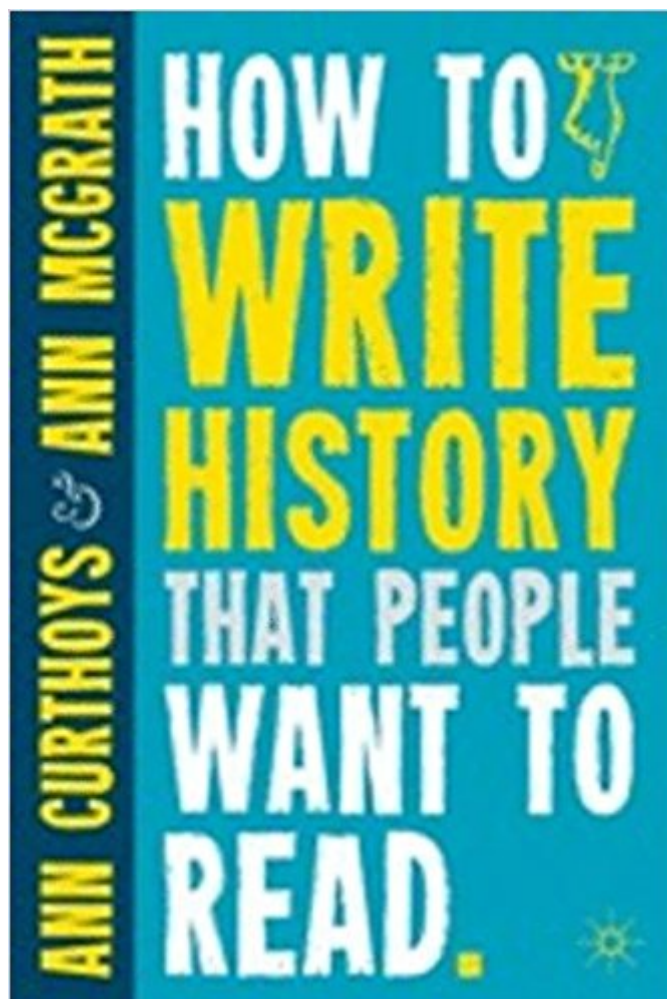


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# How To Write History That People Want To Read



## Synopsis

Drawn from decades of experience, this is a concise and highly practical guide to writing history. Aimed at all kinds of people who write history academic historians, public historians, professional historians, family historians and students of all levels the book includes a wide range of examples from many genres and styles.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'A really excellent book. It is written in a bright, informal style with some hard-and-fast rules balanced with advice, warning and very positive encouragement.' Alan Atkinson, author of *The Europeans in Australia* 'This witty little volume reveals the tricks and tips of the profession and recounts endearing anecdotes about the authors' own experiences as historians. A delightful read, this is also a seriously good advice manual. Refreshing, sensitive, thorough, here are two wise women who practise what they preach.' Philippa Levine, author of *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* 'Historians of all kinds, whether scholars, students or commercial authors, all share a wish to maximise their publics: this lively and practical primer will tell them how. Lucid, unpretentious and punchy, it is crammed with sage advice, shrewd criticism and dozens of samples of compelling history writing.' Iain McCalman, author of *Darwin's Armada*

ANN CURTHOYS <sup>^</sup> Professor of History at the University of Sydney, Australia. In addition to writing about historical theory and method, she has written about many facets of Australian history,

especially the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Her previous books include *Freedom Ride: A Freedomrider Remembers* (2002) and (with Mary Spongberg and Barbara Caine), *A Companion to Women's Historical Writing* (Palgrave, 2005). ANN MCGRATH is Professor of History at the Australian National University, Australia. She has written numerous books and articles, including 'Born in the Cattle': *Aborigines in Cattle Country* (1987) and with Pat Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake and Marian Quartly, co-authored *Creating a Nation* (1994). McGrath has won various prizes for writing and has worked as a historian on public enquiries and commissions, has made television documentaries, curated museum exhibitions and developed pod-streaming history projects.

Very much enjoyed this book, very helpful advice for anyone writing non-fiction that has a historical element, especially academics. While written by Australians, the advice is universal. I especially liked their checklist for what to be keeping an eye out for after you have written a manuscript but before you send it off to publishers or reviewers. I have bought two additional copies for friends, one a historian of economics, one a historian of psychology. And I find myself revisiting my copy of the book as I write a journal article. Excellent.

This is an excellent book. Very readable and good tips. Maybe a bit too much emphasis on the writers' own experiences. Would like to have had more examples from other historians, especially those writing for the public.

A good read on how to write history better

Helpful to anyone who wants a serious career as a scholar.

*How to Write History that People Want to Read* is one of those enjoyable, professional books that does exactly what its title promises. In this instance, Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath cover the things you should consider when writing history—from research in far flung places to dealing with criticism. They offer sensible advice on structure and style—and their own style is extremely readable. From my reading, the book started off welcoming and encouraging everyone to write history (be it a privately published family history book, a textbook or a blog), but then gradually focussed in on people in academia—namely students. I imagine history students would find it a useful guide. Twenty years ago I was a history student. These days I write steampunk instead. Steampunk

is history with a twist. It is part technological invention (steam) and part social critique (punk). So when I was reading *How to Write History that People Want to Read* I was doing so from the perspective of someone who researches history to purposely skew its retelling. There is a lot of similarity in how I construct my fictional world, and Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath's advice for historians: use the five senses, develop characters, hone your own style, and so on. But what intrigued me was their discussion of historians' moral position. Ethics in history (in anything) fascinates me. It's one of the reasons I enjoy writing fiction: the exploration of good and evil. In steampunk, the social critique can be the reason for the story. Forcing the reader to the point where they have to make a moral judgement is what powerful fiction does—even if readers express their experience of it as "I love/hate the book". This thread of critiquing the here and now by telling a story of the past is a theme throughout *How to Write History that People Want to Read*. This is historians-as-activists and it's not a role everyone's comfortable with. But being aware of why you write is a challenge all authors ought to accept. *How to Write History that People Want to Read* is an interesting way to look behind the scenes and see how your favourite history books and journal, websites and television shows come into being.

Many of us want to travel back to the past to discover, uncover and recover stories of people or places that for some reason we're drawn to. And we want to do this properly, to write what Dianne Cullen Smith calls "True stories told well." We want to respond to something that has resonated with us; and to share that response with others. A worthy ambition, and this is an excellent guide to understanding that process, and applying Curthoys and McGrath's philosophy and principles as outlined here. *How to write history that people want to read* is written in a relaxed and informal style, rich with examples and firmly based on a set of hard and fast rules at its core. Basically she invites the writer-historian to ask and truthfully answer four questions of themselves: 1. How much research is necessary? 2. When should I start writing? 3. Should I structure my work by theme or chronology? 4. How do I write a compelling narrative? Both Curthoys and McGrath are seasoned and experienced writers of the historical genres. They have made sure to include a goodly number of practical tips, exercises and general commentary on what to do and what not to do. Throughout shaded sidebars stand out as signboards, amplifying what is in the text, or provide actual quotes and miniature case studies of good practice from other established authors in this field. A well-worth investment for any writer of historical fact or fictional reconstruction.

Good historians must master the tools of the researcher, interviewer, and storyteller. A tall task to be sure, and you can have no better guide than *How to Write History that People Want to Read* by Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath, an eminently readable primer which offers practical advice on how to prepare for library visits, conduct audio and video interviews, and write a compelling narrative.

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