# Being Historically Faithful in Public

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The catastrophe of September 11, 2001, occurred four months after I earned my PhD. I was teaching at a community college just outside Seattle. I specialized in northwestern environmental history, but as a community college instructor, I occupied the role of a generalist. Shocked by the attacks, the college community wondered how to respond and decided to convene a panel discussion. Colleagues asked if I wanted to join. I demurred. What did I have to offer? I did not study current events. I did not even study past events in foreign or military affairs or violence. My expertise lay elsewhere—in postwar wilderness politics. Then I recalled my training as an *American* historian. I knew more than most about how American government and society historically organized and responded during wartime. I joined the panel and discussed the ways powerful governments suspended civil liberties in wartime throughout U.S. history. Within the academy, I was no specialist; in that community, I was the expert. It is important to recognize these differences of audience.

Within two years, I moved to a four-year research-oriented university in Idaho. This shift required substantially more scholarly focus, hunkering into specialization and eschewing that generalist label. Still, as an employee at a public land-grant university, I felt bound to offer something, when I could, to the public good. A decade into my career there, I was invited to contribute to a statewide publication, an occasional joint effort of the state historical society and the state's three universities. The theme issue commemorated the sesquicentennial of Idaho becoming a territory. I was asked to write about the Idaho landscape of 1863—a topic comfortably within my scholarly expertise. Then, I learned the journal would be delivered to every member of the state legislature. After initially blanching—never had I envisioned or wanted state legislators as an audience—I recognized an opportunity to introduce some uncomfortable ideas to readers presumably happy with comfortable history. That different audience nudged me enough to realize others might benefit from history I knew.

I share these two stories because they constitute the origin story of how I started thinking about history outside strictly academic circles, the boundaries of which often feel carefully guarded. But also, and more important, the stories center on questions of expertise and audience, which are two of the beating hearts of historical practice. Historians might benefit from reconsidering their expertise to understand that while we are trained to know more and more about less and less (as the cliché goes), we are vastly overeducated about basic historical matters compared to the public (or our elected representatives). At the annual Pacific Northwest History Conference, a session might include four experts about the Isaac Stevens treaties, but at the local public library's evening programming, almost no one knows who Stevens was. But the people at the library are interested, and historians can tell them more. As we do that, we must remember our listeners are comparatively uninformed, not unintelligent or uninterested. With public voices, we can offer something of use and value.

Historical practices must be adapted to a public audience, but not all of them. Historians must keep many practices steadfast. Historians seeking to communicate primarily to nonhistorians must still commit to verifiable information and transparent reasoning. They may not withhold information that would change the meaning of their work. They must use language clearly and not impose current frames of reference on past historical actors.[1] Today, few historians believe objective, universal, timeless truths are obtainable. Still, our practices must be objective in the sense of making our methods open and assumptions available to our audience.

This article is not intended to provide a practical how-to guide (e.g., how to pitch an idea, how to write a 1,000-word story for a newspaper or magazine, or how to land a trade press book contract). Those guides already exist and are valuable and worth finding.[2] Instead, I aim to raise some considerations at a different level, drawn from my own experience and observations. These things were not always clear to me when I began reaching beyond academia's halls.

Public-facing work contains potential pitfalls and is yet one more thing to do for historians already slammed with work. But for those so inclined and in the position to share, benefits accrue.

Ultimately, communicating history to the public is a way to embrace your own expertise and feel empowered to share it. This is one key idea: historians' expertise as related to a public audience is distinct from their expertise compared to other historians. Recognizing that and adapting one's voice appropriately is a key to success. How each historian navigates that will be partly a personal decision, but it ought to be rooted in being clear about our audiences and adhering to historical practices. When we stray from historical practices, we do work other than history and find ourselves on unsteady ground. What follows are some ideas about experiences related to these matters.

Elite decision makers have long considered history useful. The search for a usable past also periodically sparks new subfields, and having some guidelines can be useful. In 1993, William Cronon published "The Uses of Environmental History," originally his presidential address to the American Society for Environmental History.[3] It appeared a decade after his landmark *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England,* which joined a spate of other founding books in the field.[4] After a fruitful start, it was time to assess the new field's contribution.

In his evaluation, Cronon not only suggests some lessons environmental historians had learned about the past, but he also describes a frame of mind that is still helpful when considering historical work. Cronon considers the field's audiences and utility. Like many subfields that originated in the ferment of 1960s social change, environmental history sought usefulness. "Simply put," he writes, representing many environmental historians, "we are trying to write histories that speak as much for the earth and the rest of creation as they do for the human past."[5] This can be tricky. "The competing needs of our different audiences can either tempt us to become so narrowly academic that we forget what it means to be useful or encourage us to become so pragmatic, polemical, or present-minded that we forget what it means to do good history."[6]

These competing needs can also be a dilemma for any scholar seeking to publish beyond academia's walls and university library shelves, too. No matter how much history they use, polemicists are not historians; their purposes are at odds. So, if we are to speak to nonhistorians, we must exercise deliberate care about our historical practices lest we become pundits rather than remain scholars. There are ways to maintain our allegiance to history and be useful to nonhistorians. Cronon listed and explained four "habits of thought" he thought environmental historians shared, "articles of faith" that environmental historians specifically had cultivated.[7]

- All human history has a natural context.
- Neither nature nor culture is static.
- All environmental knowledge is culturally constructed and historically contingent—including our own.
- Historical wisdom usually comes in the form of parables, not policy recommendations or certainties.[8]

These "articles of faith" are self-explanatory in the context of environmental history, but what makes them interesting is how Cronon explicitly ties usefulness to faithfulness to the discipline. These "habits of thought" are rooted in *history,* not environmentalism (or any other type of activism).

Cronon's suggestions, with slight tweaking, provide evocative ways to think about what historians—all historians, not only environmental historians—offer. These principles might be guidelines for going public or even prompts to help us consider how to do so.

*All people and events develop within a historical context.* No historian can deny this, but you will be hard-pressed to find many journalists or policymakers or uncles and aunts leading with it in their storytelling, analyses of national or local politics, or explanations for why the world is the way it is. Obviously, historians understand the world as a product of history, meaning a product of choices and trends with both deep roots and sometimes fast-acting changes. As hard as it may be for a historian to accept, many other people do not see the world this way! At least not without prompting and guidance. We do not need to evangelize and turn everyone into historians, but we can work to illuminate how history explains some part of the world. Starting with context is helpful. Share it. Explain it. Every subfield has developed its own specialized contexts. Regional historians can bring not only the environmental context that Cronon cares about but also contexts of labor or sexuality or race or combinations of them all. Their scholars' insights illuminate public understanding of where, and when, we live.

*The world changes constantly.* Two elements are embedded in this truism. One is that history is not a study in constancy but in change. "Great men" did not act in a vacuum and in unchanging ways to create the world, whether in the 15th or 19th or 21st century. When commentators use terms like *always* or *never*—"People have *always* been this way" or "We have *never* seen anything like this"—historians can offer precedents to temper the absolutist thinking too common in casual punditry. Our expertise can be deployed for an audience open to being informed. We can show, for instance, that Idaho elected (multiple times) liberal politicians such as Gracie Pfost, Frank Church, and Cecil Andrus, belying the idea that "Idaho has *always* been conservative."

The other element is that changes interact. In particular, Cronon points to the ways human actions shape nature and natural changes affect humans, an essential reminder that causation is not one-sided but multifaceted and itera-

tive. We can point out that historical context is a mishmash of people and ideas and material forces bouncing off and affecting one another, with every change producing the conditions for additional changes. We can show how suppressing wildfire did not end burning but transformed forests and turned them into ever more likely tinderboxes. Like ecologists, we study change that can lead into unexpected and unintended directions, continually ricocheting into new historical directions.

*What we know depends on who we are and when we live, which is true for people in the past as well as for us.* Much of the impact of this idea will sit quietly in the back of our minds as we consider how bound we are to our historical moment and to the cultural moorings that hold us in place. This self-awareness helps us not speak with unwarranted authority. We can also use it to remind our audiences that, as the famous quip says, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."[9] Casual students of history may encounter the past and imagine what they would do or think if they lived in another time or place.[10] This is a mistake if they impose their thinking on the past, for their time and culture condition them. Historians are well positioned to explain this point. Historical thinking, as the history education specialist Sam Wineburg puts it, is an "unnatural act." Thinking seriously about history generates empathy and humility. Wineburg considers history superior at this.

> Mature historical knowing teaches us . . . to go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we have been born. . . . Of the subjects in the secular curriculum, it is the best at teaching those virtues once reserved for theology—humility in the face of our limited ability to know, and awe in the face of the expanse of human history.[11]

If this is true, it requires historians to remind public audiences to temper their commendations and condemnations, as well as their certainties. We can model it with our own pronouncements, as clear and well-defined as possible, doing what we can to maintain standards of evidence.

Cronon's final point needs no adjustment, since it does not point to a specifically environmental history conclusion: *Historical wisdom usually comes in the form of parables, not policy recommendations or certainties.* Rarely do I give a public lecture when I am not asked about the future, something for which I have little useful education—and no access to evidence. My last book examined the history of public lands, and when I talk about it, audiences usually want to know about the system's future. As inevitable as the question is, I never want it and typically redirect it. I cannot know what the National Park Service or Forest Service *will* do, but I can point to consequences when it *has done* something, like excluded people from protected areas or the management process or not paid attention to biologists. When I sat with colleagues at that 9/11 panel, I did not *predict* the Patriot Act; I merely related that in past wars, governments overrode civil liberties. When asked to predict or advise, summon humility and restraint. It can be tempting to share our thoughts when we have a public voice, but if we are speaking *as historians*, our expertise is necessarily constrained. We are more powerful as storytellers than as policy prescribers anyhow.

These ideas, adapted from Cronon, keep our role as historians front and center. They remind us of historians' habits of mind to keep us grounded. Our credibility depends on it; once spent, that is hard to regain. Nevertheless, keeping our training and commitment to history can sometimes create friction when writing for nonhistorians. Historians moving to communicate with the public must be aware of some of the differences and potential tensions. Consider significance.

*So what?* This is the question we must answer, from the first-year undergraduate finishing a term paper to the emeritus professor working on a tenth scholarly book to the freelance historian pitching a historical angle on a contemporary issue for the local newspaper. It remains a hard question to answer, in part because it can always be asked one more time. And sometimes, we want to just enjoy the past without wanting to subordinate a story to significance. After all, we study history because it fascinates and pleases us. That may be sufficient in selecting a reading list for vacation, but to become a scholar and to engage in public discussions of history, we must weigh significance and deploy it expertly. But that can be a complicated maneuver.

For academic history, significance focuses on other scholars and their arguments. To merit publication, a study must do something new and important. It must ask questions other historians have ignored, or mine archives historians have neglected, or reconsider assumptions previous historians made. Doing these things might produce a new way to understand some segment of the past. When trying to persuade a professor, a graduate committee, a university press, or a tenure committee, historians lean on their "contribution to the literature." Bit by bit, knowledge builds, and history becomes stronger because of the careful attention paid to making significant additions to existing knowledge.

This approach is not, mainly, how the general public sees history. This is also not how editors outside academic presses typically address significance. To be clear, the public wants history to matter, and editors demand attention to significance. But the parties think of the *so what* question differently. This is because the public's interest in the past is not conditioned by scholarly frameworks or theoretical or methodological interventions. Its interest could be rooted in many different reasons, but

advancing the field of history is unlikely to be high on the list. So, while scholars carve nuances into the past and chip away at previous arguments, most nonspecialists are unlikely to read widely enough on narrow subjects to benefit from the sort of subtle interpretations that scholars construct their careers on.

In history everywhere but academia, *significance* carries a different purpose—and sometimes, it can feel at cross-purposes to historical training. Of course, some public audiences might feel inherent interest in the past, but most will need some sort of reason. So the significance often centers on *why now?* That is, why do the dynamics of the Corps of Discovery at Fort Clatsop more than two centuries ago matter in the 21st century? How do strikes in the 1930s inform labor protests in the 2020s? The audience's concern most often is not the scholarship of past generations or a contemporary rival theory, but why members should care *today.* (This can be quite literal: "Why should I spend my next five minutes reading this?")

Fortunately, editors will help, and their journalism training will insist on it. But sometimes, this chafes against Cronon's fourth statement: Prescriptions and predictions might sell better than parables.

The incentives or motivations for public writing differ. Editors in nonacademic publishing want a strong grounding in scholarship (but worn lightly in the prose), but because most of them are not trained in history, they focus elsewhere. Will people read this bit of history? But in answering that question, editors weigh not dazzling scholarly intervention so much as insightful relevance. Often, this is called a news peg. Why do readers need to know about this history *now?* Reasons could be endless and are often obvious. The reasons to revisit Seattle's history of exclusive real estate covenants or violence against nonwhite communities have asserted themselves prominently in recent years. But less direct reasons often exist, too, and historians can benefit from reflecting on why our research could inform today's public. Just as we have to justify the significance of our work within the context of existing scholarly traditions, thinking through why something matters now engages our ability to place our work into other contexts and conversations. It exercises our minds and stretches scholarly muscles toward a broader usefulness. At a time when higher education faces criticism, it forces us out of that proverbial ivory tower to think about historical implications of our subject and its public interest. Any contrived relevance will become clear in the public light of day, so our thinking must be precise.

General editors help with this work with their questions, just as a good scholarly editor will. However, there are differences in how these editors work, and not just in the types of significance they attend to. In my experience with scholarly publishing, attention to my prose has been relatively slight. Instead, the focus is on how to frame and deploy the innovative scholarly argument most effectively across a monograph or extensive article. It is a valuable relationship. But rarely have editors pressed me on word usage or sentence structure or changed such things.

When writing for public-facing venues, however, the case has been different. Every angle gets attention—every word, phrase, sentence. Part of this is a function of length. It is easier to consider every word, multiple times, in a 1,000-word essay than it is to do the same with a 10,000-word article, much less a 100,000-word monograph. Frequently, working with wonderful and patient editors, a third draft might be returned with comments or changes still in nearly every sentence. This takes some getting used to if you are accustomed to benign neglect in matters of style.

This suggests something fundamental: historians might benefit from tending their writing more deliberately. Compared with other disciplines, history provides prose that relies less on specialized language, and our methods are quite understandable to a wide audience. Our path to good, accessible language is shorter than others'. Still, besides the academic focus on scholarly significance, most historians writing for broader audiences can benefit from rewriting. Credit sources but do not marinate in them. Shorten paragraphs and sentences. Be crisp. Be vivid. Be brief. Have fun with it. (Perhaps, this goes for *all* historical writing.)

Note that there is no admonishment to "dumb it down." Public audiences are incisive and inquisitive. Frame history in ways useful to the public and in ways that are consistent with historical practices. This is the lodestar. You are writing for your neighbors in La Grande and Pocatello, not students in a seminar room. If you believe historical knowledge matters—and surely historians can agree on that—present it so that it matters to the uninitiated. There are several options and opportunities to do so.

The public sphere for historians has grown, and western historians may have special roles to play serving the public. In a recent book chapter, "Taking a Public Turn: Public History as Public Service in the American West," Leisl Carr Childers reflects on the varieties of public history.[12] In what she calls a "public turn," she categorizes three ways historians can interact in the public sphere: as a public intellectual, as a public historian, and as an applied historian. In her schema, a *public intellectual* rooted in history is one who offers context, expertise, and critical voices to general public debates; the *public historian* is one who deploys historical methodologies out-

side academia and works with nonhistorians to produce history for the public, which furnishes a public service; and *applied historians* are those who orient history toward practical aims to help solve problems in the present, especially with policymakers. Opportunities abound, Carr Childers suggests; just choose your path, or paths, toward public service armed with rigorous history.

By the end of the chapter, Carr Childers defines this "public turn." Rather than distinguish those different strands of historical public service, she stitches them together.

> The public turn is doing public-facing history in the public sphere as a public service in ways that transcend the various definitions of public history and how academics operate. Producing history in public as a public intellectual can stimulate engaging and necessary conversations about difficult current events. Public historians largely interpret the past in ways that are designed to reach broader public audiences to shape the discourse about them. Applied history shapes frameworks of thought for public officials who have to grapple with these events. The core relationship between all three endeavors is centered on *skilled expertise grounded in historical methodology, which always requires deep historical research and interpretation and an absolute commitment to the integrity of that process*.[13]

This framework offers historians interested in reaching public audiences a useful way to think about their work. By rooting it in firm historical practice, the author can assure that the work will be high quality. The journalists or local politicians who dabble in history but do so without a grounding in methods and fidelity to our practices make a historian cringe, as they cherry-pick anecdotes and call it evidence rather than immerse themselves in the source material. Going public is *not* about forgetting or dismissing the value of sound historical research. It is about rethinking the needs of the audiences.

Importantly, Carr Childers continues with a warning. Although the public turn aims to put history to "use in the wider world," challenges exist. "Engagement in the public sphere," she writes, "means risking criticism, overcoming the belief that history has a limited utility, and enduring the accusation that it is biased and dishonest if it is done for pay."[14] None of these is light, and some are rooted in psychology as much as history. I would add a corollary. Invariably, when drafting an article meant more for my neighbors than for the lecture hall, my academic peers' voices chatter in my head. "It's more complicated than that," they say. "What about these four recent studies and the subtle way they intersect and contradict each other?" they pose to me. Doubts mount in ways related to Carr Childers's warnings. *Maybe history cannot be pursued publicly in a sufficiently complex way. Maybe I am oversimplifying beyond usefulness.* And worst: *Maybe my academic colleagues will laugh at me for this short account or think I sold out.* Learning to recognize and then ignore those voices has become a necessary step in my process. I make my way through when I remember I am not writing for historians who have read the same things I have but for people who have never cracked open a single issue of *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* or have never heard the term *postcolonialism.*

To be certain, debating finer points of historical interpretation with peers is valuable. The conversation is easy with a common language, shared knowledge base, and widely accepted disciplinary norms. It is what makes academic conferences vibrant intellectual spaces and pages in journals like this one stimulating to read. Those fine distinctions—and sometimes the pitched battles between interpretations—advance the field. For many of us, they are what excited us most when we entered the profession. Yet even our biggest conferences and best journals reach a small audience. Directing our history only to this group is a missed opportunity, and it reinforces some of the worst stereotypes about academics not being of the "real world." So many others are interested in history and more still can benefit from its lessons. They come without our particular training and common set of knowledge. We owe it to that audience to reach out and meet them where they are. But we also owe it to our profession to be faithful to our practices. If we are not, then we may write about the past but as something other than as historians.

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1. There is debate about presentism among historians that most recently broke out when the American Historical Association president warned about reading the past through today's lens and focusing *too* much on recent history. My point is somewhat different. Instead of prohibiting using today's standards of social justice to probe the past, what I am emphasizing is that we cannot impose today's worldviews onto the minds of past actors. The coverage of the presentism debate was wide. The initial argument was presented in James H. Sweet, "Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present," *Perspectives,* Aug. 17, 2022, https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/september-2022/is-history-history-

identity-politics-and-teleologies-of-the-present. Coverage was in the *Chronicle of Higher Education, Washington Post, New York Times,* and, above all, social media.

2. Such guides seem to be more common for scientists. See, for example, Nancy Baron, *Escape from the Ivory Tower: A Guide to Making Your Science Matter* (Washington, D.C., 2010). *How to Write History That People Want to Read* includes good general craft advice for historians, much of which can be applied to reaching that elusive broad, public audience. But even it includes only a few pages directly connected to the question of trade books and a few more for scripts, magazines and newspapers, and other nonacademic audiences. Ann Curthoys and Ann McGrath, *How to Write History That People Want to Read* (New York, 2011), chap. 2.
3. William Cronon, "The Uses of Environmental History," *Environmental History Review,* Vol. 17, no. 3 (1993), 1-22.
4. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983).
5. Cronon, "Uses of Environmental History," 7.
6. Ibid., 7.
7. Ibid., 12 (1st qtn.), 13 (last qtn.).
8. Ibid., 12-18.
9. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York, 1953), 1.
10. San Wineburg describes a student doing just this in his classic essay "Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts," which appears in his book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2001), 7-12.
11. Ibid., 23.
12. Leisl Carr Childers, "Taking a Public Turn: Public History as Public Service in the American West," in *Western Lands, Western Voices: Essays on Public History in the American West*, ed. Gregory E. Smoak (Salt Lake City, Utah, 2021), 23-40.
13. Carr Childers, 39. Emphasis added.
14. Ibid. 39.


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