Research Tips

1. Do as much research as possible away from the Internet — with living people, in real places.

2. The first tip is that readers expect books to be *exhaustive* on their subjects. That doesn't mean they want the books to be long — it means that they expect that you will cover all the basic ground that needs to be covered to understand the subject, even if they know some of it already. This piece of advice may or may not be relevant to your subject. In my case, with a very idiosyncratic book on viral culture, it led to people asking me at readings why I hadn't included an analysis of X or Y viral phenomenon in my book. "Because you already know about it," the magazine guy in me always wanted to respond. But in the book world, people want to see you mention the stuff they already know, at least in passing (or to knock it down)– otherwise, how can it claim to be a *book* on the subject? It's worth taking that point of view seriously.

3. Don't hold back on that fantasy site visit / phone call / interview / query / meeting that you have always wanted to do, lest it become too late to include the results in your book. Do it now! This book is your golden ticket.

4. Don't lose track of your notes and/or future ideas for inclusion by writing things down in multiple notebooks or on scattered pages of the same notebook; concentrate, aggregate, cohere, reread, and compress. Keep it all in one place (with back-ups). Obsessive-compulsive organizational habits are your bestfriend; telling insane and vaguely embarrassing stories later on, about how you used eight different colored markers, four highlighter types, and multiple versions of extra pages stapled into a vast mega-notebook that you re-read every night before bed – and that you also took digital photos of lest you lose the whole thing in a house fire – will be a lot more fun than explaining how you forgot to include certain things and your book sucked because you never got your shit together.

5. If you have the feeling an interview isn't yielding much, get off the phone as soon as you can. On the other hand, when you strike interview gold, keep it going as long as you can.

6. I'm obsessive about the research. I organize and cross-list and file from the very beginning. I make notes of key points, issues, and themes. the amount of research one does for a proposal is very different from the amount of research one does for a whole book. so I keep track of all these key moments in a way that lets me recognize patterns that I didn't see earlier. And also so that when I'm later actually writing, i know where to find everything. writers waste a lot of time looking for that study that they filed, well, somewhere.

7. I did learn that questionnaires make good research tools. I had three levels of questionnaires, each expanding on the one before it, so I didn't have to individually interview each person. I did that by email or phone if and when it was warranted. The questionnaires were posted on my site, the first one visible to the public so anyone could use it, then the 2nd and third were on hidden pages that I gave my participants the URL to. The data was compiled and I received

email alerts whenever there was a new entry. So while I was researching certain elements of my book, the questionnaires and the people who used them were doing a lot of the legwork. Being that I'm fairly uneducated, I think I did a pretty good job with it.

8. I tried, not always successfully, to start each day with some discrete goal I wanted to accomplish: write 200 words, or get through a certain amount of research, or conduct two interviews, or whatever. If I set out to spend a day "writing," that would be so overwhelming I'd end up just farting around online all day instead of starting the climb the mountain.

9. You can't do too much research. In the military, we often say time spent gathering intelligence is seldom wasted. The same concept applies in writing a novel. You never know what little detail will give a scene the ring of authenticity. In a college creative writing class, I wrote about how a scuba diver got cut underwater, and in the filtered light at depth, the blood appeared green. Though the professor didn't think much of that particular story, he did concede he liked that detail. In fact, he said, "The author must have seen that." And indeed, I had.

10. You can write what you know. We've all heard it before. Experience may be a cruel teacher, but it is a thorough one, and experience is the purest form of research. Things you've done in life can inform your writing in surprising ways, even if your characters aren't doing those same things.

11. Research can be a lot of fun, but at some point you have to stop researching and start writing. Remember, research can become a form of procrastination and the more you research, the more information you will find to include. Therefore, as soon as you have enough information to write a scene about a place, event or person in your novel, then maybe you should stop and do some writing about it. Keep a balance between consumption and creation, input and output. Another way to approach this is to set a time limit. For example, if you know you need to start writing on a particular date to hit a (self-imposed) deadline, then work backwards to allow yourself a research period before this. You can always do additional research as you write, but the important thing is that the book is underway. Get started with what you have, fill in the blanks later.

12. Don't rely on the internet for everything. Yes, it's handy and you can find heaps of things there, but it should only be one of your sources. Wikipedia is a starting point - I look at it because these days it comes up first in a search half the time - but from there I branch out and look at at least ten sites. There are many, many websites that are created by people with a specific interest in a subject. That doesn't mean they're an expert. I've found many sites with inaccurate information, or pushing a certain point of view. I like to find sites maintained by government departments (in the US many states have a department of history and/or conservation, for example), universities and/or academics with specific knowledge, and local history sites.

Researching Your Novel

This is an edited extract of First Draft in 30 Days (Writer's Digest Books) by Karen Wiesner. Wiesner has had 90 books published in the past 14 years, and been nominated for and/or won 124 awards. She is also the author of the bestselling writing reference book, From First Draft to Finished Novel: A Writer's Guide to Cohesive Story Building. Her latest title, Writing the Fiction Series, will be published by Writer's Digest Books in May 2013. firstdraftin30days.com

www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/19/researching-your-novel

When to research

Ideally, you will learn to make the most of your research time by planning it far in advance and getting started on it long before you begin a specific project. If you're not already haunting secondhand bookshops, flea markets and libraries, now is the time to start. Traditional bookshops, online bookshops and book clubs will also be invaluable to you.

Start gathering contacts, too – experts you might need to interview somewhere down the road. Police officers, doctors, lawyers etc, can prove very helpful when you need specific information only professionals can provide.

Why start gathering your research for a project so far in advance? To give yourself time to do the bulk of your research between projects. Even when you're not actively writing anything, you can still do research. In fact, doing your research when you're not worried about deadlines is ideal, as you'll be under less stress and have more time to focus on the task at hand.

Why should I research during the outline stage?

Research often unearths important details and facts that can affect your entire story, so it pays to invest the time early on in the process. It's also very hard to write a story with huge holes in your own knowledge; it's like doing the work backwards.

Of course, situations will arise when you realise, after completing the outline or while you're writing the book, that you need to do additional research. If it's minor – and in some cases, even if it's major – you can do the research while you're writing or after you finish the book. Simply incorporate the research into the book as you edit and polish the first draft.

As a rule, do your research before or during outlining. However, certain types of research should be done only when your formatted outline is almost finished. For instance, if you need to interview a police officer for your novel, you may not know exactly what to ask until the outline is nearly complete.

In a situation like this, it helps to keep a running list of all the questions you need to ask during the interview. You can use Worksheet 8 for this purpose. Begin this list as soon as you start to research your story, and keep it in your project folder so you can tweak it whenever you need to.

Do as much preliminary research as you can about the subjects you intend to bring up during the interview. It's best if you only ask him/her to fill in the few holes left after you've done your own

research.

If you've got a fairly good idea how long the outlining process will take, make an appointment with the expert you've chosen to interview for around the time of the outline's completion. This should ensure your list of questions is complete.

Go over the list of interview questions often as you work on your outline, eliminating those you answer for yourself through research and adding those that crop up during outlining.

Revise the questions for clarity if necessary. Include the chapter and/or scene numbers next to each question on your list. That way, when you're done with the interview, you can just drop the answers into the outline. When you interview an expert, use recording equipment. Once the interview is complete, transcribe your notes and file them in your research folder.

Ultimately, it's up to you to decide how much research you do. You'll know you've done your research well when you can write about everything in your book intelligently, without questioning anything you're saying.

Additional outline aids

Now that you've completed your preliminary outline and research, it's time to dig a little deeper. Before you begin work on your formatted outline, go through worksheets 9-14.

These worksheets address key issues, such as dialogue, character and plot facts, and timelines. They will provide a crucial foundation for a more detailed outline, and they will help you stay organised as your outline becomes more complex.

Try to keep all the worksheets with your outline in your working project folder. If you find that you're not ready to fill out all the information on these worksheets, just read over the blank worksheets and allow the questions to percolate.

Dialogue worksheets

It's never too soon to start thinking about what your characters will say and how they'll say it. Giving each of your characters a distinct voice is key to writing great fiction.

The goal of Worksheet 9 is to encourage you to think about your characters' individual speech patterns and specific word choices. Your characters will probably reveal these distinctions as your story progresses, but thinking about it early will make you more receptive to such revelations.

For each of your major characters, record information about individual speech patterns and any catchphrases they may use.

With this information in place on a dialogue sheet, you'll know exactly what a given character will say and how he/she will say it. You can also use this worksheet during the final edit and polish of the manuscript to double-check speech patterns.

Fact sheets

As your outline develops, it can become harder to keep track of everything – especially once you've added in all the facts from your research. Worksheet 10 can help you chart all crucial bits of information to ensure the heart of your story remains consistent from outline to outline and draft to draft.

Background timelines

Background timelines can be written for any character in your story. It's usually best to start with a defining moment in the character's life – an event that has proved to be pivotal in some way.

While the information in a timeline may never appear in your finished novel, it can still influence how you tell your story. On the other hand, timeline information may turn out to play a crucial role in your story.

This type of timeline is generally written free form, but Worksheet 11 should get you started. If you find that the formatted worksheet hinders your creative process, or takes your story in directions you don't want it to go, then write the information down free form.

Miscellaneous timelines

Worksheet 12 is used to keep track of miscellaneous events that occur before or during the actual story and that are important to the story, rather than a specific character.

Record the page numbers for each fact so you can use the worksheet as a handy reference while you outline, write or perform editor revisions.