

Storytelling the past:

the role of story and storytelling in primary history

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This article will demonstrate how to engage children through storytelling and how it can be used to develop their critical understanding of the past.

Why story?

Despite their common derivation, the words 'history' and 'story' suggest very different kinds of knowledge, the former carrying overtones of detached understanding of the past, and the latter being concerned with individuals and their personal journeys. While these differences can sometimes make the relationship between story and history uncomfortable, story remains fundamental to the way that we understand the world in which we live. In history, stories can be fictional narratives set in particular periods, or can provide accounts of specific events bringing together disparate pieces of factual evidence to create a coherent whole. In either case, when we use story, we work with the way the brain most likes to organise information and create networks of connected ideas.

In classroom history, one of the most common ways of organising information is the chronological list of events (e.g. events leading to the first Moon landing), but this needs to be distinguished from story. A chronological list relates to a sequence of events whereas a story focuses on the experiences of an individual or group.

The way that story enables us to both understand others and represent ourselves is through connecting people (and their motivations), events, settings, and time – it is thus a powerful tool when teaching history. The first step in exploiting story effectively, then, is to identify who will be the focus of any narrative.

Whose story?

When choosing a pre-published story, or creating a narrative ourselves, we need to choose whose story

we are going to tell, and how, whether this is a single person or a group. We can focus on the:

- Individual (specific) – a specific historical figure, such as Mary Seacole.
- Individual (representative) – a figure, such as 'a suffragette', who can be used to embody a common experience. This could extend to an individual representing a broad category, such as 'a middle-class woman', etc.
- Group (specific) – a group which has a specific identity; e.g. the conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot.
- Group (representative) – a generalised, abstract, group, e.g. evacuees. Often, a group will simply be identified as a people or nation, so we might say, 'The Anglo-Saxons wanted to expand their lands....'

The people whose stories are most commonly told in history texts are those who have influenced the lives of others. This relates to what is referred to as 'tellability' (or 'reportability'), which is what makes us want to know more, and to invest time in reading or listening to an account. In the story of the Battle of Hastings it would be natural to concentrate on either Duke William or King Harold because of the effects that their conflict had on all of England. However, an alternative focus could be to explore the effects of the battle on an Anglo-Saxon family, whose very 'ordinariness' would make their plight more relatable. We will return to the question of tellability in the case study below.

Validity and criticality

When historical evidence is presented through story, we want the narrative to be as authentic as possible. There is, however, no escaping that the author/teller



of any historical story will have made choices between versions of events, perhaps filling in gaps in the evidence with supposition, and making presumptions about how people thought and felt. The National Curriculum expects children to learn about the rigorous use of evidence, and the role that interpretation plays. Taking a critical approach to narratives is important, then, with both the stories that children are exposed to and also the accounts that they create themselves. In order to lay bare the interpretive nature of history, a critical approach will ask questions such as:

- What is the author/storyteller's perspective here, and how reliably does their account mirror recorded events? Are there different versions available of the same event?
- How different would the story be if it were told from another character's point of view?

- Are there people who are not represented in the story, but for whom the event(s) would be significant?
- Does the story replicate, support, or challenge entrenched power relationships (to do with race, ethnicity, gender, disability, class, etc.)?
- Are there attitudes or beliefs represented that are different to those commonly held in contemporary society?

A critical approach is appropriate with all children. For example, at Key Stage 1 the Fire of London told through the eyes of Samuel Pepys raises a number of questions – How reliable was his story? What other versions are available? What might the baker's story tell us? Whose stories are missing?

To read to tell

Story reading, story writing and storytelling

The least demanding way (for the teacher) of working with story is to provide children with a written text, and to set them tasks that involve analysing it, or creating their own written responses. However, this ignores the potential for engagement that oral storytelling presents to children, both as hearers and as tellers. When the teacher tells rather than reads, they model their own ability to interpret events and communicate them coherently; when the child tells rather than writes, they can exploit non-verbal resources (such as gesture) to give events significance, and can communicate without having to worry about transcriptional elements of writing (such as punctuation).

Before going further, I need to establish what I mean by the term 'storytelling'. In a lot of schools, storytelling has become synonymous with story recitation, which is to say that teachers and children learn a fixed text and repeat it. This contrasts with my own approach to classroom storytelling which is based on how we tell stories in to each other. When storytelling you need to include the following:

- context
- character(s) and their motivations
- causal relationships between events
- chronology
- location

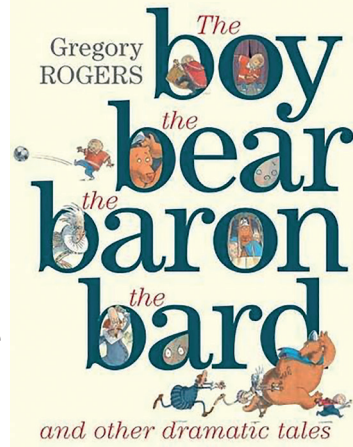
The everyday skills of recounting events are then applied to this content. While the resulting storytelling will probably resemble conversational storytelling more than a polished performance piece, it will still do the essential work of communicating a storied network of knowledge. I will provide a way of structuring such a story for classroom use in the case study below, and suggest a way of using it which involves minimal memorisation.

Embedding story in teaching and learning:

Using a picture book story as a hook for studying a historical period

Depending on the learning intention, stories and story making can take place at different points in a teaching sequence. Story can provide an initial point of interest (or 'hook'), because we are naturally drawn to hearing about the lives and cares of other human beings. Placed at the start of a teaching sequence, story can also provide context for the content that follows. Although it is not an historical account, I have used Gregory Rogers's wordless time-travel adventure picture book, *The Boy, The Bear, The Baron, The Bard*, to stimulate children's storytelling. Their

stories, historically located in Tudor London, then helped to contextualise the world of Shakespeare and the Globe Theatre, which we then went on to explore through a factual text, and a virtual tour.



Using story to connect with events, times, and places at Key Stage 1

During (or at the conclusion of) a teaching sequence, we can exploit story's ability to connect people with events, times and places to make sense of historical evidence. For instance, during a Reception class project or Living Memory at Key Stage 1 on toys, the teacher could tell a personal story about a toy from their own childhood. Children can also create their own stories to make sense of artefacts or evidence, linking them to people and events – the skills of storymaking developed in English/literacy are obviously relevant here.

Using story to connect with events, times, and places at Key Stage 2

The story of the first Anglo-Saxon kingdom

Below is my own version of the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons on English shores in the fifth century, a story that fits within the National Curriculum expectation that children in Key Stage 2 should study 'Britain's settlement by Anglo-Saxons and Scots'. While I present a print version here, in the classroom I would expect to tell this without giving the children a script.

In the mid-fifth century, the Romans departed Britain and left its Celtic tribes behind them. Known as the Britons, these tribes were organised into small kingdoms, each ruled by a local king. We do not know for certain about how they arrived. Some writers wrote of a catastrophe but many support the idea of gradual migration. However, in one version of the story we are told that there was a high king, or King of the Britons, called Vortigern, and when the Picts drove south from Scotland, invading his English lands, Vortigern looked to his family across the seas for help.

Vortigern wrote to his cousins, in what we now call Germany, asking for their aid to defeat the Picts. Vortigern's warlike Anglo-Saxon cousins, Hengist and Horsa (from the tribe of the Jutes) sailed across the Channel in three longships, landing at Ebsfleet in Kent. The first sign of the approaching Anglo-Saxons would have been the sails of their ships on the horizon. The name Hengist means 'horse' and Horsa means 'stallion', and the sail of the lead

ship was the colour of blood, and across it was emblazoned a running white horse.

Vortigern was delighted at his cousins' arrival, and even more pleased with their success in driving the Picts back to the north. In return for their help, Vortigern offered the Isle of Thanet to the Jute warriors. But Thanet is a small island in the top right-hand corner of Kent, and Hengist and Horsa did not think that the offered reward was good enough. Vortigern's happiness turned to despair as his former helpers became his enemies, demanding land which was over ten times larger than Thanet, and which extended far west into Kent. Hengist and Horsa sent a message to their Jutish homeland and invited more Anglo-Saxons to join them, telling the Jutes that the land of the Britons was excellent, but that the Britons themselves were worthless. Of course, this meant war.

Remember that Vortigern had asked his cousins for help because of their skills in warfare. So, the war was short but bloody, with the Jutes driving Vortigern's men westwards until they reached the River Medway, which cuts Kent in half, north to south. In the year 455 BC, at what is now the peaceful village of Aylesford, Vortigern's army was finally defeated, but not before Horsa had lost his life in a fight with Vortigern's son, Catergern, who was also killed. The victorious Jutes established their own kingdom of Kent with Hengist as their first king. Still grieving for his son, Vortigern fled to north Wales, where he stayed until his death, forever blamed for losing English land to the invading Anglo-Saxons.

Vortigern has become a forgotten king of English history, while memories of Hengist and Horsa live on for, if you visit Kent, you will be welcomed to the county by road signs, all of which carry a blood red shield on which is emblazoned a prancing white horse.

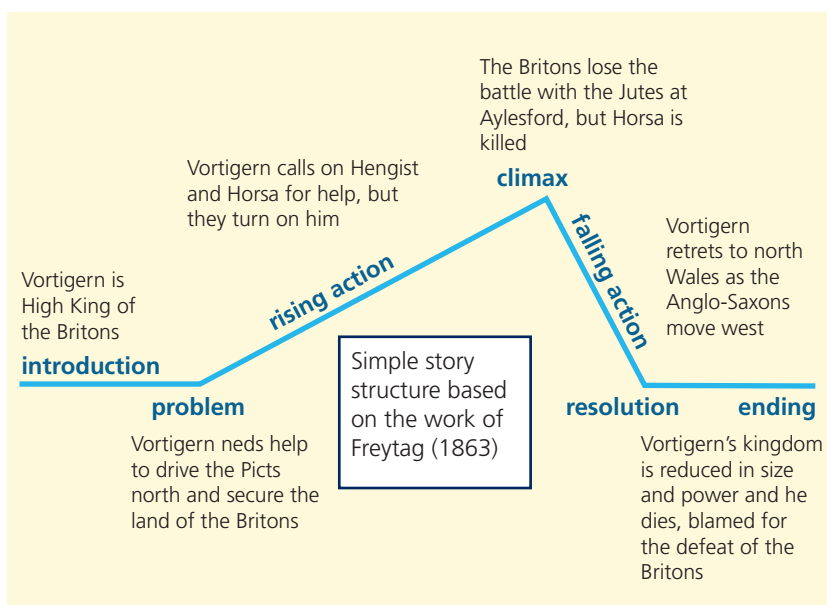
Memorising the story and telling it

As I have already indicated, I would tell (rather than read) this story, or I would ask the children to tell it if we were using the printed text in class. But if we are going to tell rather than recite the story, how do we structure the story and learn it for telling? Once again, you need to identify context, character(s) and their motivations, causal relationships between events, chronology and location. My approach is to then map these elements on a simple story structure as shown in the diagram right.

You can see how each element is included, and how a rise in the narrative thread indicates rising tension in



the story. This kind of resource can be created by the teacher in preparation for a lesson, or by the children as they prepare their own telling (or written account) – and there is no shame in teacher or child having such a memory aid in front of them as they share the story – the learning is about creating meaningful connections between ideas and events, rather than memorisation.



Exploring a critical standpoint with the children:

Both teachers and learners need to ask critical questions of accounts which they create or are given. Identifying this and building on it is part of the learning process. The following shows how you can use the story of Vortigern, Hengist and Horsa in order to develop critical standpoints with children

- *Author's perspective and reliability:*
My version of the story of Vortigern is based on summaries by Fran Allfrey and Beth Whalley, and Stuart Brookes and Sue Harrington, which draw on medieval sources such as Geoffrey of Monmouth. This is one story of how the Anglo-Saxons arrived – there are other perceptions about what happened.
- *Another character's point of view:*
Rather than Vortigern being the principal character, the story could concentrate on Hengist and Horsa, and their reasons for leaving their homeland.
- *People not represented in the story:*
All of the nameless contemporaries of Vortigern would have faced situations for which they were unprepared, and which affected their life chances. This means that there is a multitude of tellable stories that could be told. So, the effects of the Anglo-Saxons settling in Kent could be seen through the eyes of ordinary folk, who still have to feed themselves and trade.
- *Entrenched power relationships:*
Not only are there no women in the account above (although women do appear in some versions, they are not represented as independent people), but also maleness is modelled as aggressive and power-hungry. There is an opportunity, therefore, to question the text about gender roles, and assumptions about who has (or should have) power over whom.
- *Attitudes or beliefs:*
Key Stage 2 children will be aware that, globally, war is a reality for many people. A critical response to this story could consider the interpretation of events through the differences between an account of this fifth-century power struggle and media coverage of modern-day conflicts – significantly, differences in the way that the suffering of individual ordinary citizens is often visible in contemporary media compared to historical accounts.

Summary

Whether storying the past results in a polished piece of written work, a performance of oral storytelling, or the simple recounting of fragments of narrative, to use story in the classroom is to exploit the natural way in which humans organise information and understand the world. When teachers and children create their own historical accounts, they are not simply constructing chronological lists of events, but

creating narratives that hold together a range of actors that contributed to those events (including the needs or wants of a particular individual or group, and their struggles to achieve them). It is through such stories that we make sense of historical evidence, but we need to remember that any story that we either use or create should be subject to critical examination that questions not only historical accuracy, but also issues such as representation and power.

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HA Resources

Lomas, T. (2014) 'Britain's settlement by Anglo-Saxons and Scots' in *Primary History*, 68, pp. 22–29.

Lomas, T. (2015) 'The effects of Anglo-Saxon, Viking and Scots settlement in Britain' – Primary Scheme of Work, Historical Association.



Resources

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Brookes, S. and Harrington, S. (2010) *The Kingdom and People of Kent AD 400–1066: their history and archaeology*, Stroud: The History Press.

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Muijs, D. (2019) Ofsted Blog: 'Developing the education inspection framework: how we used cognitive load theory' (online). Available at: <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2019/02/13/developing-the-education-inspection-framework-how-we-used-cognitive-load-theory/>

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