by professional historians
- Scholarly lectures
- Excavation reports

Educational

- Textbooks
- Museums and sites
- Reconstructions
- TV documentaries/news
- CDs, websites, Internet discussions, podcasts, blogs

Fictional/semi-fictional

- Novels, paintings, plays
- Films
- TV drama/comedy

Popular and/or political

- Folk wisdom/ personal reflection
- Theme parks/ souvenirs
- Paintings of earlier periods
- Monuments/ceremonies/protests
- Advertising
- Websites, magazines
- Political speeches or arguments that invoke the past in some way

- **Examining any cultural artefact where the creator is showing a phenomenon from the past in a particular way.** Saddam Hussein's regime created stamps depicting Salah ad-Din, the first sultan of Egypt and Syria who led the Muslim armies against the Crusader states in the Levant. One stamp showed Salah ad-Din next to Saddam Hussein, creating a message about the meaning of the past events in the context of the present. Hall in *TH 133* explains how she used this with her pupils.

4) Decide on your angle – don't overload pupils with everything at once

Think about many factors that can influence an interpretation or make one possible. It might be the sources used or *how* they were used. It might be the questions the interpreter asked or the hidden influences or prior works that stimulated the interpreter to ask the question in that way. For some of these factors, it may be best just to explain, crisply and engagingly, what these factors were. For others, asking pupils to engage with the possibilities can become the focus of reflection.

What does this mean for my practice?

To avoid becoming overwhelmed by all these possibilities – or risk overwhelming the pupils – use the chart in Figure 1. This adapts a set of questions originally asked by McAleavy in 1993 (*TH 72*). It was created in 2004 by a group of history teachers and HMI at a special history Ofsted conference in Bristol. It has been a reference point for history teachers ever since.

Decide which bit of the chart you want to focus on for your main enquiry question. Decide what is appropriate for the interpretations you want to study. This decision-making should happen in the context of your wider curriculum planning. In your Key Stage 3 as a whole, pupils should experience all these angles, so that they build up a rich,

balanced, problematised and comprehensive picture of how historical interpretation occurs.

Study Dan Smith's account (*TH 162*) of how he introduces his Year 8 pupils to multiple interpretations of the First World War. Which bits of the chart in Figure 1 does he choose to focus on?

5) Build a constructive, analytical approach in your pupils

A common mistake novices make, and one which history teachers made in the early days of teaching interpretations of the past, is to ask pupils just to reach a judgement about accuracy or truthfulness. Paradoxically, this doesn't help them become thoughtful about truthfulness! All too often, it just leads to crass simplifications and misses the very process of interpretation that you want them to learn about. It can even cause pupils to collapse into some of the worst kinds of distortion that used to occur with primary sources, such as writing sources off for being biased. It bypasses what the interpretation was trying to achieve, what kind of interpretation it is and how claims are reached.

What does this mean for my practice?

Avoid dry nitpicking exercises ('the stirrups in the 1970 film *Cromwell* aren't quite accurate'). Also, where dealing with fiction or entertainment, make it plain, from the outset, that it is clearly fictional and is meant to be, and avoid wasting time with obvious critiques such as, 'Dad's Army gives an inaccurate account of the Home Guard because the characters are made up'. Get beyond such points into more serious and interesting matters such as using knowledge of the 1960s to reflect on why films like *Cromwell* or a series like *Dad's Army* were made, the conditions that made such series or feature films popular and what this tells you about the 1960s.

A practical example of how to plan using a constructive, analytical approach is Norcliffe's 2004 article (*TH 116*)

on teaching Year 9 about murals in Northern Ireland as interpretations of Ireland's past. She wanted pupils to be clear that William of Orange has not always been closely associated with Protestantism. How did 'good King Billy' assume the role of a Protestant hero? Norcliffe wanted pupils to understand how an imagined past relates to Unionist ideas of place and identity. Through this, she taught pupils, using examples from both Protestant and Catholic traditions, how selective use of the past forges strong identity and a strong sense of place. In this way, the complexity and ever-changing character of such interpretations came through.

Therefore, build pupils' knowledge about the period of the interpreters. (Norcliffe ensured that her pupils were clear on the history of Ireland *after* William of Orange, and right up to the present.) Then ask them to annotate particular interpretations with reference to the later shifting experiences, viewpoints and purposes that may explain why the picture, story or argument is presented as it is.

6) Vary the range of interpretation types

Although a focus on historical scholarship is vital, it is important to remember (as will be clear from the range of above examples) that a key purpose in introducing Interpretations as a curriculum idea, in the 1991 National Curriculum, was to introduce pupils to the sheer range of interpretations.

Another way in which the 2004 HMI conference in Bristol drew together the vast range of work by history teachers since McAleavy's original work in 1993, was to update his list of interpretation types. Take a look at the list in Figure 2, so that you get a sense of the range of possibilities available to you.

Figure 2 shows how interpretation is a profoundly social process. Interpreting the past is something that human beings constantly do, in multiple associations and communities, both wittingly and unwittingly.

7) Don't confuse all this with pupils doing their own interpretations!

Of course, it is vital that pupils learn to interpret the past themselves. This is why history teachers train pupils to do this all the time and it is why almost every *other* part of the National Curriculum does require pupils to do this. When they are building a causal analysis (see What's the Wisdom on Causation *TH 175*), they are interpreting. When they are learning to do their own evidential thinking, they are interpreting. Be clear that this particular entitlement of England's National Curriculum tradition is, by contrast, about ensuring that pupils have *something else*, in addition to doing their own interpreting: the chance to study interpretations created by others.

This is why enquiry questions such as 'How bloody was Mary?' 'Does X deserve his reputation as a villain?', while perfectly good enquiry questions for other purposes, are not going to make pupils place the force of their analysis on specific interpretations by others.

In order to secure this particular curricular entitlement, enquiry questions such as these are much better:

- What is absent in X's interpretation of Y?
- What is in the forefront of historian X's interpretation of Mayan/Inca/Mali society?
- How have interpretations of Mongol society been influenced by lack of sources from the period/emphasis on Genghis Khan/absence of women?
- Why have historians X, Y and Z disagreed about the lives of seventeenth-century married women even when using the same sources?
- How far do Arab perspectives on the Crusades differ from Western accounts?
- What do films X, Y and Z suggest about changing interpretations of native American peoples?

8) Plot the way an interpretation or group of interpretations changes over time

If pupils see how interpretations or particular types of interpretation change over time, they start to understand more of the complexity of factors that can shape interpretations. The more they know about this, the better the questions that they ask. This works well in a sequence of lessons, where you can create narrative suspense from lesson to lesson: pupils become fascinated by how types of interpretation change.

What does this mean for my practice?

A six-lesson sequence that explores changing interpretations is Fullard, Wheeley and Fordham's (*TH 142*) enquiry, 'Why have interpretations of the Battle of Rorke's Drift changed over time?' This scheme of work steadily builds a narrative of British imperial decline, relating this first to two very different paintings from different parts of the nineteenth century, and then to a film made in 1964.

As with all work on interpretations, an important tip is to ensure that pupils are as knowledgeable about the interpretation itself and about the period of the interpreter as they are about the period being interpreted. This is why some history teachers sometimes choose to study the interpretation *during their teaching of the later period*. For example, you could study Shakespeare's interpretation of Julius Caesar or Richard III *while studying the late sixteenth century*, instead of during your study of the ancient Romans or the late Middle Ages.

For a quick way to learn how scholarly interpretations have shifted over time for a particular event, go to the various Polychronicons. You'll find one in every edition of *Teaching History* since *TH 112*. Each of these charts the changing scholarship for a particular event or development in the past.

Why not build a department meeting around one Polychronicon, using it to think about what scholarship the department needs to read and to unearth key gaps in your current teaching of Interpretations?