

Research and Outlines

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

(If you go to this website, the worksheets mentioned in this handout can be accessed.)

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.