

The Ins and Outs of Research
Workshop for ORWA by Laura Byrne Paquet
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The three keys in doing research for any type of fiction are knowing *what* you need to find, *where* to find it and *when* to stop.

WHAT

What you need to find will vary greatly, depending on the type of book you're writing. For a Regency historical, you'll probably need to know about everything from social etiquette and types of carriages to English geography and country houses. For a contemporary romantic suspense, you may need details on police procedures, laws in various jurisdictions, or types of guns and poisons. And for just about any type of book, you'll need information to make your characters' professions, ethnic backgrounds and neighbourhoods authentic and believable.

Many authors who write historicals gravitate to that type of book because they love research, but doing your homework is just as important when you're writing a contemporary. In fact, it may be more important, because at least some of your readers are likely to be more familiar with the information than you are!

Here are some of the infinite variety of things you may need information on as you flesh out your characters and settings.

- **Job details**, such as information on daily tasks, pay scales, common problems, relevant laws, lingo and processes. For example, let's say your heroine is a high school teacher. When is she likely to get to work in the morning? How late does she stay there? How many classes a day does she teach? What sorts of equipment does she use—a smart board, a computer, a TV? Where does she keep her purse during the day—in her classroom desk, in her office, in a staff locker? Is she required to coach or lead extra-curricular activities? If a student threatens another student, is she required to call the police? Could she be fired for posting something inappropriate on Facebook? Could she likely afford a Lexus?
- **Personal details**, such as details related to the character's childhood, ethnicity, nationality and education. Someone who grew up in the 1990s will have different childhood reference points—favourite TV shows, movies and music—than someone who grew up in the 1970s. Grandchildren of immigrants probably call their grandmothers by different names (“Oma” if they're Dutch or German, “Nonna” if they're Italian, etc.). While Canadians talk about going to university, Americans generally say “college” and Aussies say “uni.”

- **Hobby-related details.** If your character is a knitter, a tri-athlete, a pianist or a gardener, you'll need information on anything from cable stitches to fertilizer, if those hobbies come into play in your story.
- **Setting.** If your story is set in a real place, you'll probably need maps, photos of important landmarks and a brief history of the place. Even if you've made up a city or town but placed it in a real province, state or country, you'll need information on weather, politics and so on. Some of the most common mistakes I see in manuscripts are errors related to sunrise and sunset. If it's June in Edmonton, don't have your characters walking in the moonlight at 8pm.
- **"Stuff."** For better or for worse, we're defined to some degree by what we wear, eat and use. If your hero is a powerful CEO, he's more likely to wear a Rolex than a Timex. If your heroine is a photojournalist, she probably uses a complex DSLR camera rather than a point-and-shoot pocket model. Also, she'll have a bagful of lenses, so you'll need to know the difference between a macro, a wide-angle and a zoom.
- **Historical details.** Here's where all those writers of Georgians, Regencies, Victorians, Westerns and other historical novels get to dig their teeth into some yummy research meat. They need to look up all sorts of details that authors of contemporaries know through personal experience. For instance, would the heroine be likely to bathe once a day, once a week, once a month or...once a year? Would the hero be more likely to own a curricle or a cabriolet? How many horses would he hitch to each? How heavy was a hoop skirt? How late did the gentlemen's clubs of London stay open? How much money would a housemaid earn—if anything? When were postage stamps invented? (I once edited a manuscript where a character put a letter in a mailbox about 20 years before the postal service was established.) How many miles can a horse travel before it needs to rest?

Exercise

For your current work-in-progress—or a story you're thinking of writing—list at least three bits of info that you need that you're not sure where to find.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

WHERE

And that leads us nicely to *where*: where can you find this mountain of necessary information? Once you start looking, you'll be amazed at the infinite variety of resources out there.

Books

Since we're readers and writers, books are often the first place we think to look, and with good reason: they're great sources of information. As with all research, my key piece of advice would be to *move from the general to the specific*.

For instance, let's say you need to know a bit about the Battle of Waterloo for a Regency you're writing. Don't start with a 300-page analysis of Wellington's military strategy. Start with an entry in something like the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, then move to a young adult book about the battle. (Books aimed at children and students are often excellent—and overlooked—resources.) Once you know the basic facts, you'll be better able to target your research. Instead of researching the whole battle, you may decide that your hero will be injured during a particular attack. That will save you time and keep you from getting overwhelmed by unnecessary details.

To find the specific books you need, try the following.

- **Bibliographies.** Check the "Bibliography" or "Suggested Reading" pages at the back of your current research books for ideas; you can also Google your time period or field of interest plus the word "bibliography" to get online suggestions.
- **The Ottawa Public Library.** Don't be afraid to ask the librarians for guidance—that's why they're there.
- **Interlibrary loans.** If the OPL doesn't have the book you need, the librarians may be able to track it down in another library elsewhere in Canada; you can borrow it for a short time and may have to pay a small fee.
- **University and college libraries.** Try Carleton for books on architecture, politics and journalism, and U of O for medicine and law. If you're an alumna, you may be able to get a free library card; otherwise you'll have to read and photocopy books onsite, or pay for a library card.
- www.abebooks.com. This cooperative of used bookstores around the world is a great place to find rare and out-of-print books—often for a good price.
- **Institutional libraries.** Museums, professional associations, companies and government departments often maintain specialized libraries related to their field of interest.

Websites

You've probably already spent lots of time surfing for information, so I won't go into too much detail here. My main piece of advice is to *surf skeptically*. First of all, try to find the most reputable information source—generally, a well-known authority or institution. Johns Hopkins University will probably be a better source of health

information than, say, “Bob’s Mad Cow Blog.” Look for domain extensions like “.gov” or “.gc” (for government departments) or “.edu” (for American universities). Professional associations and major news sites are also good sources.

A word of warning about Wikipedia: in my opinion, it’s a good starting point but *not* a good ending point. Its fans point out that mistakes are often quickly caught and corrected by other Wikipedia users, and that’s true, but the site is enormous and not every page is read as often as others. And the odd political rant or corporate PR blurb does sneak in, despite everyone’s best efforts, as do typos. On the bright side, you’re likely to find at least a “stub” entry for just about anything you’re interested in, from obscure historical figures to tiny villages in the middle of nowhere. Just double check what you find. (That advice applies to anything you find anywhere, including in books and newspapers, but it’s especially true about Wikipedia.)

Here are some of the sites I’ve found useful when fact-checking authors’ research.

- www.timeanddate.com (for sunrise and sunset times)
- www.weathernetwork.ca
- www.weatherchannel.com
- www.imdb.com (for movies, actors and directors—beware, though, as it is another crowdsourced site, like Wikipedia)
- http://geonames.nrcan.gc.ca/search/search_e.php (for Canadian place names)
- <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/> (the CIA’s guide to the countries of the world)

Depending how much detail you need, you can also pay for access to sites such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

People

Fiction writers often overlook an excellent resource: real, live people. There’s no one like an actual cop to tell you how police officers behave at a crime scene and no one better than an emergency room doctor to explain how physicians deal with a heart attack. If you’re really lucky, your sources may even invite you to shadow them as they do their work. (This isn’t possible in every workplace, though. It’s also a big time commitment for your source, so be judicious about asking for this perk.)

If you’re writing an historical, archivists, museum curators and historians know reams of fascinating stuff about fashion, etiquette, food, technology and more.

It’s common to be shy about cold-calling people and asking them to spend time telling you things. As a freelance journalist, I’ve been doing this for over 20 years, and I always get a bit nervous. But here are a few tricks I’ve learned along the way.

- Remember that most people love to talk about themselves and their work. I try to put myself in the interviewee’s position. If someone called me up and said, “Would you mind spending 15 minutes answering some questions

about your fascinating job or field of expertise so that I can feature it in my new novel?”—well, of course, I’d be flattered!

- Use your contacts. It’s easier to launch into a request by saying, “Your sister suggested you’d be a great resource” rather than, “I found your name in the Yellow Pages.”
- Pave the way with an e-mail. The digital age has been a godsend for telephone phobics like me. Outline your request in a *brief* message that explains clearly what you want (a quick telephone interview, an in-person meeting, an e-mail exchange) and how long you expect it to take. Succinctly describe the type of book you’re writing (romantic thriller, historical romance, etc.). Explain why you’re contacting this particular person. And close by thanking him or her for considering your request. Provide a phone number where the person can reach you, as well as an e-mail address—some people prefer communicating by phone.

Other resources

Depending on your book, a wide range of other research resources may come in handy, including the following:

- online databases (you can use a wide range of news, medical and other databases for free through the Ottawa Public Library website)
- old publications on microfiche and microfilm (available at the main branch of the OPL and at university libraries)
- listservs and message boards for particular professions and hobbies
- audio and video archives (<http://archives.cbc.ca> has a range of archived broadcasts related to major historical events, for example)
- shops and websites that sell equipment related to jobs and hobbies
- archives of old photographs and primary documents, such as diaries and letters

Exercise

List as many sources of information as you can think of for the following.

1. Details about experiments in photography in early 19th-century England
2. Information about the care and feeding of horses on a modern dude ranch
3. “Colour” to add to a scene set at a teenage skateboarding contest

4. Information on the daily tasks of a fashion designer preparing for a major show

WHEN

When do you stop researching? This may be the trickiest question of all to answer, particularly if you are a procrastinator. (Like, um, me.) Endless research can give you the illusion that you're actually hard at work on your novel, but your editor doesn't want to see a pile of notes. She wants to see a story full of exciting characters and plot. And to give her that, you eventually have to write.

During the research phase, you will probably start to come across the same facts over and over again. When you find yourself frequently thinking, "Been here, read that," it's probably time to close the encyclopedia and fire up your computer.

For most writers, the research and writing stages usually overlap, to some degree. After an initial bout of research to get your basic facts straight, you buckle down to work, only to screech to a halt when you get to a scene that requires some bit of knowledge you just don't have. That's OK. Just leave blanks to fill in later, or dash off and try to find the information—whatever works best for you.

ONE FINAL WORD ABOUT RESEARCH

After doing so much hard slogging—trips to the library, interviews, endless Web surfing—it can be tempting to throw every cool fact you've unearthed into your novel. One word of warning: *don't*.

You're writing a novel, not a career guide, textbook or historical treatise. Research is designed to enhance your plot, your setting and your characters; it is not an end in itself. We've probably all read passages like the following:

Lady Harriet Dalrymple-Jones removed her velvet pelisse, dyed with expensive indigo imported from a Jamaican plantation and trimmed with delicate lace hand-tatted in Spain, and handed it to the butler. She then strolled through the spacious foyer, with its soaring columns in the immediately recognizable style of neoclassical Scottish architect Robert Adam, and ascended the sweeping staircase with its exotic carpet, likely knotted by hand in the workshops of Anatolia. Her nose caught the alluring curry and coconut scents of mulligatawny soup, probably made from a recipe brought back to England by British soldiers who served in India in the late 1700s....

Don't let this happen to you. Remember, you're telling a story. The reader does not care how much research you did. Delight in research for its own sake, and use it sparingly. And have fun! ☺