

# Enabling Students to Read Historical Images: The Value of the Three-Level Guide for Historical Inquiry

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STUDENTS OF HISTORY are expected to be able to interpret visual images as a source of primary evidence for historical inquiry, yet history teachers may not always place sufficient emphasis on pedagogies that consistently and specifically target the skills of visual interpretation. Developing understanding of visual evidence is sometimes left to chance, perhaps backed by the argument that students live in a visual age and therefore have an innate ability to interpret visual culture successfully. This article discusses research conducted into my own teaching practice. I have found that the use of the Three-Level Guide provides valuable assistance in developing student understanding of historical images. Furthermore, because the Three-Level Guide is a method that enables close analysis of images, while simultaneously contextualising important historical information, it is an ideal tool for in-depth interpretation. The tool works by developing critical thinking and discussion about ideas and issues raised in the Guide's statements, and it was shown that this process develops an awareness of the significance of visual clues and facilitates debate on a variety of interpretations.

In New Zealand secondary schools, History is an optional, but popular, subject in the three years of senior school and there is a nationwide examination for each year level devoted specifically to the interpretation of



**Figure 1:** The Double Deliverance 1588:1605, engraving by Samuël Ward, 1621.

sources.<sup>1</sup> Students have to be able to interpret a range of primary sources, including visual media such as photographs, paintings, or prints. In the examinations, students address questions on the ideas, views, and relationships indicated in the sources and on the usefulness and reliability of the sources as historical evidence. However, gleaning meaning from images that they have not been confronted with before can be a challenging task for students. Interpretation requires students to synthesise their understanding of what they see before them with their knowledge of historical events and ideas.

To evaluate student views on the effectiveness of using the Three-Level Guide strategy for interpreting images, students were asked to complete a questionnaire answering questions prior to and following the use of a specific visual example, *The Double Deliverance*, an engraving designed by Samuël Ward in 1621 (see Figure 1). Thirty-three students were surveyed. Twenty-three respondents derived from the University of Auckland's graduate teacher education programme and were training to become secondary school history teachers, while the remaining respondents were a class of 17 to 18 year old students from a mid-decile secondary school in New Zealand.

How would you rate your ability to interpret images from this period? (*Put an x on the following line*)

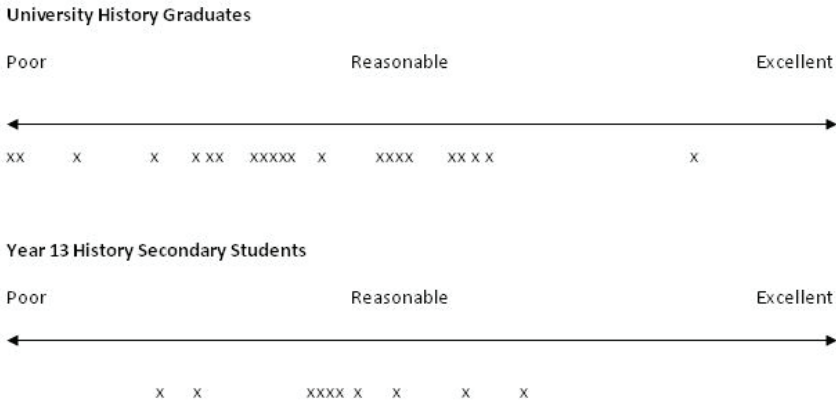


Figure 2: Collated Results from Questionnaire on The Double Deliverance 1588:1605.

When asked “How would you rate your ability to interpret visual images from the early modern period of English history?” most respondents considered themselves within the range of “Reasonable” in their ability with visual sources (see Figure 2). There was a greater spread of perceived abilities among of the Teaching Diploma students, with one considering him/herself close to “Excellent” and two rating themselves as “Poor.” This suggests that most students do not feel particularly confident in interpreting pictorial evidence, even when they have completed tertiary degrees in History.

Therefore, consideration has to be given to methodologies that enhance the mental operations students use to interpret images and address the difficulties students may experience in aligning visual readings with contextual knowledge. This was the rationale behind the research study that inquired into whether the Three-Level Guide was valuable for an in-class activity-based focus on a specific image. The Guide was found to enable students to better understand complex images because the experience and knowledge of the teacher served to assist students through the interpretation process.

### History of Three-Level Guides

Three-Level Guides were developed by Harold Herber in 1978 as a means of improving students’ comprehension of text.<sup>2</sup> As a strategy for

use with text, it has received considerable recognition and has been widely used over many years. For text, the three levels were used to differentiate between simple comprehension of what is stated in a text (Level 1), interpretation of text (Level 2), and consideration of ideas beyond the text (Level 3). However, it is a strategy that deserves to be considered for use in interpreting visual media. Based on my research study, the strategy is highly effective in the visual teaching context and exhibits similar benefits to its text-based use. It encourages a close reading of images, encourages debate on finer points of interpretation, and leads to consideration of broader underlying ideas.

From the late 1980s, a number of New Zealand schools developed Language Across the Curriculum (LAC) policies<sup>3</sup> that aimed to improve students' literacy and comprehension skills across disciplines.<sup>4</sup> The Three-Level Guide was one of the strategies used by some schools in their Language Across the Curriculum programmes. In researching the effectiveness of a range of reading strategies, Alvermann and Swafford (1989) examined methodology textbooks to find what kinds of strategies textbook authors recommended. Of fifty-four strategies, the Three-Level Guide was among the fourteen most-recommended comprehension strategies and one of the "seven receiving the most research attention."<sup>5</sup>

Nearly twenty years ago, I modified the strategy for use in the teaching of images as primary sources for History and for teaching art works for the subject of Art History. In my teaching practice, I have found that students demonstrate that images interpreted using a Three-Level Guide remain memorable well after they have been learned. Furthermore, the process of debating which statements are accurate appears to improve understanding and imbed contextual knowledge. Students are motivated to engage in a learning activity that involves students ticking statements and arguing their viewpoint on the accuracy of statements. Because students do not have to develop the statements themselves, they are not hindered by variable competency with language and can concentrate on looking and interpreting. Students, such as second language learners who can sometimes be impeded by poor written skills, are able to participate well in this discussion-orientated approach.

### **The Three-Level Guide Method**

A Three-Level Guide takes the form of a series of statements, written by the teacher. The statements are divided into three levels, which develop in terms of their degree of interpretation, from Level 1, which is a straightforward reading of what can be seen in the visual; to Level 2, which is an interpretation of the meaning of the visual imagery; to Level 3,

which evaluates the ideas underlying the visual. Level 3 can also be used to give consideration to what the maker (artist, photographer, engraver, etc.) intended in their work. Students tick the correct statements after analysing the visual evidence and they are expected to carefully consider their decisions since a discussion process follows where they have to justify their decisions.

The teacher uses not only their own researched knowledge to determine the information that is included in the statements, but also their estimation of how much is likely to be noticed and understood about the visual initially by students. Teaching of context and content alongside interpretation can be largely controlled by the teacher since, in writing the statements, the teacher can provide contextual information or historical and visual detail that he/she believes is important for students to know and understand. Through statements that identify particular features of the image, the teacher can also lead students in a treasure hunt to find objects, symbols, actions, or relationships that are of significance in the interpretation of the particular image.

The reading of the image is reinforced by a three-step approach to reporting responses to each statement.

### **Step 1**

Each student individually analyses the visual and ticks the statements they believe to be accurate. Only ticks are used—not crosses—since some statements may be written to be partially correct and partially incorrect.

### **Step 2**

The students pair up and compare their answers. Where they differ, they have to justify their decision, or agree to alter it if they are convinced by their partner's arguments.

### **Step 3**

The students form into groups of four and compare their answers. Where they differ, they have to justify their decisions, or agree to alter their decisions if convinced by the group's arguments.

An alternative (or additional part) to Step 3 is to discuss students' decisions as a class. This provides the opportunity for the teacher to hear student views and to expand upon and clarify understandings.

## **Designing Three-Level Guides**

An effective process for writing the statements for the Guide begins with determining the key learning outcomes that are critical for students

to understand, such as a dominant message in the visual or important contextual knowledge. Secondly, identify important visual clues that students should recognise and interpret—for example, symbols or objects that may be relevant to both the image under study and other images from the period. Next, begin writing the Three-Level Guide by recording statements that highlight important visual clues and significant ideas under headings for each level, i.e., Levels 1, 2, and 3. Review the statements and adjust them to make them accurate, partially accurate, or incorrect. Finally, make a determination on the level at which each of the statements fit best—Level 1 as a straightforward reading of the visual, Level 2 as an interpretation of the visual, or Level 3 as an idea that expresses understandings beyond the visual, or expresses a likely viewpoint of the maker.

The Three-Level Guide methodology works best when a simple, correct statement is used as the first statement at Level 1. This enables students to begin the reading process and give them the confidence to proceed. For example, in the Three-Level Guide for *The Double Deliverance 1588:1605* engraving by Samuëll Ward, 1621, the statement “The Spanish Armada is represented by the crescent of ships on the left” is given as the first Level 1 statement. Such a statement immediately alerts students to a possible context for this engraving. Some statements should be written in a manner that leaves room for debate on whether or not they are entirely accurate. For example, the second statement in Level 1, “God’s presence is mainly shown by the eye looking down into the cellar,” is accurate to the extent that God’s presence is represented by the eye; yet his presence is also represented by the Hebrew writing, by the shaft of light, and by the semi-circle of clouds which conventionally surrounds God when he is depicted in anthropomorphic form.<sup>6</sup> The students, therefore, need to consider whether “mainly” is an accurate description of the way God is shown.

### **Developing Student Understanding**

Students can be led to consider the objects, symbols, and characters in the visual by referring to them in the Guide’s statements. For example, by the time students have completed Level 1 of *The Double Deliverance 1588:1605* Three-Level Guide, they will be able to recognise the representation of the Spanish Armada and God, identify a possible conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot, consider the Latin statement “I See and Smile,” consider the nature of the building, and identify that there are two dates of significance—1588 and 1605. Additional features are then given consideration in Level 2—for example, the cherubs, the presence of Guy Fawkes, and the figures seated at the table.

The Three-Level Guide can also be designed to provide information that students would not be expected to know or be able to interpret. For example, “The Hebrew writing, within the semicircular formation of the clouds, is the Hebrew name of God written in four letters” is identified as something students are unlikely to know or be able to interpret from viewing the engraving, so the information is provided in the Guide. This way, students can then go on to consider whether it is accurate to say that “This shows that the divine presence of God is seen as essential by English Protestants in defending England against the treacherous deeds of the Catholics.”

Some statements utilise students’ prior knowledge of the topic. The statement “The main conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot, Francis Tresham, is shown going into the cellar” (Level 1) is inaccurate since Tresham was the person whose actions exposed the plot and prevented its success. Students, however, might have recognised the inaccuracy of the statement through noticing the reference to “Faux” between the figure’s feet, or through recognising the contradictory statement in Level 2 that refers to “Faux.” To encourage students to consider underlying meanings rather than literal readings of the image, statements can point out the absurdities of literal interpretations of imagery. “The Spanish Armada failed because there were cherubs in the sky who blew great winds putting, the Spanish fleet off-course” is an example of this (Level 2).

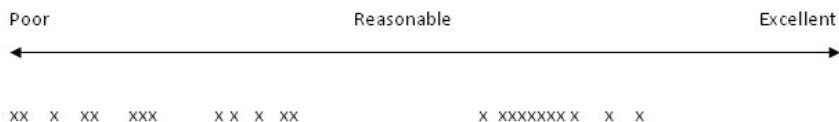
In going beyond the information that is able to be gleaned from the visual, important contextual knowledge can be conveyed. For example, through the statement “My engraving is innovative in commemorating the failures of the both the Spanish Armada and the Gunpowder Plot within one image”, the teacher is able to impart the knowledge that up to that time, there had been separate illustrations for the two events (the Spanish Armada and the Gunpowder Plot), but that Samuëll Ward connects these critical moments for the viewer. Similarly, in including “I cannot understand why the government objected to my engraving ... so similar to images that have been considered acceptable in the past,” the teacher is able to explain during ensuing class discussion that in 1621, there was concern that anti-Papal polemic might derail marriage negotiations that were underway for Prince Charles to marry the Hapsburg Infanta Maria. The Spanish ambassador Don Gondomar objected to its publication and Samuëll Ward was imprisoned.

Some respondents to the questionnaire recognised the way the Guide assisted with context and made specific comments on contextual learning when they were asked whether the strategy assisted in interpreting images: “the strategy increased my contextual knowledge building on what I had already deciphered,” “it was helpful in that it provided a degree of context,” “it was helpful because it included extra contextual knowledge.”



How would you rate your knowledge of religious and political matters in Elizabethan and early Stuart English history? (*Put an x on the following line*)

University History Graduates



Year 13 History Secondary Students



Figure 3: Collated Results from Questionnaire on *The Double Deliverance* 1588:1605.

### Student Views of Three-Level Guides

In the questionnaire surveying student views of the Three-Level Guides, students were first asked “How would you rate your knowledge of religious and political matters in Elizabethan and early Stuart English history?”, rating their responses on a continuum line from “Excellent” to “Poor.” Most Teaching Diploma students rated themselves as poor to reasonable in their knowledge of the Tudor-Stuart period with only a few rating themselves higher (see Figure 3). Many of these students would have last studied the topic while at school and may not have done any Early Modern History papers at University in the intervening years. The secondary school history students largely rated themselves in the reasonable category with two rating their knowledge higher and one below. These students had been studying the topic for five months for four hours per week.

Without the assistance of the Three-Level Guide, students were then asked to interpret the meaning of *The Double Deliverance* and provide evidence for their interpretation. Only six of the University students provided a reasonably accurate interpretation with some evidence, three of whom provided a well-explained and interpretive response. Five University students gave inaccurate or nil responses, and the remaining responses (twelve students) identified very basic information such as the key events or the presence of Guy Fawkes or Satan. The secondary students had even greater difficulty. While most of the students recognised the reference to the Spanish Armada, there was significant failure to identify the Gunpow-



der Plot or consider other features in the engraving. Despite their greater confidence in their knowledge of the period than the University students, the students were unable to make any links between the objects and figures shown in the image to come up with an interpretation that fitted the image as a whole. In identifying very few of the features of the image, they seemingly tried to define the meaning of the work through the presence of the Spanish Armada in isolation. Alternatively, one student suggested the image was about family life in the early modern period based on the “dinner table” in the centre.

Students were then asked to explain how they worked out the meaning of the image. Twelve of the respondents suggested an approach where they looked for dates, symbols, and objects, but they failed to explain how they then used that disparate knowledge to reach a conclusion on the meaning of the image. Four University respondents and four secondary respondents made specific mention of making links between what was seen in the visual and contextual knowledge, while the remaining seven University students and five secondary school students provided no relevant process or claimed guesswork as their method. This suggests that history students rarely have any process that they consistently follow, or that they are unable to identify a process that they use, perhaps because some have always taken methodologies for interpretation of primary sources for granted. On the other hand, if one asks a class of history students what process they use for writing essays, they are much more able to give a clear explanation of the process they follow—a process which is usually more deliberate and more consistent than any method that they use for interpreting historical images. In the New Zealand context, images similar to *The Double Deliverance* have frequently been included in national examinations for the history topic “England 1558-1667.” While examination questions may provide some guidance to interpretation, there is clearly a need for teaching a process for interpreting visuals that is repeatable and encourages students to scrutinise and give consideration to the entire image.<sup>7</sup>

The surveyed students then embarked on doing the Three-Level Guide and followed this by answering the question “Was the Three-Level Guide useful?” All of the University respondents cited it as helpful, while two secondary students stated that it was not entirely helpful. One student cited the reason as being “My interpretation was completely wrong,” while the other student felt that Levels 2 and 3 relied on knowledge that he/she did not have. Reasons for positive views of the Three-Level Guide were that it “gave clues along the way to help understand later statements,” “provided information which caused me to consider, made me want to justify my decisions, and look at reasons why the statement was a tick or not,” provided a “framework for thinking about content, provided facts and

details,” “challenged me to reconsider possibilities,” “touched on areas of the image I had not thought of,” was a “good springboard to start debate,” “clearly broke down the image in an easy step by step way,” “covered all aspects—what we can see, meaning, author,” and was “really helpful as it was discussed not only with peers but with the teacher.”

While a larger research study is required to validate the above findings on the benefits of using Three-Level Guides for interpreting visual images, comments made in the questionnaire responses do suggest that the Three-Level Guide is a tool that aids visual exploration and extends student understanding.

### Summary

While documents have often been given greater prominence in historical inquiry, visual imagery is increasingly being recognised for its potential to reveal ideas that are not paralleled in text, and for its significant contribution to student understanding of the nuances of an era. The challenge, therefore, is to develop learning strategies that enable students to read historical images successfully. The Three-Level Guide strategy facilitates the intersection of the contextual knowledge of student and teacher with the visual evidence inherent in a historical image. In creating circumstances where what is seen and what is known is intricately interwoven, the visual culture of any given historical period can be better understood. The process under which a Three-Level Guide operates provides repeated opportunities to consider evidence and to work collaboratively in discussion with others, thereby enabling in-depth and critical consideration to be given to these complex interrelationships.

### Notes

1. In New Zealand, source interpretation for History gains credits towards the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). Students’ competence in interpreting historical sources is measured against achievement criteria. For example, for Level 1, students need to “accurately identify facts, ideas, and points of view, describe a historical relationship indicated by the evidence, and make a valid judgement about the usefulness/reliability of the evidence provided in the sources.” The sources given in the examination include documents, visual material, graphs, statistics, cartoons, etc.

2. Harold Herber developed a range of “Reading and Reasoning Guides,” which are explained in Harold L. Herber, *Teaching Reading in Content Areas* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970). The Three-Level Guide in its most widely used form was developed

by Herber in 1978. *Literacy & Learning: Reading in the Content Areas*, p. 31, <[http://www.litandlearn.lpb.org/strategies/strat\\_4three.pdf](http://www.litandlearn.lpb.org/strategies/strat_4three.pdf)>.

3. Over the past two decades, the Language Across the Curriculum programme has been supported by a number of New Zealand schools. In 1989, reports from eight schools involved in the Language Across the Curriculum initiative were collated by Jan McPherson and David Corson, *Language Policy Across the Curriculum: Eight Case Studies of School-Based Policy Development*, (Palmerston North, New Zealand: Department of Education, 1989). Between 2003 and 2005, funding from the New Zealand Ministry of Education enabled sixty schools to pilot the programme. Stephen May and John Smyth, “Addressing Literacy in Secondary Schools: Introduction,” *Language and Education* 21, no. 5 (2007): 365.

4. The Language Across the Curriculum initiative had begun with the Dartmouth Conference in England in 1966. Stephen May and Noeline Wright, “Secondary Literacy Across the Curriculum: Challenges and Possibilities,” *Language and Education*, 21 no. 5 (2007): 371.

5. Donna E. Alvermann and Jeanne Swafford, “Do Content Area Strategies Have a Research Base?” *Journal of Reading* 32, no. 5 (February 1989): 390.

6. For further discussion of the symbolism used and meaning conveyed in the engraving *The Double Deliverance 1588:1605*, refer to Barbara M. Ormond, *The Iconography of Visual Culture and Pedagogical Approaches to Seeing—Illustrated Prints Pertaining to Religious Issues in Early Modern England* (Köln, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2008), 92-94.

7. For discussion of other teaching strategies for interpreting historical images, refer to Ormond, Chapter 4.

### Appendix: Three-Level Guide

#### THREE-LEVEL GUIDE

#### The Double Deliverance 1588:1605, engraving by Samuel Ward, 1621

**Student Instructions:** Look carefully at the engraving and tick the statements that you agree with. You will need to take into consideration the knowledge you have acquired about events in the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. First work individually, and then once you have finished, discuss your answers with another student. Amend any answer if you are convinced by the other student’s argument.

<b>Level 1</b> √	<b>Tick those statements which are an accurate reading of the features of the engraving. Be ready to explain your reasons.</b>
1. _____	The Spanish Armada is represented by the crescent of ships on the left.
2. _____	God’s presence is mainly shown by the eye looking down into the cellar.

3. _____	The main conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot, Francis Tresham, is shown going into the cellar.
4. _____	<i>Video Rideo</i> is the Latin for “I See and Smile.”
5. _____	The dates of the events of the Spanish Armada and the Gunpowder Plot are clearly identified in the engraving.
6. _____	The building on the right is a Catholic cathedral.

<b>Level 2</b> √	<b>Tick those statements which are an appropriate interpretation of the meaning of the engraved image.</b>
1. _____	The Spanish Armada failed because there were cherubs in the sky who blew great winds, putting the Spanish fleet off-course.
2. _____	The figures surrounding the table represent the dangers of Popery, while Satan epitomises an overpowering evil at work.
3. _____	God protected England when England was greatly in danger.
4. _____	The Gunpowder Plot was discovered because Guy Fawkes (Faux) held a lit lamp and was subsequently seen on his way into the cellar.
5. _____	The main purpose of the engraving is to provide news of the Spanish Armada and Gunpowder Plot to people in the English countryside.
6. _____	The Hebrew writing, within the semicircular formation of the clouds, is the Hebrew name of God written in four letters. This shows that the divine presence of God is seen as essential by English Protestants in defending England against the treacherous deeds of the Catholics.

<b>Level 3</b> √	<b>Tick those statements which you think Samuel Ward would have agreed with.</b>
1. _____	My engraving is innovative in commemorating the failures of both the Spanish Armada and the Gunpowder Plot within one image.
2. _____	I included both Latin and English to enable both educated and partially literate Englishmen to understand my engraving.
3. _____	The Pope is less significant than Satan, so I showed the Pope sitting on the left, at the front of the table.
4. _____	I cannot understand why the government objected to my engraving design because the way in which the Spanish Armada and Gunpowder Plot are depicted is so similar to images that have been considered acceptable in the past.