

Spinning Straw Into Gold: Storytelling Veracity When Evidence Is Slight

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Slides: octavia.net/vault/THQresearch.pdf

Sources of Research 1

- Received History
- Archaeological Evidence
- Artifacts
- Maps
- Language
- Site visits

Sources of Research 2

- Citizen Historians
- Experts
- Informal Experts
- Your Direct Experience
- Questions & Answers

Received history 1

- Reference books of historical accounts, both text books and contemporary to the period
- Biographies
- Books on the architecture, art, battle practices, family life, folklore, religious practices, food and agricultural development of the era
- Historical atlases and atlases of exploration

Received history 2

- Exhibition catalogues
- Postcards & posters
- Photos you and others have taken.

Archaeological evidence

- Settlement remains now housed in museums, whether removed from the site of discovery or en situ museums and historical sites.
- These can be actual archaeological sites, re-created or not, and modern recreations/re-imaginings of historic sites. Such places convey a vivid feel for detail and environment.

Artifacts

- Everyday objects which remain to us, from pottery to weaponry to jewellery to tools and everything in between
- These comprise accidental finds, grave goods, "sacrificed goods", trade goods, art, etc, now housed in museums, historical sites, and private collections. Music of the era is an artifact, as well.

Maps

- Maps, both modern and historic, showing settlements, burial grounds, now-vanished meres and forests, ancient tracks and roads, navigable waterways.
- Local historical societies oftentimes excel at the production of such maps; do not overlook them.
- Modern satellite mapping techniques are discovering more every day about long-forgotten settlements and patterns of land use.

Language

- Period literature can help convey the tone, rhythm, cadence, “lilt” and other distinctive identifiers of your era and culture.
- A little goes a long way; sometimes just one character who speaks in distinctive fashion can carry the day.

Site visits 1

- There is no substitute for actually walking the ground you write about. If at all possible do so, noting the colour and texture of the soil, and its composition - its stoniness and sandiness, clay content, etc. Visit at different times of the day – and year, if possible.
- Are you near enough to any sizable body of water to hear or smell it?

Site visits 2

- What would you have seen and smelt, given the agricultural and technological demands of your era? Pig sties near, retting ponds, tanning and parchment making going on, dairy farming with its requisite piles of manure, charcoal burning? Factories and industry? Airplanes or airships? Motor vehicles?
- The quality of light - seaside places or those situated on large bodies of water always reflect and hold light differently from places inland, and oftentimes have greater fogs and mists.

Site visits 3

- Be aware of land use changes and how climate has changed - those maps mentioned above - and remind yourself that trees and plants you see now may have been introduced after your period of concern. (The age of exploration and botanical collection and dissemination from 1500 through the 1700's introduced thousands of new species and varieties far from their sources, for example.)
- If you can't visit - understandable in recent times - try to find travelogues, whether professional or amateur, or still images online. Flickr is a good source.

Citizen Historians 1

- These are the many thousands of dedicated re-enactors around the globe, representing nearly every time period, who devote themselves to recreating the ways of the past.
- They may be connected to museums and real or recreated historical sites. They may be part of well established groups, or individual practitioners.
- Find them through The Society for Creative Anachronism; Facebook Groups; Historical Societies. Many of them make YouTube videos.

Citizen Historians 2

- Amongst their number you will find spinners, weavers, and dyers; makers of historically correct clothing, gear and equipment of all sorts such as baskets and weirs; makers and players of musical instruments, makers of jewellery or weaponry, specialists in historic fighting techniques. You will find individuals with deep experience in period baking, cheese-making, brewing, animal husbandry, and farming. Later periods are represented as well: some are experts in early machinery, steam engines, and technology.

Experts

- Historians, academics, and archaeologists are passionate about their subject matter. A sincere and respectful request for a specific piece of information will oftentimes yield a great harvest.
- Keep in mind that academics can hold widely varying viewpoints. But having one or two expert friends can be great to turn to when you are at a loss in your research. They might point you in the right direction, or even raise questions you had not considered.
- Find them at their universities and museums you see cited in the press, in books, or in exhibitions; many also have social media accounts.

Informal experts

- I have a character who became deaf as a child. This was outside my realm of experience, but I read blogs by parents of the deaf, and learnt that often they have a difficult time disciplining their deaf children compared to their hearing children, as they know there is so much their deaf child can not possibly pick up. Such insights are useful regardless of era. Attitudes may change, but human nature does not.

Your own direct experience

- Your own acquired skills. Learning how to spin with a drop spindle, play the lute, cook over an open fire, shoot a long-bow, or any activity central to your characters will be creatively nourishing and deeply enrich your ability to write of it. And you have absorbed so much in your research that you are guided to make plausible choices in your characters' lives.

What is the goal of our research?

- To present with vividness the times we write of - and to allow us to know enough to be able to make the Informed Imagining, the reasoned solution.

Questions & Answers

Thank you!

- Collect these slides from octavia.net/vault/THQresearch.pdf
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