

# Best practice when engaging with the many aspects of the written word in history teaching

YOSANNE VELLA\* 

Faculty of Education, University of Malta, Malta

## THEMATIC ARTICLE

Received: January 31, 2022 • Accepted: January 19, 2023

Published online: May 8, 2023

© 2023 The Author(s)



## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical examination on the importance of writing in history teaching in schools to age groups 7–16 year old. It presents a discussion and an overview of best and meaningful practice in history teaching when using written historical sources as evidence for analyses in the classroom. It also looks at how educators can support pupils' own writing in history lessons in effective ways. The paper attempts to do this by reporting on various pedagogical research work conducted specifically on writing in history and its many facets when it comes to history learning in schools. The author offers various pedagogical recommendations based on her own as well as others' research work on the written word in history teaching. The paper looks at written sources from four different aspects. It discusses written sources as primary historical sources in themselves and how they can be made more palpable, that is more tangible and easier to use for pupils. It then looks at Secondary written sources, that is, historians' interpretation of history and how these can be presented to pupils, followed by how Primary written sources can also produce opportunity to practice the skill of detecting bias. Lastly pupils' own writing is discussed and how their writing in history can be made better.

## KEYWORDS

history, pedagogy, ages 7 to 16, written historical sources, the skill of writing, supported learning, history classrooms

\* Corresponding author. E-mail: yosanne.vella@um.edu.mt

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper the author would like to discuss the importance of writing in history teaching to age groups 7–16 year olds, from two aspects. Written historical source as evidence for pupils to analyse in their history lessons and pupils' own writing in history classrooms; and the best approaches for each in history pedagogy.

Writing is one of the principle activities of human beings. It is a symbolic representation of speech and talk; language transformed into a medium that makes it possible for human beings separated by distance and time to communicate or at least pass across a message even when a reply is not possible. Writing is extremely important in history to the extent that the definition of history itself hinges on it and distinguishes it from pre-history. History refers specifically to the time in the past when writing started in a particular society and community. The point when writing systems emerge naturally differs for differed communities and while the very first writing by humans is disputable (Clayton, 2015; Pilcher, 2003), all would be in agreement that many communities in the past started writing although at different times. Once they did we start having written records and these have always been a fountain of knowledge and information and insight in the study of the past.

## WRITTEN PRIMARY HISTORY SOURCES AND MAKING THEM MORE PALPABLE TO PUPILS

Traditionally written history sources are what academic historians have mostly worked on and in the history classroom in schools even with very young pupils written sources of all kinds should be an integral part of history pedagogy. There are two types of written sources in history which can be used with pupils; Primary written sources and Secondary written sources.

History teachers can use evidence from Primary written historical sources like for example manuscripts, documents, letters, inventories, time tables and biographies coming from the history period being studied. However, in the case of school children written sources cannot just be presented in the classroom without any teacher preparation, for they tend to be problematic to use because they present a number of challenges. Pupils definitely need good language and reading skills to be able to handle written sources and even if the pupils do possess these skills the vocabulary, language and styles of handwriting could be unfamiliar. There is little point in introducing pupils to written sources that they cannot read.

There is also the added problem that even if school children can read the source, they can find it very difficult to understand its meaning. Written history sources can have low intrinsic motivation value for they may not immediately be interesting to pupils. Therefore if written sources are to be used well in school, teachers need to prepare sources well. There are a number of strategies the history teacher needs to undertake before presenting a written source in the classroom. While artefacts as sources can transcend time written sources often need to be taken very much in context. Images and more outside information need to accompany the written source, while translated copies of the originals into the child's language must be done. The overall presentation of the written source can also be made more user-friendly to the pupils by rewriting it in bigger familiar fonts and not leaving the manuscript or document hand written or in old typing mode. A particularly helpful approach is offered by Fines and Nichol (1997) who



suggest making the reading of sources an easier task by accompanying it with a voiced rendition of the text which helps support children's reading.

However, despite all the difficulties written sources may pose, they are generally recognised as important original sources which cannot be dismissed and ignored in the history classroom. As [Fines and Nichol \(1997\)](#) say "Through reading documents and working upon them, children come face to face with people from the past in their own words. A document forces the pupil to participate at first-hand in a dialogue with the past" ([Fines & Nichol, 1997: 81](#)). Written sources have long been used in history teaching especially in the United Kingdom. Back in the early 70s, [Jamieson \(1971\)](#) quotes the authors of *Archives and Education* (HMSO, 1968) who describe the excitement and relevance of written documents:

"The original letter or document is charged with an emotion, an urgency and an immediacy, to which the later printed record can never pretend. For a child to read of the torture of Guido Fawkes is one thing; it is another to see the firm signature to his examination of November 8<sup>th</sup> and the faltering half-completed effort of November 10<sup>th</sup>, written after the execution of the king's warrant, to use 'the gentler torture first, et sic per gradus ad ima tenditur'. That Nelson really did lose an arm at Santa Cruz becomes emphatically clear when we see his right- and left-handed letters. At least for some – and probably for more than is generally imagined-the original document, letter or journal is the best door into the past." ([Jamieson, 1971: 28](#))

Indirectly written sources can also promote various other skills besides historical ones in the school, in particular they can especially help to practise language skills. This position is taken by [Blyth and Hughes \(1997\)](#) who complain that there is a tendency for the English content of the history curriculum in Britain to be taken for granted while in fact history teaching can support literacy (this is true for any language naturally not just English) especially with the younger pupils (ages 5–10):

"Children who have had good practice in using written sources throughout their primary years should be able to make an evaluative response to the text as well as make comparisons with other texts. The skills they develop are historical and linguistic." ([Blyth & Hughes, 1997: 5](#))

[Davies and Webb \(1996\)](#) summarises the quite comprehensively the objectives behind using written sources with children, when they state:

"The challenge is to find ways of introducing these sources to pupils in such a way that they have a clear understanding of both the language that is used and the context in which sources are written; that they are given real historical exercises to undertake and encouraged to begin to develop their own interpretations of sources by developing sophisticated analytical skills; and to know something about the way in which records are kept so that further investigations will be possible." ([Davies & Webb, 1996: 3](#))

By concentrating on the language the written sources are written in, it can be shown how the language itself has evolved historically and progressed as time went by. Besides gaining vocabulary acquisition and proficiency in the language itself the pupil can learn much about the history. In many countries, the language used in the written source itself may reflect a specific historical period. It can be that a written source is written in a particular form or format for very significant historical reasons.

[Blyth and Hughes \(1997\)](#) also suggest linking children's own experience of reading and writing to the source material; the sort of materials used and the history of writing and printing. This is precisely what [Vella and Caruana \(2017\)](#) tried to do, that is, create intervention by means of a history activity to improve the teaching and the presentation of the written



source to pupils and therefore eliminate or lessen the problems pupils face when trying to tackle a written source.

Vella and Caruana (2017) showed that pupils' response in school classrooms (ages 13–16) to a written source can be much improved compared to their pre-intervention answers. The intervention supported understanding of the historical text and produced better pupil learning. The breakdown of average marks before and after intervention tasks for each question and the final total average class mark before the activities, showed that pupils on average doubled their marks for the same task after the intervention activities. The aim to make the text in the question more inviting was reached, for the pupils were motivated and understood the written source better. Prior to the questions based on the source, the authors also suggest giving the pupils scaffolding tasks which help them when it comes to answering the questions individually. Tasks may vary and one example of a task, was matching a subtitle from a list provided to the pupil with its respective paragraph. The recommendations regarding presentation of written sources in history teaching offered in this research may be summed up as follows:

- a. Present students with authentic old looking paper which may be smeared with a teabag to get a brownish hue. Moreover, when dried the paper may be crumpled for it to look older. This is done for the students to be put in the picture and appreciate the source more.
- b. The font and the line spacing need to be increased for the students to read the text with more ease.
- c. Pictures and a description alongside them may also be added especially for visual learners. However, the authors suggest that teachers need to be careful not to add a lot of pictures as this may lead to the students getting distracted from the written source itself.
- d. The important parts of the text which the students need to focus on may be highlighted and put in bold. Parts of the text can also be changed to another colour to grab the students' attention more.
- e. The paragraphs may be numbered. This helps the students not to get lost and flustered while reading the text or trying to answer any of the questions.
- f. A magnifying glass may be used to scrutinise the source better, this proved to be quite motivating and exciting to the students. (Vella & Caruana, 2017: 23)

## SECONDARY WRITTEN SOURCES IN THE CLASSROOM

Teachers can use the historians' writing in history lessons as a Secondary source when using history books on the topic being taught in class. These written sources are most interestingly used when they are employed beyond a mere exercise of gathering information from a history book or a history article and focus instead on studying different interpretations. As J. Mills advises: "Historians' interpretations of substantive concepts can and should frame our curricular enquires." (Mills, 2021: 56) This was done in one learning situation when Vella (2011) presented pupils with different historians' perspectives as well as with different Primary source written evidence on medieval Maltese history. This helped the pupils to come up with different possible timelines of the same period. Similarly historians Christopher Berg and Daniel Goldhagen's history books and the different interpretations offered on the same topic by these two historians is interwoven in a very effective way into teaching activities to answer the question of 'Why did they shoot?' in a Second World War history lesson in the United Kingdom (Keystagehistory UK, 2021).



In this way pupils can be given the opportunity to see how history is not a fixed product and interpretation on the same topic can vary. Bias is an inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, it is a positive or negative opinion based or not based, on facts and knowledge. All human beings are subject to their biases and we often live and act according to these biases which have formed after years of observation of the society we live in. Historians are no different for they too are products of their own culture and society and subject to their own prejudices and values, so who is writing, when and to whom often has a direct influence on the history being written.

## INTERPRETATION USING WRITTEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

History is a highly subjective endeavour and it is not just historians who differ in their interpretations and produce Secondary sources with sometimes opposing points of view depending on the historian's bias, but Primary sources are naturally biased too. Primary written sources can also provide an excellent opportunity to practice the skill of detecting bias in a source. Primary or secondary sources are all to some extent biased, but as Sean Lang says rather than being a disadvantage this is an important and useful attribute. "Not only are all accounts, primary or secondary, subject to the bias of their authors but, far from being a fault, it is precisely that bias that gives sources their value." (See [Lang, 1993: 9](#)).

Basic facts do exist in history, there are separate forms of evidence which support these facts so that the whole fits together and a framework is built. However, for a long time historians have known that "It is only the framework of fact on which history can rest, it is not history. History to mean anything must be more than a rehearsal of facts, it must include an interpretation of facts." ([Kitson-Clark, 1967: 42](#)).

[Vella \(2020\)](#) showed that a teacher can help pupils to learn how to detect and analyse the bias within the Primary history written sources. This can be also done while investigating multiple historical sources and pupils can learn to analyse and build arguments based on evidence provided by the sources. It is after all what professional historians do, they collect and verify evidence and then interpret it in a way that is more or less acceptable to their readers and the general consensus is that history.

Detecting bias is not an easy natural skill and a teacher should not assume that if pupils are given a set of written sources they will automatically analyse them correctly and pick up on all the hidden agendas and innuendos that might be within the source. [Vella \(2020\)](#) explains that teachers should get pupils to focus on a number of aspects and offers the following recommendations on scaffolding pupils' bias analysis when faced with a written source:

1. An reminder of what is bias
2. Nouns in the text and the adjectives used in front of each noun
3. Sarcasm and ridicule in the text
4. The fonts
5. The punctuation marks
6. Finding sentences which reveal the writer's beliefs.
7. Bringing in the historical context both locally and internationally
8. Comparison with contemporary biased writing ([Vella, 2020: 111](#))



## PUPILS' OWN WRITING IN HISTORY

Another interesting pedagogical aspect of writing in history, is the activity of writing by the pupil him or herself. Essay writing (writing at length) has always been an integral part of history teaching in schools, especially for the 11 to 16 age group. It is often used as a way of assessing pupils' understanding of a particular aspect of the historical topic being studied. All experienced history teachers know that good pedagogy during the lesson will probably result in better pupil response in their answers in essay form, however, one research study wanted to find tangible empirical evidence of this actually happening (Vella & Caruana, 2015). It was also the aim of this small scale research activity to try and raise pupils' understanding in history lessons by giving the essay writing exercise more attention. Normally in most contexts after history lessons the essay is given once, corrected by the teacher and the pupils eventually receive their mark or grade. In this case the researchers wanted to create a situation where there is a more gradual development into the learning and the class activities and essay writing revisited under different forms before the final result is produced by the pupils. While at the same time firmly keeping in mind real classroom situations where time constraints are often an issue in history lessons.

The main objective of this research was to help pupils give very good essay explanations regarding two essay questions: "Why was Valletta built?" and "What were the consequences of the building of Valletta?" – two popular essay questions pupils are often made to write a long response to, in Maltese history regarding the building of Malta's capital city. The history thinking skills required to answer them are the concepts of cause and consequence. Cause and consequence are two major concepts in history and they "are arguably the most complex of the key concepts [...] They are difficult to teach because it is easy to make assumptions about the extent of your pupils' understanding of cause and consequence." (Hayden, Arthur, Hunt, & Stephen, 2008: 105).

Many debates have arisen over the concept of causation "One of the major reasons for debate here is that causation is rooted in contingency and uncertainty." (Phillips, 2002: 42) There could be many causes which eventually lead to an event. However, it is difficult to say whether event one and event two were the sole causes of the final event; or whether there was another event which was not major, as the others, but could also be seen as a cause. It can often happen that the teacher chooses certain causes over others and presents them to the class however, history pedagogical research (Counsell, 2004; Hayden et al., 2008; Phillips, 2002) suggests that it is much better to create a learning situation where pupils decide to highlight which causes and consequences are more important after careful analyses of evidence. Then they need to link them together, sort them under long-term causes/consequence and short term causes/consequence and then organize them according to their level of importance as causes of the final event. In the case of causes Calleja (2003: 35) suggests that "The learner must understand how the different causes and motives have worked together to make one event, or several events, happen." Pupils find all this quite difficult especially when it comes to linking causes together and to understand that an event happened due to multiple causes and not just one cause. Pupils also tend to believe that the last cause which precipitated the event is the most important one "events were 'inevitable'. It is almost as if, given a certain combination of causes, an event was 'bound to' happen" (Hayden et al. 2008: 106).

This simple "clean" explanation takes away the issue of doubt or uncertainty and therefore is more comfortable for students to think in this way and only a few students can actually make a



difference between the predictability of scientific causation and the unpredictable historical events which are manipulated by individuals. In this regard it is in the teacher's remit to remind students to be cynical concerning conclusions that a certain event was inevitable. By studying history we are studying events planned by human beings; hence we cannot be certain about their purpose and objectives behind each event.

If pupils are able to master the difference between the motives or hidden agendas and the real cause, then they are able to understand and work through the concepts of cause and consequence. Hayden et al. (2008: 107) argue that despite the fact that every event is 'unique', pupils should use key "words such as 'social', 'political', 'economic', 'technological' and other adjectives" to help them understand and categorize causes and consequences, always, keeping in mind that these terms may be used in diverse events.

Keeping in mind these very real difficulties when teaching cause and consequences to pupils and for these pupils to then in turn produce a meaningful history essay (Vella & Caruana, 2015) conducted tasks in the classrooms using card history activities based on Christine Counsell's work (Counsell, 2004). These card activities were in turn used to support their writing with writing frames. Pupils' two essay responses were compared. Pupils were able to remember more of what was done during the lessons and to produce better answers in their writing after participating in the activities and with a writing frame. Their writing essay done only after following a lesson with just a teacher centered Powerpoint presentation of the same topic, was poorer in comparison. Moreover, key words found in the cards of the causes and consequences were significantly used by the pupils in the essays. This implies that pupils had become familiar with the vocabulary used in the causes and consequences written cards and made use of them in their essays. Together with the writing frame this put pupils in a stronger position when it came to writing of the essays. They were now able to mention more possible causes/consequences and more importantly to support these with reasons and explanations. This is quite a good pedagogical achievement for it shows a significant move away from giving a mere short list of causes/consequences towards more categorising and reasoning of causes/consequence. The class activities helped produce better history understanding, and it is a good start towards helping students produce better and more meaningful essay answers.

Pedagogical research studies (Hammond, 2014; Kemp, 2011; King, 2015) all seem to be in agreement that in-depth narrative also has a role when it comes to improving, especially older pupils' history writing. Unfortunately, few classroom situations can afford long sessions of in-depth narrative and narrative on its own is not advisable. Interestingly, Alex Ford (2020: 54) offers a possible workable compromise. In just two history lessons allotted to the American Civil war, he created the following sequence in his lesson:

1. Convey a clear narrative of events without focussing too narrowly on short term issues.
2. Enable pupils to see tension between pro- and anti-slavery visions.
3. Focus explicitly on the nature of change over time.
4. Use a range of analytical tools to allow pupils to reframe their answer.

He did this by picking three different key groups in the history topic who held a particular vision, then he explored the changing tensions between the groups over time as a means of studying the changing likelihood of war.



## CONCLUSION

While written history sources can present challenges for use in the history classroom in schools, research shows that there are specific strategies history teachers can employ which not only make the sources more accessible but also support pupils' learning and general historical understanding. This is very encouraging and confirms that written sources applied correctly should indeed be used with school children. In the case of written sources which are Secondary sources, that is, the interpretation of a historian, their use in the classroom is priceless because they offer opportunities for pupils to practice the skill of detecting bias as well as various other critical thinking skills of analysis which help pupils with the historicity of the theme. It is evident that the right pedagogical approach with written sources produce more meaningful pupil activities. Pupils' own writing skills are an inescapable part of history teaching and learning and as explained in this paper there are various tactics a teacher can use in his or her teaching to support pupils' writing in history.

Undeniably the written word and the skill of writing itself are multifaceted in history education, and the many different aspects need careful attention and consideration in the history classroom. However, far from being a problem in history teaching, with the right approach writing is one of the pivotal fulcrums on which pupils' historical understanding rests.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof. *Yosanne Vella* is a professor at the Faculty of Education of University of Malta. Her main research interests include history teaching, written historical sources, the skill of writing, supported learning, and history classrooms. She is also a historian and has written a number of history papers and books including 'Women in Malta in the 18th Century' (2017) and 'Once upon a time in 1798, 1799, 1800' (2022).

## LITERATURE

- Blyth, J., & Hughes, P. (1997). *Using written sources in primary history*. Hodder & Stoughton.
- Calleja, G. (2003). *The teaching and learning of some historical concepts in option groups in junior lyciums*. Unpublished Masters' Dissertation, University of Malta.
- Clayton, E. (2015). *The golden tread: The story of writing*. Atlantic Books.
- Counsel, C. (2004). *Building the lesson around the text: History and Literacy*. London: Hodder Murray.
- Davies, R., & Webb, C. (1996). *Using documents*. English Heritage.
- Fines, J., & Nichol, J. (1997). *Teaching primary history*. Heinemann Educational.
- Ford, A. (2020). Changing thinking about cause: Focusing on change and continuity to refine students' causal thinking in GCSE. *Teaching history* (Vol. 178, pp. 44-54). Historical Association UK.
- Hammond, K. (2014). The knowledge that "flavours" a claim: Towards building and assessing historical knowledge on three scales. *Teaching history* (Vol. 157, pp. 18-24). Historical Association UK.



- Hayden, T., Arthur, J., Hunt, M., & Stephen, A. (2008). *Learning to teach history in the secondary school*. Routledge Falmer.
- Jamieson, A. (1971). *Practical history teaching*. London: Evans Brothers Ltd.
- Kemp, R. (2011). Thematic or sequential analysis in causal explanations? Investigating the kinds of historical understanding that year 8 and year 10 demonstrate in their efforts to construct narratives. *Teaching history* (Vol. 145, pp. 32–43). Historical Association UK.
- Keystagehistory UK. <https://www.keystagehistory.co.uk/free-samples/battalion-101-why-did-they-shoot-a-history-mystery/> [Last access November 2021].
- King, M. (2015). The role of secure knowledge in enabling Year 7 to write essays on Magna Carta. *Teaching history* 159 (pp. 18–23). Historical Association UK.
- Kitson-Clark, G. (1967). *The critical historian*. Heinemann Educational Books.
- Lang, S. (1993). What is bias? *Teaching history* (Vol. 73, pp. 9–13). Historical Association UK.
- Mills, J. (2021). One big cake: in what ways does substantive knowledge on the ‘mid-Tudor crisis’ emerge in the writing of Year 7 students? *Teaching history* 182 (pp. 56–62). Historical Association UK.
- Phillips, R. (2002). *Reflective teaching of history 11–18*. London: Continuum.
- Pilcher, H. R. (2003). Earliest handwriting found? *Nature*. April 2003. <https://www.nature.com/articles/news030428-7>.
- Vella, Y. (2011). The gradual transformation of historical situations: Understanding ‘change and continuity’ through colours and timelines. *Teaching history* (Vol. 144, pp. 16–23). Historical Association UK.
- Vella, Y. (2020). Teaching bias in history teaching; an example from Maltese history. *History Education Research Journal*, 17(1), 99–113.
- Vella, Y., & Caruana, R. (2015). Raising performance in history teaching while improving secondary students’ essay writing skills. *History Education Research Journal*, 13(1), 118–131. UCL IOE Press.
- Vella, Y., & Caruana, K. (2017). An investigation into finding effective ways of presenting a written source to students. *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research [IJHLTR]*, 15(1) Autumn/Winter 2017. Historical Association of Great Britain.

---

**Open Access.** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the CC License is provided, and changes – if any – are indicated.

