

Different kinds of research

Think writing research is just about Google or Wikipedia? Think again! Actually, there's a continuum when it comes to research for writers with 'googled it' at one end and 'could write a PhD on the topic' at the other – and as with most writing-related skills, writing research is all about balance. When I researched my second novel, I ended up with enough information to write a nonfiction book on homes for unmarried mothers. There was a point at which I had to say 'enough' and stop and tell the story.

With all that in mind, it helps to know your 'why'. Why do you need to carry out research? What's its main function? Character creation? Information? Tacit knowledge? So here, in alphabetical order, is my list of 14 different kinds of research for writers. By the way, many of these overlap with one another, so the division is somewhat artificial.

1. Contextual research

Contextual research is about building up your knowledge of the subject area you're writing about and related issues. You're connecting different aspects of the field of knowledge like a jigsaw. Your 'why' is likely to be about creating a sense of atmosphere or because you need to gain tacit knowledge or because one of your characters is an expert. For example, listening to music or collecting ephemera or interviewing a marine biologist.

Consider the tacit knowledge you already have, too. I know a lot about growing up in a hotel (the subject of [my first novel](#)) because my parents ran self-catering holiday flatlets and many of my classmates' parents ran hotels. That was normal in Bournemouth in the 1980s. What knowledge do you already have (that seems normal to you) that you could use to build authenticity into your stories?

2. Cultural research

This is non-specific research. It's all about what Julia Cameron calls 'filling the well' so that ideas percolate away in your head and are ready when you need them. You might also do this because you want to start creating in a different medium and need to expose yourself to it more often. For example, going to plays or art exhibitions or concerts or literary festivals.

3. Experiential research

This sort of research is a little like method acting, although it doesn't have to be quite so full-on! For example, riding on a steam train because you're writing about trains, or learning to skate because your main character is an Olympic figure skater or hanging out in the town where your novel is set.

4. Interviews

Say you're researching lighthouses, like I did when I wrote my second novel, would it be better to google lighthouses, to visit a lighthouse, to go to a maritime museum, or to interview someone who looks after a lighthouse? The answer depends on your why of course, but make sure you're addressing all of your whys!

For example, you might need to know the technicalities of how lighthouse lamps work but you might also have a main character who abseils down the side of a lighthouse or who works as a cleaner in a lighthouse. Interviews are likely to come about as a result of you doing another kind of research first, but may be the best kind of research if you need help building interesting characters or if you're relying heavily on the use of a character's memories.

Interviews can also help you with most other kinds of research. They can suggest search terms for online research, for example, or locations for site-specific research.

5. Library visits

Remember that there is more than one kind of library. If you're in the UK, there are copyright libraries, like the British Library, where you can research in one of the reading rooms but can't borrow books. There are main branches of local libraries, sometimes with research facilities or special collections dedicated to local history. There are newspaper archives and other specialist libraries. Writing in a library can be very useful because you can look things up as you go!

6. Museum visits

The benefit of visiting museums is that you get to form sense impressions of the objects in an exhibition and to imagine what it would have been like to use whatever it is. Museum visits shouldn't simply be seen as an information gathering exercise, but as a chance to imagine the related people and environments.

7. Online research

There are two kinds of online research: general (using a search engine) and targeted (using specific trusted sites). There are limits to the effectiveness of a general search simply because the search results are usually in the millions, it relies on you knowing the right search terms, and you don't necessarily have a way of evaluating the information for quality / authenticity. It's best to hone your search terms first, then find a range of trusted sites to explore in depth.

8. Examining primary sources

Primary sources include photographs, letters, documents, maps, artifacts and costumes. As with museum research, research based on primary sources isn't only about information gathering. You're also thinking about the people and the environments and using your imagination to tell stories about them. You can also use primary sources (photos for example) at the starting point for a story, by asking 'What if?'

9. Reading fiction and other genres

Setting aside reading for pleasure, when it comes to research, reading fiction and other genres is about three things 1) understanding the mechanics of writing a book 2) gaining contextual / cultural knowledge about time periods, places and people, or a particular subject matter 3) immersing yourself in the conventions of a genre.

10. Reading nonfiction

You might well read nonfiction to gather information, but it's always good to know your why beforehand and to write yourself some specific questions. If you don't do this, your nonfiction reading will be a form of contextual research, good for tacit knowledge and general understanding but not for solving particular problems. If you're surrounded by books and not getting anywhere, this could be the problem! Don't feel like you have to finish the whole book - mine it for particular information.

11. Site-specific research

This is my favourite kind of research. It involves going to the important places in the novel or story and experiencing them. This might be visiting a forest or a beach or a hotel because you're writing a story set in one. OR, more specifically, it might mean going to St. Paul's Cathedral regularly because your novel is set in and around St Paul's. When I wrote my short story collection I wrote stories

while in particular locations, known as writing-in-situ. My stories were inspired by the places, but not necessarily about them. ([You can read more about the resulting collection here.](#) Scroll down.)

12. Technical / practical research

Technical or practical research may well involve stuff your characters need to know to do their jobs or to exist in the world you've put them in. For example, if your character is a doctor or in the police or a forensic pathologist or even a ballerina, there's a certain level of knowledge you need to write about them. Likewise, if you're writing about sports cars, you are going to need to research at least some of the technical / practical aspects.

You might also do technical / practical research into the nuts and bolts of the kind of book you're writing. How do murder mysteries usually work? How is a romance novel / fantasy novel / literary short story usually plotted? You could read how to books, seek out experts, do courses and go to talks, as well as reading plenty of examples.

13. Training-as-research

Training-as-research is a type of experiential research. For example, learning to cook because one of your characters is a chef. I learnt a lot about making cakes, tarot cards and cocktails when I wrote my second novel, for example, by doing courses and teaching myself.

14. Writing a journal as research

Write in a journal regularly to capture your thoughts, ideas, feeling, dreams and ideas, and to record your experiences. Why is this research? Because if you're writing about people, some of the thoughts and feelings that you experience are likely to affect your characters too. A journal is also a great way to capture seemingly fleeting thoughts and questions about a subject area. Turn it into a scrapbook by adding images, ephemera and quotations. If you're interested in journaling, you might like [this article from the Write Life website.](#)

How to collect your research

There are also several different ways to collect your research. Some of the research methods listed above will suggest their own means of 'collection' but here are some you might like:

- In a scrapbook or journal
- On a blog
- On Pinterest
- In a box file
- In organised folders on your computer
- In a notebook
- On a dictaphone or recording App
- Using a 'clipping' App like Evernote
- On a cork board

Over to you!

As I said, there comes a point when you need to say 'enough' and start to assimilate the research and the writing. You've got to decide whether you want to research as you go (when the need arises) or whether you're going to research up front. Be careful you're not using research as a form of procrastination though - you can always leave blanks and go back and fill them in later. I know many writers who research after they've written a plan and some who write the first draft first. It's worth emphasizing the most important point again: know your 'why' and you'll save yourself a whole heap of unnecessary research and several twisty rabbit holes.

More soon. Until then, happy writing,

Lou xx

P.S. Let me know what you love about writing research in the comments.

P.P.S. If you'd like more tips like these, take a look at [the Small Steps Writing Guides](#).