

## **Building A level students' confidence and ability as learners:**

### **Writing and Editing A level books 1990-2015**

I was involved with three series of A level books as writer and editor – and 17 books in all. I don't know if that sounds a lot of books, but it was certainly a lot of pages – most were big books. I began with writing *The Tudor Century 1485-1603*, a hefty 424 pages published in 1993. I then edited the nine books in the *Core Text* series for John Murray/Hodder between 1998 and 2006. They varied in length between 280 and 450 pages. Finally I was given gentler tasks. I wrote, as I'd long wanted to, *The Wars of the Roses*, again for Hodder in 2012 and edited six of the other books in that *Enquiring History* series, all of 144 pages. (The full list of titles in these series is at the end of this article)

None of these books were written for individual specifications nor contained assessment guidance.

The focus of this article is how we went about helping students to learn more effectively – the nature of the books was a product of focussing on learning as well as the history itself although, given that number of pages, they certainly contain a lot of history. My key idea was that I was creating what I call 'stepping stone' books so I'll begin by explaining what I mean by that term.

### **Stepping Stone books: What was I aiming to achieve?**

I never saw my books as being 'the only book you'll need' for A level but as 'stepping-stone' books, the first stage in helping students towards a wider range of reading. I aimed to create books that immediately felt accessible to new A level students, especially less confident students for whom History was their second or third choice A level or whose GCSE results hadn't lived up to hopes – the students who might fall by the wayside if their confidence dipped to critical levels early in their course.

As a young teacher in the 70s there were very few immediately accessible books for such students – mostly we made do with large tomes (such as the intimidatingly huge, black-backed Oxford Histories) which needed a lot of mediation to help students cope with them. It was obviously important for students to use demanding books but some never made the leap to being able to use them effectively – hence my wish to create stepping-stone books that encouraged students to believe that they could use more extensive, discursive texts, that they could cope, learn and thrive with the right support. One important criterion for success was, therefore, for these books to help students towards the books and articles that would enable them to reach higher standards than they'd expected and which they would go on to use at university.

### **What were the key features of these 'stepping-stone' books?**

The most important factor in creating these books was thinking about students as learners, identifying the problems we knew they had or were likely to have with the content and designing and writing books which helped them overcome those problems. Central to this were three features - the page size of the books, the use of diagrams and the nature of the text. It also helped that these books were not restricted by being

built around a single specification. Of course, the history itself had to be up-to-date and thoroughly and clearly covered but the students as learners were the core focus of everything we did.

I'll deal with the text, the process of planning and writing, under the next heading, but first some thoughts on the first two features I've listed.

Page size – all my A level books had big open pages with plenty of white space because I wanted them to be welcoming, similar to the books students were familiar with at GCSE. In part this was a reaction against some of the 'topic' series such as the Seminar series and the early Access books which, to me, looked only marginally less intimidating than the big tomes. Yes, they were smaller but their small page size actually made them look more cramped, more dense and therefore less welcoming to the new A level student.

The other reason why I wanted big pages was that they created a wide range of design opportunities provided we avoided overly-complex designs. This allowed us to use a range of illustrative diagrams and artwork, not as 'illustrations' secondary to the main text but integrated with the text. This made the books look varied and hopefully more interesting to students – every page isn't the same, either in being full of words or having the same visual structure.

The use of diagrams – was an essential because they provide a second way of presenting information for students i.e. the same information often appears in the text and in diagrammatic form. Many diagrams had small visuals and artwork to help students understand the ideas or concepts and information more easily. None of this was based on deep reading of the science of learning. It was based on the authors' practical experiences of working with A level students. This use of diagrams is, I think, one of the reasons why the Core Text series published by JM/Hodder has been so successful for so long and a lot of the credit goes to John Hite and Chris Hinton who wrote and designed the first two books in the series (*Fascist Italy, Weimar and Nazi Germany*), setting a superb standard for the other writers to build on.

A third element contributing to the success of these books is that none were built around or limited to a single specification and nor did they contain assessment guidance. We did, of course, pay attention to the contents of specifications but we could go beyond those specifications, providing broader discussion and sometimes more historiographically up-to-date material than appeared in specifications. Importantly, this also meant we were not writing to timetables dictated by the appearance of new specifications and so had more research time and more time to rethink design or add material at proof stages. And, of course, the most lasting benefit was that a book didn't become redundant whenever a new specification was introduced.

I also think that writing about the period or topic rather than about a specification gave the authors more sense of 'ownership', that this was their interpretation of what was important about the period or topic – which is important in enhancing authors' professional satisfaction with their books. They were asked to write these books because of their excellence and experience as teachers, not because of their work as examiners.

## **The pleasures of series editing – what did it involve?**

Like any new responsibility, being series editor felt decidedly scary at first but it soon became a real pleasure – the people I worked with were a delight to get to know and the creativity we developed together was exciting. I was also surprised to discover that I had strong views as well as a clear vision of how the books should develop – I'd never previously seen myself as bossy.

I was lucky to start editing on a small-scale. I began as a replacement series editor for SHP at KS3 in the 80s, then in my own right on other SHP books in the 1980s. The NC gave me the chance to edit a larger KS3 series for OUP in 1991 and I wrote my huge Tudor A level book in the early 90s so by the time I started work on the John Murray *Core Texts* series I'd built up a good range of experience. This helped hugely with the much longer A level books which required collaboration with authors over periods of up to three years on individual books – we all needed plenty of stamina and to maintain good relationships with each other. I'd also learned to juggle multiple books and authors – not just A level books but also KS3 and GCSE books at the same time, some at planning stage, others being written, others in proofs - plus my own writing.

## **What did series editing entail?**

1. Working closely with the commissioning editor to plan the series approach and style, identify authors, chair initial meetings where authors were briefed and introduced to other authors on a series whenever possible.
2. Taking day to day responsibility for training new authors in the discipline of creating textbooks, providing model text (e.g. I wrote sample chapters of *The Wars of Roses* ahead of briefing authors), working with them on their book plans, helping them see books as a whole and not as a series of individual topics, encouraging them to think and read more widely than required by the basics of specifications.
3. Reading and commenting on sample chapters ahead of contracts, then sentence by sentence comments on chapter drafts, suggesting detailed improvements to text, pictures, diagrams and artwork. It was essential to put myself in the role of an average A level student who knew nothing about the topic so ... Could I find my way round the page? Did I understand every sentence of the text? Did I understand exactly what each question was asking? Could I distinguish the key points/arguments of the section from the supporting detail?

On occasion I rewrote text but only with authors' agreement. Sometimes this could become an extensive task. There was a tricky balance here - between being interventionist at times while respecting the writer's individuality and choices. Intervention was necessary to make a book as good as possible – and I can't have got that balance right every time.

Proofs required just as much care and focus as first drafts so this meant reading every word of each set of proofs and annotating pages suggesting improvements to text, artwork and design – and explaining to the publisher why such late changes were essential!

4. Liaising between authors and publisher, answering queries about contracts and royalties where possible and, very importantly, keeping publishers off writers' backs! There was also a pastoral role in helping authors resolve problems of work-home-writing balance and, on occasion, negotiating extension to schedules with publishers when authors needed more time because of unexpected events – over the two or three years of a book's development all kind of things could happen from childbirth to job changes to bereavements. Writers need stamina but they all need help and encouragement – and, at the very end, it was important to remind them to celebrate and not just fall in a heap!

Overall it was a great series of experiences – not at all something I expected to do but extremely rewarding and creative.

## **Planning and Writing**

This is an approximation of the guidance I gave writers whose A level books I was editing, all very much aimed at creating successful stepping-stone books.

1. Write for students, not for the academic adviser or your university tutor. This sounds obvious but it was amazing how often first time writers, no matter how experienced as teachers, forgot who their audience was in the first draft of their first chapter. I did when I started. There's something about the formality of 'writing a book' that encourages that brief forgetfulness.
2. You've been asked to write because you're an expert teacher who knows the topic well but, more importantly, understand what problems students have with the topics and have experience in helping students overcome those problems. You are writing a book but, even more fundamentally, you're teaching students through the medium of the book.
3. Try your hardest to put yourself in the shoes of students who are meeting the topic for the first time. This isn't easy when you've been teaching the topic for some years but imagining that you yourself are a novice helps enormously. This ability to imagine myself as a novice student was one of my greatest assets as a writer, even with the Wars of the Roses which I'd taught at final year degree level for 15 years – and as editor that was often my key role, to look at text as if I was an unconfident 16 year old.
4. Write as if you're talking to students – try to relax, communicate with them as students, tell them what students often struggle with. Explicitly address likely preconceptions and misconceptions – what students often get wrong. Explain that X is a difficult idea but everyone makes sense of it after a while, e.g. sympathise with them at the frequency with which Tudor noblemen changed titles as if they were deliberately trying to make life difficult for A level students in 500 years' time.
5. Don't be afraid to be audible as a voice that students can hear in your writing. Books are written by people, not by machines, and students are helped to understand the nature of history if they know books are written by people who are presenting their interpretations of the history – otherwise a textbook can sound as if it's presenting the only possible answers or interpretations.

6. Your language needs to be as precise as possible, both in text and tasks. Teachers are used to writing for their own classes but, implicitly, know they can make up for imprecisions with explanations in class. Writing for other people's classes requires a wholly different level of precision with language.

7. Treat the whole book and each chapter as a problem-solving activity – you want students to know and understand certain things so don't just plan around the content but also around the learning problems students have, the activities and information that make good introductions to the chapter topic/question and how you will conclude the chapter to underline the main takeaways.

8. You have a number of 'weapons' at your disposal – text, diagrams and charts, artwork, pictures and other types of sources, quotations from historians, a wide variety of tasks. How will you balance and integrate them in the available space? Every book needs a detailed page by page plan to avoid over-writing and ending up with a book that's 20, 50, 100 pages too long!

I planned each book on A3 sheets divided into small rectangles, one rectangle for each spread of the book – usually 64 rectangles to an A3 sheet so the book plans for the Core Text series involved 3 or 4 A3 sheets of rectangles. I had a plan for the whole book before starting so I knew in outline what content would be on each page. If I wanted chapter 1 to be two pages longer than planned I could then look to see where those two pages would come from later in the book and adapt my overall plan. That stopped the book growing beyond its intended length or, alternatively, I had a good argument for demanding more pages from the publisher!

9. Count the words you're writing so you don't over-write – it's a double waste of time writing too many words and then having to edit them out again. Sample designs show how many words fit on a page so that has to be the bible – before you start you need to know how many words fit on a full page of text, how many on a half, on a third. Be grateful you're not doing this in the days before automated word counts existed!

10. Linked inextricably to the last point - design every page so you know if your material fits the pages. You need to tell the publisher and designer exactly what you want by sending plans of pages - designers often lack classroom experience and don't understand automatically what size you want each image to be or the importance of students being able to understand the sequence of material on a page.

11. Think of the book as having a second purpose – providing CPD for teachers. There's two strands here. One is including the latest research and interpretations to help teachers stay up-to-date, the second is making judicious use of learning and teaching activities (such as decision-making activities) which give teachers ideas which help develop their own A level teaching. Ideally also explain to the students why you've included such activities so they have the chance to think explicitly about the process of how they learn.

12. In discussions with your editor (me!) personal communication (telephone then, zoom etc now) is far more effective than email. When I can hear the author's voice explaining their aims or uncertainties, I learn a lot from their tone or hesitations and can prompt ideas or, as so often, reply 'write what you've just told

me – that wasn't in your text'. Emails don't and can't have that ability to prompt creativity and effective solutions to unspoken questions.

The more you work with and talk 'live' to another person the more creative those conversations become, even when, as with my many Saturday afternoon calls with Dale Banham, we're both keeping an eye on the football scores.

Gosh, there's a lot there – and I fear there was probably more I've forgotten for the moment!

### **The role of academic advisers**

The authors I worked with had a range of experiences with academic advisers – mostly very helpful though sadly not always. The main conclusion I reached is that advisers need to be involved from the beginning of planning, when they can provide wide-ranging suggestions that can influence the shape of the book – the wider questions it's exploring, new areas of research to consider etc. They can also be made aware of the constraints of page numbers, design, schedules etc. The danger of involving an adviser at a later stage, i.e. asking them to comment on a completed text, is a response along the lines of 'I wouldn't have planned it like that. I'd have asked different questions about the period, chosen a different periodisation, included the research by x and y.' By then it's too late to be unpicking the core approach of a book.

The other point that goes hand-in-hand with this is that the advisory role works better if it's the author rather than the publisher who makes the approach to the potential adviser – this is more likely to produce a collaborative relationship between author and adviser. If the publisher makes the approach, it's possible, as happened in one case, that the adviser sees the role as 'marking the work' of the author. This is not helpful.

### **A few frustrations**

One frustration I escaped was writing an A level book for an individual specification. The development of such books at GCSE and A level is, I think, one of the most negative developments in education. Conversely, one of the great strengths (and the reason why they have continued to be used for so long) of our A level and GCSE books for SHP in the 1990s and 2000s was that they were about the history, not a single specification.

Now for two real frustrations, one very selfish one and one that turned out for the good!

1. I really would have liked the process of enquiry to be continually explicit in books to help students move towards greater independence – and it's important to stress that I'm talking about the process from questions to hypotheses to research to revising hypotheses i.e. the full process, not just the use of enquiry questions, which isn't the same thing at all.

However I lost nearly all the battles over the number of pages that we had available. The closest I got was in *The Wars of the Roses* where I was able to build the first enquiry 'Why was London full of rebels in 1450?' explicitly around the enquiry process with a full page describing the enquiry, explaining why this helps

produce more effective analysis and giving students an initial hypothesis to test. Succeeding chapters then began with tasks and initial information leading students towards creating their own initial hypothesis.

In addition I always wanted more space to discuss the value of studying history and how history is studied. In my initial plan for my Roses book I had a spread devoted to exploring the different types of books and other historical communications students encounter, from textbooks to academic articles to popular histories and hoped to have one of these spreads in each book but the idea fell by the wayside – though that original draft is available on the website and has probably reached far more people as a result!

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/DifferentTypesHistoryBooks.html>

2. The presence of the writers in their books was also something I came to feel strongly about but didn't achieve. There's a culture of authorial invisibility in textbook writing – the writers is generally no more than a name on the cover and the title page – and often invisible in the style of writing too. In contrast, for the *Enquiring History* series I originally envisaged a page in each book about the author (with a photograph!) who they were, where they studied history, where they taught, whatever they wanted to say about their connection with the topic.

This wasn't about ego! I wanted students to know that the books were written by a person, someone who was making judgments about the topic and its interpretations because I wanted students to appreciate that every book contains judgements and interpretations, the result of choices made by the writer. The writers may not have been research historians but they knew their subjects very well and had to be confident enough in their knowledge to put forward interpretations while making clear that other interpretations are possible. This understanding that books are written by people seems fundamental in students' appreciation of the status of a history book (even a textbook!) – that it isn't 'the word of truth' but full of contestable statements and uncertainties, part of the ongoing conversation amongst historians about what is valid to say about each topic.

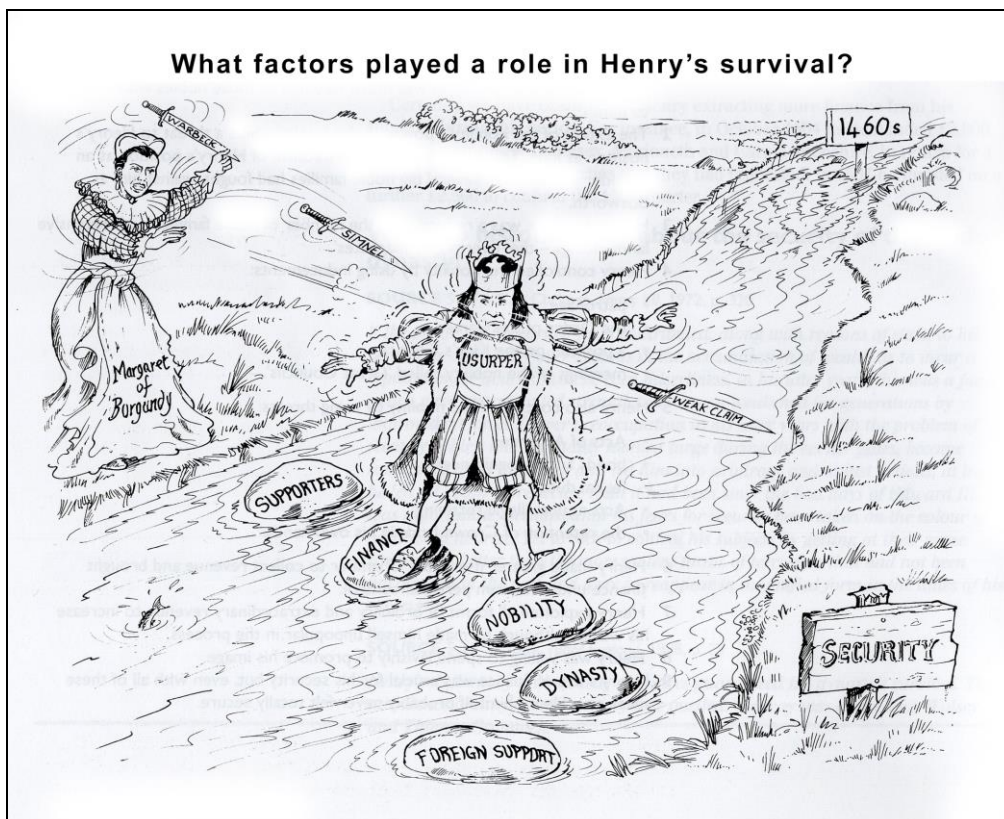
Latterly I also began to wonder if textbooks can be scholarship and not just contain quotations from scholarly books and articles? What if the author has a voice, is identified and presents their own interpretation based on their own research, their own use of sources and related to other interpretations? Is that scholarship?

3. Now for the selfish frustration! I really enjoyed writing A level books and would have liked to have written more but time and other responsibilities were against me. When we started the Core Text series in the late 1990s I was going to write the Britain 1789 to 1851 book – I'd taught that period for A level and came to really enjoy it – but writing wasn't possible alongside editing the other books, given how huge they are. Later I really wanted to write on Henry VII (yes, Henry VII, not VIII) as a follow-up to my Wars of the Roses book for *Enquiring History*. I had a book plan I was enthusiastic about but again editing and the need to put time into GCSE books got in the way. But I still have that Henry VII plan – maybe one day on ThinkingHistory??!!

4. And finally the frustration that turned out well in the end! I was really disappointed when the *Core Text* books were in black and white, not colour. Colour images would have had far more impact and would have been far more useable as sources in colour but even in the early 2000s colour publishing of such large books was too expensive. Fast forward twenty years and I'm very grateful they aren't in colour. To reprint a book in colour they have to sell far, far more copies annually than those in black and white – hence the colourful *Enquiring History* books are no longer in print but most of the *Core Text* books are still available and, at the time of writing, are not far short of series sales of 300,000 copies. So in the long run it's not been a frustration at all.

### Do these A level books have a value as CPD for teachers?

Teaching A level students is deeply enjoyable and rewarding - and just as technically demanding as teaching younger students. It's easy to think, when you start out teaching A level, that it's chiefly about 'delivering' knowledge and exam technique to students. It's certainly true that the depth of knowledge needed by teachers is intimidating, especially if it's a new topic for you, but what makes A level teaching technically demanding and, as a result, deeply fulfilling is the need to focus on how to help students learn, both about the history and about how to study history.



I've always liked this artwork created by the authors of *The Early Tudors 1485-1558* and I've included it here because it links my concept of 'stepping stone' books to the value of these books as CPD for new teachers of A level. Imagine the figure of Henry VII in the centre is an A level student trying to progress across the A level river from the beginning of Y12 (when he or she is still very much a GCSE student) to



success at the end of Y13. On the bank, instead of Margaret of Burgundy hurling knives, there's a figure representing the voice in the student's head, hurling knives saying 'self-doubt', 'this is harder than I thought' 'you didn't do well with that last essay' and other confidence under-mining thoughts. What the student needs is help – those stepping stones put in place by the teacher to provide help, guidance and confidence. What would that help consist of?

My first stepping stone is obviously books that get students off to a confident start – that's what this article has been about – and encourages them to believe that they can cope with the depth of knowledge and understanding that's needed. Other obvious stepping stones are the teacher's knowledge of the history and of how history is studied, their ability to narrate and explain clearly and to enthuse and create curiosity and their capacity to improve students' ability to tackle exam questions and coursework. However, there's other, maybe less obvious stepping stones too, ones that I tried to build into my A level books. Here are three of them, all very much about building students' confidence as learners.

**1. Developing independence as learners** – one of the most stabilising stepping stones is helping students become confident independent learners. This requires students to understand and use the enquiry process of question, begin reading, hypothesise, read and research in more detail, revise hypothesis, decide how certain their answer is etc. If you can embed this in students' practice it's a huge help in crossing that river because it greatly reduces the chance of them developing that 'I feel lost, I don't know what to do next' feeling that is so undermining - and independent learning will help them cross the tumbling torrent that is study at university too.

I've discussed this model in an article ([link below](#)) using the best example I built into my A level book on *The Wars of the Roses* – don't be put off if you don't know anything about the 15<sup>th</sup> century it's the example of how we explained and set up the learning process that's important to look at. It's one of the most important ways you can help students across that river.

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueIndependentLearning.html>

**2. Use varied teaching activities to help students develop a first layer of knowledge** - you can use the same range of activities to help A level students learn that you would use with younger students - but the purpose is not variety, it's about helping students develop that very important confidence-boosting first layer of knowledge. One of the best things I did in *The Tudor Century* way back in 1993 was include four decision-making activities as introductions to the four periods within the book. Before they'd done any reading, students faced a number of decisions to take in role as, for example, Henry VII – they had to think, discuss and make choices. That immediately gave students a first layer of knowledge of the new topic – it wasn't a complete and secure layer of knowledge but enough to help them move on to read about events with more confidence because they recognised events and people from the decision-making task. Giving students that first layer of knowledge is essential for their confidence and survival – expect them to deal with too much knowledge immediately will send some of them tumbling into the river. One of the teacher's main tasks is to judge how much to put into that first layer.

And it's not just decision-making activities that you can use for this purpose. They don't appear in the books but you can use scripted dramas, structured role-plays (which I used regularly with undergraduate history students) and many other activities – you can find an array of these activities in the link below. They're an essential tool for helping your students maintain their balance and confidence crossing the A level river!

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityKS/ActivityALevelAll.html>

**3. Use visual metaphors and recording devices** - the artwork of Henry VII crossing the stepping stones is also a reminder of the importance of using good metaphors and visual representations of events and visual recording devices such as washing lines, concept maps etc. Illustrations such as the one of Henry VII crossing the river are often worth many minutes of verbal explanation because they capture an idea in a way that's instantly comprehensible.

Using visual recording devices is just as important - setting students a washing line activity, placing events or topics on a continuum, requires them to make judgements using evidence i.e. they have to think, not 'just' acquire information and remember. The result is not just a strong visual summary of what's been studied but often creates an essay plan. Washing lines, for example, are great for summing up the issues for a 'To what extent ...' style question.

It's important to use visuals in both these ways, alongside or instead of text and as the basis for activities – just because A level students have to write words in assessment doesn't mean they can't learn via images. The illustrations provide a great way of understanding a concept, issue or topic that they can then read about with more confidence.

There's a good many examples of such visuals in the *Core text* books I've discussed (see the list at the end of the article) and I used visual recording devices in my *The Wars of the Roses* book but also in the link below (the focus is on GCSE but is just as relevant to A level)

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/attainment/index.htm>

and there are descriptions of a range of teaching techniques in this link:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityModel/index.htm>

One final thought in this section – A level books can help teaching even if they're on topics you don't teach. The visuals and teaching ideas may well be transferable to the topics you do teach so it's worth looking at a range of books, not just those on the topics you teach.

## **The End!**

Writing and editing A level books was fun – and extremely rewarding and satisfying. It was a brilliant experience helping teachers write good books and, later, hearing how much the books have been appreciated by teachers. And it was a pleasure working with so many excellent teachers. All in all, writing and editing A level books has been one of the most satisfying and creative things I've done.