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# Research for Writing

## Fiction Writers

Why would you need to do research for fiction? Isn't fiction just made-up stuff? The characters, situations, and action may be a creation of your fevered imagination, but the story takes place in a setting. A fictional story can be set in either real places or imaginary places.

- **Real Places.** If you are writing about a real place, do your homework! Make sure you have either travelled there or study maps, travel guides, etc. so you know the area. You have to be informed about the area you are writing about. Nothing will damage your credibility as an author or turn a reader off more quickly than making an obvious mistake in geography.
- **Imaginary Places.** I write fantasy and science fiction. Many times my stories are set in imaginary places—everything is made up. When you create an entire fictional world, country, city, or crossroads village from your own imagination, who cares what you put it in?

You should because your readers will care. You have to make up names, describe the geography, interpret local customs and lore . . . How much creativity do you have left over after you create the plot and characters? Making up good names can be a challenge.

And be sure to keep track of what you create! When you make stuff up, you have to be consistent. Keep records of your characters' names and characteristics. Draw a map, at least a sketch, of the geographical relationships between places. If you create any special customs, technological gadgets, magic spells, etc., be sure to jot a note so you can be consistent. So, yeah. Create your own reference book that you can research. Remember: consistent, consistent, consistent.

## Print Resources (Forms of many of these are also available on line)

**Plot Ideas and Story Starts:** Do you need an idea to get started?

- Newspapers. Daily articles, the daily police log, trial reports, advice columns, etc., have ideas for conflict.
- Plot summary collections like *Masterplots*. You don't want to rewrite *Gone with the Wind* or *Hamlet*, but a plot idea is a plot idea.
- Mythology and tall tale collections. You don't want to rewrite *Jason and the Golden Fleece* or *Paul Bunyan*, but a plot idea is a plot idea.
- *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia*, (Five editions so far), Harper & Row. An encyclopedia of world literature including writers, synopses of works, characters, etc.

**Encyclopedias** Trite? Sure. With access to the internet you can google a question or use Wikipedia for a quick answer, but a good set of encyclopedias has a lot to recommend it. Encyclopedias contain a little (or a lot) of information on just about everything. The material has been compiled, vetted, and written on a consistently accessible level. For writers needing just a bit of information to make a reference reasonably accurate, encyclopedias are perfect. Even if you are writing non-fiction, an encyclopedia entry can get you started with a basic outline of information to research.

In the internet age, sets of encyclopedias show up at garage sales—cheap. However, be aware of publication

dates. Information on the Roman Empire will probably not go out of date anytime soon. However, if you want to reference a pop song or current fad, a twenty-year-old encyclopedia will come up short.

- *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Now online) The world's most trusted reference source. Last print edition published in 2010.
- *Encyclopedia Americana* (Now online) Once of the largest encyclopedias. Last print edition published in 2006.
- *Colliers Encyclopedia* Last edition 1998. Purchased by Microsoft, its contents are now part of *Encarta*.
- *The New York Public Library Desk Reference*, (several editions). A single volume with wide-ranging, concise, and accurate information for a quick reference check. (e.g. in the Alphabets and Words chapter there is a list of commonly misused words—I went to church to “prey?” or I put a “For Sail” sign on my house?)

**Word References** Think you know what a word means, but you're not sure? My character is angry, but isn't there a more colorful word I could use?

- Dictionary: A classic source for definitions. Consider consulting an unabridged dictionary. Alternate meanings and word derivations can be a big help.  
Additional idea: I have used archaic forms of a word as a basis to create names for characters and objects.
- Thesaurus: Finding alternate, more colorful or more specific words can help your writing. *However*, be sure you know exactly what the word means before you use it! Different words have different shades of meaning. You want to make sure you get the exact denotation and connotation you want. Some thesaurus-based errors can be unintentionally hilarious—embarrassing for an author.
- Rhyming Dictionary loon . . . moon . . . June . . . croon . . . tune . . . soon . . . Walloon . . . baboon . . . Writing poetry is hard enough. If you need a rhyme, a rhyming dictionary can help.
- Books of Quotations Sometimes you want to include some wise or witty words someone else has said. Check exactly who said it and exactly how they said it. In a fantasy world, I have paraphrased a quote from our world to make my character sound profound (or, if I twist it, profoundly stupid).

**Chronologies and Timelines** If you are writing historical fiction, a list of what was going on in the world can help make your work seem more realistic. It may also give you plot/subplot ideas.

**Making Characters Real** To make characters come alive, they must show emotion. Suppose your character is angry. How do you *show* your readers the character is angry rather than telling them?

- *The Emotion Thesaurus: A Writer's Best Friend*, Angela Ackerman & Becca Puglisi, 2012. Look up *anger*, and you'll see a list of physical signals (flaring nostrils, sweating...), internal sensations (grinding one's teeth, muscles quivering...), mental responses (irritability, poor listening skills...), cues for acute, long-term anger (explodes over little things, ulcers...), cues of suppressed anger (false smiles, headache...). They list 75 emotions. By the same authors:
- *The Positive Trait Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Attributes*
- *The Negative Trait Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Flaws*
- Body language There are many books on body language which can help you show your character communicating their inner emotions.

**Names** Finding the right name makes it easier for me to write the character. It helps me lock-in the identity I am creating.

- *The Writer's Digest Character Naming Sourcebook*, Sherrilyn Kenyon, Writer's Digest Books. 25,000+ First names and surnames, their meanings, and more organized by country/area of origin. This type of guide can help you find the right sounding name for other ethnic groups, cultures, time periods, etc.
- Baby name guide books. There are many of these. A search for “baby names” in [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)'s bookstore returned at least a hundred pages of hits. A quick count showed 29 of the first 30 responses

were purely baby name reference lists.

**Adventure and Survival Guides:** How do you start a fire? What snakes are poisonous? What plants are edible? How should a character defend against a knife attack? How can you make a bow and arrow from scratch? Even if you haven't been there/done that yourself, your characters need credible response to the tribulations your plot throws at them. Here are some examples of reference books from my own library that can help. (Hint: I found most of the titles on the remainder tables at Barnes & Noble.)

- *FM 21-76 US Army Survival Manual*, Dorset Press.
- *Tom Brown's Field Guide: City and Suburban Survival*, Tom Brown, Jr.
- *SAS Survival Handbook: The Ultimate Guide to Surviving Anywhere*, John Wiseman, Collins.
- *Special Forces Unarmed Combat Guide*, Martin J. Dougherty, Metro Books.

**Professional Guides:** If your character commits a crime, do you know police procedures for investigating a crime? What types of evidence does an investigator look for? How does an officer arrest and book a suspect? If your character gets ebola, do you know the symptoms and standard treatments? What can cause amnesia? While writing about what you know is good advice, sometimes first hand knowledge is not possible (or desirable).

- *Police Procedure & Investigation: A Guide for Writers*, Lee Lofland
- *Order in the Court: A Writer's Guide to the Legal System*, David S. Mullally
- *Forensics: A Guide for Writers*, D. P. Lyle
- *The Merck Manual*, (various editions). (The source for information on diagnosing and treating medical disorders.)

**Personal Interviews:** Interview professionals in a field. Get a doctor, a police officer, a nurse, a teacher, or any experienced person telling war stories about their line of work, and you could have some golden material for plots or characters. At the worst, you will spend some time making the other person feel good by giving them a chance to talk about themselves. They will think highly of you for asking.

## On the Internet

Much of the above information is available, plus. . .

**Plot Ideas and Story Starts:** I need an idea to get started.

- <http://writers-den.pantomimepony.co.uk/blank-page-eliminator.php> (Plot ideas, story starts, tips, etc.)
- <http://www.plot-generator.org.uk> (Sort of a choose your adventure type plot generator by genre. Fill in some names, descriptive adjectives, jobs, etc. and it generates a plot outline.)
- <http://www.creative-writing-now.com/story-starters.html> (Links to story starter sites plus other creative writing ideas)
- <https://www.pinterest.com> Collection of media "pins" sorted into a variety of categories including collections of links to writing prompts and other inspirations

**Naming Helps:** What name should I give to a character or place?

- <https://www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/index.html>
- <http://www.babynames.com>
- <http://www.writing-world.com/links/names.shtml> (Links to about three dozen internet naming resources)
- [http://www.namator.com/names\\_fantasy\\_s.php](http://www.namator.com/names_fantasy_s.php) (Fantasy names)
- <http://fantasynamergenerators.com> (Fantasy names)

- <http://nine.frenchboys.net/fantasyplace.php>
- <http://www.rinkworks.com/namegen/> (One of my favorites for generating a variety of names)
- <http://www.behindthename.com/random/> (A name generator for different nationalities, mythologies, time periods, etc.)
- <http://www.fakenamegenerator.com> (Generate a detailed fake idea for different nationalities)

### **World Building Ideas**

- <http://www.fantasist.net/frameset.html>
- <http://www.seventhsanctum.com/index.php>
- <http://abutterflydreaming.com/2009/02/06/100-medieval-careers/> (If you are writing epic, medieval fantasy, what are some careers your characters could have?)
- <http://www.sfwa.org/2009/08/fantasy-worldbuilding-questions/> (Science Fiction Writers of America list of questions to help you create your own world—on paper)
- <http://writingwhilethericeboils.blogspot.com/2011/11/writing-roulette-all-generators-you-d.html> (Generator for a wide variety of ideas, plots, names, etc.)
- <http://www.pantheon.org> (Encyclopedia Mythica: An internet encyclopedia of mythology, folklore, and religion)

**Source for free clip art images:** Need a cover? Illustrations? There are many sources for this, but they must indicate the art is in the public domain or royalty free before you can reproduce it for your own use without paying. The other part of this reality is that you tend to get what you pay for.

<http://www.free-graphics.com> (One example)

# Non-Fiction Resources

## Source Materials

- **Primary Source:** Accounts by people who were there, saw what happened, and wrote it down. Examples might be an interview with the person, diary entries, court testimony, minutes of meetings, a transcript of the words of an interview (not the article the interviewer wrote about the interview). This is the real deal. This is what people saw, heard, smelled, and felt—or at least, what they said they saw, heard, etc. This is the best source for finding out what really happened. The disadvantage is that primary source material can be hard to find. It's often in archives, sometimes well cataloged, but sometimes not. It can be quite voluminous and take a long (long, long) time to get through. It can also contain a lot of information not germane to your topic.
- **Secondary Sources:** These are books and articles written about your subject by people who were not there or did not play a significant part. A secondary source interprets, analyzes, and otherwise builds on existing information. A secondary source can be good material especially if the author(s) used primary sources and used them well. However, even the best secondary sources are subject to the authors' interpretations and biases. Published books and articles have usually been vetted to some degree by the publisher before they go to print. If it is an article you find on the internet, you *must* validate the source. Respected organizations like the *Smithsonian* or the *New York Times* have a vested interest in maintaining their credibility. If you find it on "bobswebpage.com," you might want to verify the information from another credible source.

## For Local Histories

### Newspaper Archives

Local newspaper archives are a good place to start. These records can be found in local libraries or archive centers. Much, but not all, current material is available in searchable, digital format. Many newspapers have their back issues recorded on microfilm or microfiche. Be prepared to sit at a reading station and look at page after page of these film records. Sometimes an article or a whole page is obscured or missing. Murphy's Law is in full force—the missing information was your key reference. Before microfilm? Well, a few of the old bound editions of newspapers with their delicate, yellowed pages still sit, moldering away, on back shelves.

### Company and Business Archives

Many businesses keep copies of all their promotional materials, press releases, board minutes, etc. These files can be voluminous and time consuming to evaluate. If you are researching a company which has been bought out or merged into another, you may be out of luck. Usually one of the first things to go are the old company's records.

### Journals and Diaries

Many people keep diaries of their lives. This can be a gold mine for someone writing a book about that person. A diary is a good source of personal chronology and a clue to what the person was doing and thinking. However, diaries are usually very self-serving documents. Fact check, fact check, fact check and try to find first-hand accounts of other persons interactions with your subject. Diaries of people living in an area you are interested in can also provide information about what was happening in the area and times when your subject was there even if you subject is not mentioned specifically. Diaries and journals can be archived at local libraries or archive centers. (Personal note: If you keep a personal journal, this can be an invaluable source of information and anecdotes for a book about organizations you were a member of.)

**Online Data Bases** Good sources of primary data as well as quality secondary sources

- National Archives: <http://www.archives.gov> The history of our nation in documents, photos, and other records. This site has links to many other sources of information including several subscription services which are free through this site.
- Census Bureau: <http://www.census.gov> Has facts figures and demographics of the United States through the years. The information is both collective, “What was the total population of Ohio in 1860?,” and specific, “Who lived at 233 S. Walnut, Bryan, OH in 1940?” If you are writing about a particular person, you can find who their next door neighbors were.
- Genealogy: <http://www.ancestry.com/> and other genealogical websites You can find the relatives of the person you are writing about as well as tracing back their origins. This data base requires a subscription, but it is free through the National Archives site.
- CIA’s World Fact Book: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/> In its own words, the CIA’s website “marshals facts on every country, dependency, and geographic entity in the world. We share this information with the people of all nations in the belief that knowledge of the truth underpins the functioning of free societies.”
- OhioLINK: <https://www.ohiolink.edu> Ohio’s academic library consortium has a wide array of academic journals, data bases, etc. available. This service is typically free through public libraries and colleges and universities in Ohio.
- Other Data Bases: Many are subscription based, some offer article abstracts for free and charge for the complete article, others are free or offer a free trial subscription.
  - <https://www.ebscohost.com/academic/readers-guide-to-periodical-literature> Index of general information magazines and periodicals
  - <http://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/gateway.page> Legal and business
  - <http://eric.ed.gov> Academic

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_academic\\_databases\\_and\\_search\\_engines](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_academic_databases_and_search_engines) ...and Wikipedia’s compilation of academic databases.