

How to Write a Novel

LESSON 12



Research: Bringing Your Book In On Time & Under Budget HOLLY LISLE

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The Title of This Lesson Changed...

In one of your previous HTWAN lessons, and in one podcast (so far), I've covered what a mammoth digression and time-sink research can be. How to skip past it with a well-placed [TC- How does *SUBJECT / specific question* work?]

So why didn't I just skip this lesson and move on to *Lesson 13: Writing Active Description*?

Because you need to know how to research, need to know how to figure out what you don't know (and figuring out **how to identify when you don't know what you don't know** is a career writing skill).

You need to know how to get enough research to fix your book without eating the whole elephant. This is essential for hitting deadlines (I'm thinking for most of you, this is not going to be your only novel — that this is just the start of something bigger).

The secret to good research is also the Secret of Life — you learn how to ask good questions, great questions, and the RIGHT question... and then figure out how to find *true* answers.

Because when you can do that, you can regularly bring your novels in on time and under budget, whether you're writing to a publisher's deadline or your own.

Onward.

One Good Question

Fiction research is not necessarily “research.”

It can encompass:

- **Worldbuilding:** The question here is simply, *What do I have to have in place to write in this world?*

And the answer can be anything from Tolkein’s whole-world-and-everything-in-it approach, to Jan Karon’s semi-contemporary tiny town of Mitford, where a cast of regulars and some basic sets are filled out by occasional street names and a nice NC mountain setting.

- **Set design:** *What is this book’s world going to look like, feel like, taste like, smell like, sound like?*

If you’re writing leopard-shifters who live in tree houses, your world is different in every sense than if you’re writing normal humans living on a space station.

- **Language creation/ usage/ style:** Every novel has both the language in which it’s written, and the language (or languages) its characters speak - and the two can be very different. Your questions here are: *How do I as the writer want the narrative to sound? And... How will my various characters sound when they speak?*

And to demonstrate the importance of this, I was writing one feline character who kept sounding like a damn vampire in her dialogue. So I stuck a couple of pencils in my mouth to mimic her fangs, and read her dialogue out loud (this for *The Rose Sea*, with Steve Stirling. The character’s name was Eowlie.) When I did that and rewrote her

dialogue, she no longer sounded like a damn vampire. She sounded like a woman with big, sharp, pointy teeth.

- **Magic/science systems development:** The question here is, *How do the processes my characters use to get work done... work?*

And if you think that because you're writing in the contemporary world, you don't need to worry about this, ***you have stepped onto path of Not Knowing What You Don't Know.***

Well, not *stepped* so much as flung yourself head-first off an overpass into eight lanes of rush-hour traffic... but you get my meaning. With the complexity of today's world, *almost everyone* doesn't know *almost everything* about *almost anything*.

We all have these microscopic areas of deep knowledge, these small areas of competence, and these vast, staggering swathes of assumption, guess, and outright ignorance. And dumping ignorance and "best guess" into your novel and hoping no one will notice WILL come back to bite you in the ass.

- **Biology construction:** *How do my characters survive in their world?*

This would seem to fall exclusively into the domain of SF/Fantasy writers.

Not so much. Having read published and unpublished sex scenes that are anatomically impossible; shifter romances with shifts that fly in the face of conservation of mass; normal human medical/trauma scenes that Just. Don't. Work; people walking across deserts bare-headed in the middle of the day with no water; and, people navigating through forests using moss on the sides of trees, I'm here to tell you that you can break your book for large swathes of readers if you just

take it on faith that you didn't do anything dumb. If you're writing outside your narrow area of expertise, you probably did something dumb. (Ask me how I know...)

- **Story development:** The question here is *How does my conflict create obstacles that my characters must then solve, and how can they solve these conflicts in a workable, interesting, surprising fashion?... Without cheating?*

So these are the questions we are here to work through, with the understanding that TIME IS IMPORTANT.

You don't have a lot of it, and you cannot spend your entire novel-writing time budget learning how to smith metal from raw ore, speak fifteen languages fluently, sword fight, spin and weave your own silk from your own mulberry-farm caterpillars, research every possible sex scene from personal experience, build your own house, dig your own well, and make your own electricity from a machine you build with metal you mine and smelt and fuel you create out of potatoes and excrement...

So in the face of mortality and a ticking clock, vast ignorance of huge swathes of everything, and wanting to write books rather than NOT writing books, how do you deal with research that can and will run away on you if you don't keep a tight rein on it?

Start here.

- Good questions narrow the scope of what you need to know.
- Meanwhile, GREAT questions narrow the scope to just one answer.

Always try to ask GREAT questions... **with this caveat.** No good or great question can be answered with the word YES or the word NO.

So let's work through the seven great questions you need to answer when figuring out what you need to research — and what you don't.

The Seven Research Questions

1. **Worldbuilding:** *What do I have to have in place to write in this world?*
2. **Set design:** *What is this book's world going to look like, feel like, taste like, smell like, sound like?*
3. **Language style:** *How do I as the writer want the narrative to sound?*

And...

4. **Language creation/ usage/:** *How will my various characters sound when they speak?*
5. **Magic/science systems development:** *How do the critical processes my characters use to get work done... work?*
6. **Biology construction:** *How do my characters survive in their world?*
7. **Story development:** *How does my conflict create obstacles that my characters must then solve, and how can they solve these conflicts in a workable, interesting, surprising fashion?... Without cheating?*

You must answer each of these questions for every novel you write.

And if you want to make a career of this, you want to make some portion of your world unique so that people can only read *your* books to get *your* stories.

But you don't have to Tolkien this. (Yes, I turned Tolkien into a verb. I'm defining it as "Creating everything in your universe down to the most minute detail.")

You do not have to build a language, draw maps, invent your own magic system or futuristic science, build your own biologically feasible aliens, or hang your plot on conflicts created from your own invented languages and mythology.

You have three research processes you can follow when answering your Seven Questions.

- The first and least research-intensive is: **Write Lightly Research**
- The second, intermediate research path is: **Pick Your Fights Research**
- The third, intensive research road is: **Eat the Elephant Research**

Write Lightly Research

Write Lightly means that before you invent anything enormous, you make the smallest change possible first, and see how that works.

I'm going to refer to [Jan Karon, author of the Mitford books](#) as my example of someone who has done incredibly well by using Write Lightly Research.

Having read a good chunk of her early work (I recommend at least the first five books of her Mitford series as “feel-good” reads), I know her work well enough to see the worldbuilding in it, and know North Carolina well enough to know that she got the locale and the people right.

So here are the questions again. And I'm going to demonstrate this process by extrapolating answers from her series.

1. **Worldbuilding:** *What do I have to have in place to write in this world?*

ANSWER: A proprietary, trademark-able town set in North Carolina — so... Mitford — not a real town, so the writer can own everything and everyone in it, and never having to worry about being on the wrong end of a lawsuit.

2. **Set design:** *What is this book's world going to look like, feel like, taste like, smell like, sound like?*

ANSWER: The small towns in the area where Jan Karon lives.

3. **Language style:** *How do I as the writer want the narrative to sound?*

ANSWER: Plain, simple, invisible.

4. **Language creation/ usage/:** *How will my various characters sound when they speak?*

ANSWER: They speak with a light version of the local dialect the writer hears every day.

5. **Magic/science systems development:** *How do the critical processes my characters use to get work done... work?*

ANSWER: The stories are about interpersonal relationships, so work in this world is light background — she does a bit of digging into the life and work processes of being the pastor of a small-town church, and you get some info on the pastor's housekeeper's job, but other work is generally window dressing.

6. **Biology construction:** *How do my characters survive in their world?*

ANSWER: They live in a normal, human-friendly, Standard American Small-Town environment as the apex predators, in a society where most folks get their food from the grocery store. They are not hunted. So... Biology construction can be safely ignored.

7. **Story development:** *How does my conflict create obstacles that my characters must then solve, and how can they solve these conflicts in a workable, interesting, surprising fashion?... Without cheating?*

ANSWER: There are no linguistic, technological, environmental, or cultural roadblocks to overcome. Everyone in each story is from essentially the same background, and the only step they have to work out is a variation on "What would a good person do in this situation?"

So how does this turn into the research Jan Karon has to do for her novels?

CHARACTERS: The pastor is just a nice man, a decent human being. The town itself is pleasant, with the sorts of problems small towns both create and represent. Mitford could be any of dozens of tiny towns in the mountains of North Carolina and up and down the run of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The folks who are part of the congregation and the town are ordinary, contemporary-ish, slightly old-fashioned small-town Americans — they're decent, generally honest folks with small problems. Karon might have to research small details of individual jobs, but only as background, not as something that drives the plot.

There is no magic in this series, no sense of wonder. There is no science — no complex “how does it work” to get wrong.

There are no literary pyrotechnics in the writing, in the plotting, or in the conflicts. In the books I've read, she tells the story linearly, from start to finish. From memory, she sticks to third person, and almost exclusively to the pastor's point of view in close third, where you can hear what he's thinking. I vaguely remember (and might be wrong about this) that the housekeeper had some POV scenes in one book, but they didn't stand out enough that I can be sure. (FULL DISCLOSURE: I read the first five in the late 90s, and have not read any of the rest, or read them since, so later books in the series might not be as good, and I may have some details wrong.)

This series is charming. For those of us who love small towns, it reminds us of the best of what we left behind, and what we would love to recapture.

So... What kind of research does Jan Karon have to do for her series? Damn little. She lives now or has lived in the past inside the world she writes, and she writes from right in the middle of a safe zone where she already knows most of everything she needs to know.

To emulate Karon's simplicity, you would:

- **Worldbuilding:** Take your current location, give it a different name, and write only the parts of it with which you are personally familiar.
- **Set design:** Use places you've lived or worked and change the names and addresses.

- **Language style:** Use the POV and narrative style that you find least challenging. Some folks find first person natural, some love third.
- **Language creation/usage:** Don't worldbuild — the instant you start building a world, you start inventing places and names and technologies and cultures that require linguistic consistency, and the base of that is a bare-minimum run through Reductionary Alphabetization and "Concepts that Don't Exist in English" (or your first language.) (Create a Language Clinic)
- **Magic/science systems development:** Use only what you already know you know because you have done it— characters have jobs or activities you pursue, stories are based more on character interaction,
- **Biology construction:** Humans and creatures you personally are familiar with *because you've lived with them*. For most folks, this is cats, dogs, goldfish, or parakeets.
- **Story development:** You can use anything you already know well — so if you're a rocket scientist, you can write great rocket science stories. If you're a doctor, you can write medical mysteries. If you're a world traveller, you can write stories set in exotic locations. The thing here, however, is to remember to only write what you KNOW you know, and not get sucked into writing what you think you know because it's standing right next to the thing you know you know. If you've lived on a farm but never had horses, don't throw in horses because you think the rules that apply to them are the same as the rules for cows, or donkeys, or mules. They aren't.

The closest I've ever gotten to Writing Lightly is with my paranormal suspense romances (tucked into my Kate Aeon pseudonym, initially published under my real name):

- [*Midnight Rain*](#)
- [*I See You*](#)

- [*Last Girl Dancing*](#)
- *Night Echoes* (not yet back in print at the time I'm doing this lesson)

I included some supernatural elements in each book, and worked off of my own familiarity with EMT/paramedic and medical characters in the *Midnight Rain* and *I See You* (I did some brushing up on then-current practices, but for me that was light research because I already knew the basics). The tarot reading came from my own (miserable) experience reading tarot for a call-up line, a job at which I lasted one month.

Desperation and slow-paying publishers can lead to a wacky work history.

For *Night Echoes*, I drew on light childhood experience doing construction with my grandfather, adult experience helping out a bit when my parents built their house, and on my own brief experience working as a commercial artist, plus a childhood and teenager-dom of painting and drawing.

Last Girl Dancing was the one book for this group of novels where I went heavy, and that was on police work. *BUT... I went heavy in revision.*

In the first draft, I wrote light, building the story around what I thought I knew. When I finished the first draft, I gave the book to a police detective who volunteered to consult for me, and I asked for him to tell me what I got wrong.

When he told me I didn't do any worse than most police shows, I told him to be brutal, because I wanted to get it right. He was a **brilliant** consultant, and when he realized I was serious, he tore *LGD* apart for me and I used my mistakes and his comments to build something that worked.

There are a couple of details he got specific about that I left out of the book, because they were pretty cutting edge at the time. Don't want to help the bad guys, you know?

— — —

Even if you don't write EVERYTHING lightly, eschewing deep research, you take keep some elements of the process light. Here are demos of that.

Light Language/ Usage/ Style

The first part of your research here is this question...

- *How do I as the writer want the narrative to sound?*

The “one-answer” approach to style is to do your best to *avoid intentional style*. Only use words you use in your daily vocabulary, never consult a thesaurus for a “better” word, and don't try to impress anyone. Write the first word you think on your page and let that word stay where it is for the entire first draft.

The second part of this is about your characters and their voices...

- *How will my various characters sound when they speak?*

My favorites of the characters I've written are Cadence Drake and Talyn. With both of them, I'm writing inside deeply built, enormously complex worlds ... but when these two characters talk, they do it in something very like my internal voice. When they think, they think the same appallingly rude things I would think if faced with the difficult situations and difficult people they're facing. They are me without the censor of needing to be polite in the face of social pressure.

They're raw, sometimes funny, definitely not folks you'd want to take to a fancy-dress party.

Example here being my female MC, Talyn, talking with a co-worker about the fact that the co-worker wants her fiancé to buy her a house before she agrees to sleep with him (or marry him).

Talyn makes the observation that the only difference between the co-worker and the whores she and the co-worker are walking past on the dock is that the co-worker wants a bigger payment before she puts out.

That might not be something you would say to someone — or even think and keep to yourself. It's something I've thought numerous times when listening to women talk to each other about what they expect to get when they sleep with someone.

I suspect my inner voice might be the rudest person on the planet.

But the point is that there are things you DO think but don't say, do believe but keep to yourself... and if you give this bluntly honest voice to a main character, you don't have to research to get the voice right, to make your character a real human being. You do to that just by being honest, by letting all those things you never let yourself say slide right onto the page.

And the result for readers who are perfect for you is this connection with a character who dares to say what they don't — and who gives them this happy moment of camaraderie with this person who is the friend they wish they had.

And this character is one you don't need to research. You know him or her. You just have to figure out what you would honestly do, or like to do, or figure out what your blunt and fearless inner voice would do or say in the situations into which you dump your character.

One DON'Ts:

- **Don't do accents, even your own.** Instead, use the regionalisms and slang folks in your area use:

He lies like a rug.

Well, aren't you sweet?

Bless her heart. (The polite southern woman's "f— that bitch")

Next, we look at dealing with keeping your effort small and comfortable when dealing with Magic, Science, and How YOUR World Works.

Light Magic/Science Systems

Again, the closer you pull from your own life, the more you can just blow off research entirely while still having a deep, real-feeling world.

- **Magic/science systems development:** *How do the processes my characters use to get work done... work?*

We all have stuff we know.

If you're a student or teacher in a public school, you know how public schools work — you get the social structure of popular and unpopular kids, good and not-great teachers, the hierarchy of teachers with tenure, teachers getting close to retirement, and teachers who are new and naive.

If you're an office worker, you know the social hierarchy of bosses, suck-ups, secretaries, good workers, and slackers.

If you're in the medical field, you know the good nurses and good doctors, the bad nurses and bad doctors, the techs who are sharp and fast, the ones who are just putting in time.

If you're self-employed, you know the gut-check of "not enough money coming in — what can I do to earn some before I lose everything?"

And so on.

This is where you keep your worldbuilding light by writing people who have job and experiences like you, (or for which you can extrapolate magical equivalents).

Here you have the go-to Best Selling Epic of all time, the *Harry Potter* series.

It's "unpopular kid in a British boarding school, with magic."

The research Rowling had to do for this was to invent a one-layer magic system (wave a wand, say some words), and create names for various spells and buildings. She did not need to create a *why* behind the magic, a how-it-works. She used magic as her gimme — the thing readers accepted at face value when they read the series. Witches and wizards come from magical families. They're just born that way.

And ordinary folks are just born that way, so there is no need to explain the process, to delve into the science behind how people can become wizards. If you're not born a wizard, you can't get there from here.

How do you use this?

You take an experience you didn't enjoy, and had to live through, and could not escape. You change the details enough that you can't get sued.

There is no Hogwarts, for example, and Harry is a boy, not a girl, so even if Rowling did go to boarding school and hated it, she cannot be taken to court for exposing the dark side of her miserable years of boarding-school confinement.

Why don't you take happy experiences? Because happy experiences make lousy fiction. They lack conflict, or any need for resolution.

Light Character Creation

If you're keeping the research light, you're going with human beings from your culture, or humanized version of animals with whom you have spent live-together time.

Sapient cats, sapient dogs. Rita Mae Brown (who wrote some very good early fiction) made big bucks and NYT sales writing “Cats As Humans” in her Mrs. Murphy series (which uses the insufferably cute gimmick of crediting her cat as co-author).

Her research for these was “owns cat, likes cat, pretends cat is four-legged human.” While I’m a fan of a lot of her work, these don’t work well for me. But they’re wildly popular, and she’s a superb writer who’s worth investigating for the many ways she’s found to do light character creation.

As for writing humans, you’ve been a child. You are an adult. You know what it feels like to breathe oxygen, to be short of breath. You know what it feels like to have your heart race, to have your pulse pound. You know what it’s like to be sweaty, to be cold, to be happy, to be afraid.

You do not have to research what it’s like to be a human being.

If you set your story in an area similar in technology and climate to the place where you live, you know exactly how regional biology feels. And some of what you *mistake as ordinary* is extraordinary to folks who have never been where you are.

Lots of folks have never experienced snow.

Lots of folks have no idea what palm trees sound like with a light breeze.

Lots of folks have no idea what it’s like living in a temperate zone forest, or a desert, or on arctic tundra, or on a tiny island.

No matter where you are, it’s exotic and wonderful to someone if you take the time to capture the sights and sounds and smells and tastes.

And you don’t have to research much if any of it.

Now on to intermediate research.

Pick Your Fights Research

This is what it sounds like. **Pick Your Fights** means you use a lot of the real world to keep the footprint of your worldbuilding down.

But with **Pick Your Fights**, you know you're going to have some areas where you have to put in time, and if you don't want to do a MASSIVE retroactive worldbuilding orgy in which you have to fix everything in revisions because you built the first draft on the fly, you'll research (or Make Shit Up) for your ONE topic.

Let's start with real-world, where you have to do REAL research.

You use every bit of Write Light technique that you can apply to your story.

In the one area where you decide you are going to go heavy, you decide in advance how heavy, and what areas you're going to research.

For this, I'm going to bring back ***Last Girl Dancing***, where I wrote what I thought I knew for the police stuff... but where I researched the daylights out of stripping.

To the best of my knowledge, women don't frequent strip clubs as customers, and I was forty-ish when I wrote LGD, and pretty chubby at the time, so even if I had been daring enough to do it, there was no way anyone was going to hire me to strip.

That left research.

So I searched "how to be a stripper."

At the time, there was one ebook on the subject, sold from an award-winning Canadian stripper's website, and this sold for forty bucks.

I bought it no questions asked.

And it was excellent. It covered things like house moms, costumes, dance moves, what fiction gets right and wrong about stripping (no lingerie!), the money you could make, some of the dangers and problems, and a lot more.

From there, I wrote the book using what I'd learned from my one research source.

And when it was done, I found a forum for strippers and guys who liked to talk to strippers, and I created an account, and explained who I was. Explained that I was a published novelist writing a book on contract, and I needed to know if I got the stripping right from both the strippers and the customers perspectives.

I got a surprising number of volunteers, and got some amazing feedback, and most of it was “you got this right” or “you were close, but in the US, it's...”

And I found out that most strip joints in the US don't have house moms, and most dancers wish they did — that the house mom is a layer of protection between management and the girls. I used that in my revision.

There are some genres that are better for **Pick Your Fight** research than others.

Urban and suburban and rural fantasy are all good for this — you can, for example, have high-heeled city witches fighting crime in a San Francisco that features werewolves at the bar and vampires running the city council.

And your premise is simply that the world is just like our world, with the same tech, except magic works too, and magical creatures live alongside the mundane ones.

So all you have to research is how you want your magical creatures to work. You can, if you want, use them as your gimme — just J.K. Rowling it,

say they're there because they've always been there, and only some people can see them.

Or you can build in a “reason why” that gives us mundanes a chance to imagine that we might be able to live in your world — that there's something we could do, or could have done to us, that would let us enter your world.

And that's the part you research/worldbuild. How does your special thing work.

And that part you make as thin or as deep as you want — if you make sure you're telling good stories, there will be an audience for both the thin-as-paper development and the built-so-much-you-could-live-there kind.

My Examples

I'm going to use my three Cat Creek novels (Series name: The World Gates) — *Memory of Fire*, *The Wreck of Heaven*, and *Gods Old and Dark* — as my example for this. For this series I deliberately kept the worldbuilding **LIGHT-ISH**.

For World Gates, I wrote contemporary crossover fantasy, which is more intensive than urban/suburban/rural, because there are two worlds: The real world we live in, and the created world the characters cross into.

In the Cat Creek novels, I had a tiny contemporary rural/small-town setting for this world, and an interconnected series of other worlds reachable by moving upworld or downworld, where magic use in one world had an effect in other worlds up and down the world chain.

The “our world” part of the story takes place in Cat Creek, which is a made-up town set in the sandhills of North Carolina. I based it on the tiny town of Gibson, North Carolina. The people are all invented, but the houses and businesses came from templates of places I knew from when I lived in the area.

And I pulled heavily from regional flora and fauna, customs, and folk types while writing all three books. Even though I was living in Georgia and Florida when I wrote them, the fifteen years I'd spent in the North Carolina gave me food for a lot of fiction.

So when I introduced dragons and Old Gods, and a crossover mechanism that took a widowed mother and her young son into danger in one of the deadly, connected worlds, I did little research.

I did a diagram of the way the worlds connected to each other, figured out how ordinary folks became Sentinels, came up with the process of dealing with dragons, and figured out what happened when you died in a world and someone brought you back.

And I worked out a magic that gave folks special powers in other worlds up and down the world chain, but none in there own. It was from travelers along the world chain that all worlds got their myths of gods and demons.

Here was how I answered the Seven Research Questions.

The Seven Research Questions

1. **Worldbuilding:** *What do I have to have in place to write in this world?*

ANSWER: Write the small town of Gibson, North Carolina from memory.

PLUS: Worlds that connect directly through the several guarded passageways in my fictional Cat Creek.

2. **Set design:** *What is this book's world going to look like, feel like, taste like, smell like, sound like?*

ANSWER: Cat Creek is utterly mundane until visited by other-worlders who pose a danger to the place.

And the other worlds are all unique, but with events in them that have repercussions on the other worlds chained to them. Changes made in one affect the others in ways no one can predict or control.

3. **Language style:** *How do I as the writer want the narrative to sound?*

ANSWER: I want the Cat Creek part to be plain and straightforward — to keep my style invisible. I want the fantasy worlds part to have a distinctly different, beautiful high-fantasy style.

4. **Language creation/ usage/:** *How will my various characters sound when they speak?*

ANSWER: I'm keeping everything in English, but with species/biology-adapted sounds for the English. And with the creation of some alien/foreign words and concepts.

5. **Magic/science systems development:** *How do the critical processes my characters use to get work done... work?*

ANSWER: This series requires a carefully worked-out magic system thought through in advance of writing, so that I can prevent breaking later stories by contradicting earlier ones. Planning on seven books — very important to get this right straight out of the gate. (Followed, of course, by series cancelled at three, right in the damn middle.)

6. **Biology construction:** *How do my characters survive in their world?*

*ANSWER: I have all sorts of non-human creatures and intelligent aliens, but the way the world-chain works is that like worlds connect to like worlds up and down the chain. So all the worlds accessible through the gates in this particular line are going to be Oxygen, Water, Carbon worlds where travellers can move from one to the other without risk of life **from the world itself**. Risk from the world's inhabitants is a given.*

7. **Story development:** *How does my conflict create obstacles that my characters must then solve, and how can they solve these conflicts in a workable, interesting, surprising fashion?... Without cheating?*

ANSWER: What happens in one world affects the other worlds, so if someone from one world travels into another world and sets himself up as a god, BAD THINGS will ensue, not just in the world he inhabits, but up and down the world chain.

8. **Set design:** *What is this book's world going to look like, feel like, taste like, smell like, sound like?*

ANSWER: The worlds closest to Earth in the chain are Earth-like, but the lifeforms that evolved are different, the cultures and languages are different, the sciences are different. What people know is different, and what defines "people" is very different.

Some Handy Tips

The less of your "alien terrain" you use, the less research/worldbuilding you have to do.

If you're using cops and robbers as window dressing where this is the subtheme of a romance novel, you can do on-the-fly research on just the bits that are direct answers to questions you ask. Like, "Would a cop be able to search a man getting ready to walk into a bank who looks like he might be carrying a gun?"

If the core story is about cops and robbers, you're going to research the answer to every question you ask.

BUT you don't have to research everything.

Take the time to build out plot cards, and for each plot card, ask, "What question do I have to answer about [cops/robbers/your topic] in this scene."

Research in advance on the questions you've planned, but **ONLY** research those questions, and how your answers will affect your story.

And with that, we go to Eat the Elephant Research.

Eat the Elephant Research

This is where most folks start.

It is:

- Buying or borrowing recommended, authoritative books on the subject
- Talking in person to live folks who know your subject because they live or have lived it,
- Searching the internet for live forums where you can verify credentials of people you're talking with
- And searching for websites that you can verify as authoritative

Here's the ONE thing you keep in mind when Eating the Elephant

Do it one bite at a time.

- Ask ONE question and research the answer you need to know for the part of the story that deals with that one question.
- Move to the next part of the story, and ask the ONE question for which you must have the answer to write THAT part of the story.
- Wash.
- Rinse.

- Repeat.

If you have to know everything before you can start, you'll never start.

And once you have finished writing the book, you can put the book in front of someone who DOES know (most of) everything, and that person can tell you what you got wrong.

And then you can fix it.

And next time you'll know more.

Finally, this is where many folks screw up

You do not dare to use ANY site or any source where the person or people giving you the information are anonymous, no matter what they claim to know, or what authority or experience they claim to hold.

If you cannot verify their credentials on the site, you MUST assume that any information they're giving you is garbage. It might not be. It might be great insider information.

And it might be some wannabe pretending to know something because it makes him or her feel important. But you cannot know which, and if you use THAT information, you're on the hook with every reader who knows better.

Your Turn

Go to the worksheets and put together the questions for which you must have answers now. Aim for lightness — for only researching what you absolutely must have to write right now, and to not expand beyond the answer to your question into Research Creep — the process of convincing yourself that the only way you can write this book now is to Eat the Elephant all in one bite..

Next Week...

The biggest problem most folks have writing description is the fiction version of this:

Walk the reader around, look at a thing, stop to describe it, move the reader a couple steps to the left, look at another thing, stop to describe it.

This is why writers find description boring to write, and why readers find it boring to read.

I have specialized since the beginning of my career (following the receipt of that “Much, much, much much, much too much exposition” rejection slip, anyway) in writing **active** description.

Next week, you’re going to learn to do that.

You can do this!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Holly". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

Holly Lisle

Class Creator, *How to Write a Novel*