GENERAL

how to write a historical novel

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How to Write a Historical Novel: A Step by Step Guide for Aspiring Authors

Writing a historical novel is an exciting way to bring the past to life, blending meticulous research with imaginative storytelling. Whether you're drawn to the roaring 1920s, the age of exploration, or the tumultuous days of the French Revolution, a historical novel lets you explore real events through the eyes of compelling characters. This guide will walk you through every stage of the process— from choosing a period to polishing the final manuscript— while keeping SEO best practices in mind so your work can reach readers who love historical fiction.

1. Pick Your Era and Focus

Before you can start drafting, you need a clear idea of the time period and the story you want to tell. Historical fiction thrives on a strong, specific setting. Ask yourself:

- What era excites you most? 18th century England, 20th century Vietnam, or the Renaissance?
- Which event or trend do you want to explore? The rise of the Roman Empire, the American Civil War, or the industrial revolution?
- What angle can you bring? A woman's perspective in a male dominated society, a soldier's experience in wartime, or a merchant's travels across continents?

Choosing a narrow focus helps you maintain authenticity and avoid overwhelming yourself with too many details.

2. Immerse Yourself in Research

Historical accuracy is the backbone of a credible novel. The more you know, the easier it is to weave facts into narrative seamlessly.

2.1 Primary Sources

These are documents created during the time you're writing about—letters, diaries, newspapers, government records, and photographs. Libraries, archives, and digital collections (e.g., *Europeana*, *Library of Congress*, *National Archives*) are treasure troves.

2.2 Secondary Sources

Books and scholarly articles provide context, analysis, and synthesized information. Look for works by reputable historians and experts. Annotated bibliographies can guide you toward the most relevant material.

2.3 Visual and Audio Aids

Watching documentaries, listening to period music, and visiting museums can help you feel the atmosphere of the era. These sensory details enrich your descriptions and dialogue.

2.4 Create a Research Log

Use a spreadsheet or a dedicated notebook to record sources, quotes, and key facts. Tag them by theme—politics, culture, technology—to reference quickly during drafting.

3. Build a Timeline of Events

A chronological framework keeps your plot grounded in real history. Outline major events, political shifts, and social trends that intersect with your story's arc. This timeline also helps prevent anachronisms and ensures your characters' actions are plausible.

4. Develop Authentic Characters

Great historical fiction balances fact with relatable human drama. Here's how to create believable characters:

- Historical Background: Give each character a social class, occupation, and cultural background that fits the period.
- Motivations & Conflicts: What drives them? Survival, ambition, love? These universal themes resonate across time.
- Voice & Dialogue: Avoid modern slang unless your character is a time traveler. Use period-appropriate idioms and speech patterns.
- Physical & Psychological Traits: Describe how the era's diet, hygiene, and medical knowledge influence their health.

5. Craft a Plot that Intersects with History

Your story should weave personal stakes into the broader historical context. Consider the following structure:

1. Inciting Incident: An event that thrusts the protagonist into the historical crisis.
2. Rising Action: Challenges that reflect real obstacles of the era—blockades, censorship, or social upheaval.
3. Climax: A pivotal moment where personal and historical stakes collide.
4. Resolution: Consequences that echo the real outcomes of the historical event.

Remember to keep the narrative pace engaging while respecting factual timelines.

6. Use the "Show, Don't Tell" Technique

Let the setting and period details speak for themselves. Instead of stating, "The war had devastated the city," describe the crumbling streets, the scent of smoke, and the weary eyes of the citizens. Show how the past shapes the present.

7. Write with Authentic Language

Balance readability with period authenticity. Here are tips:

- Use archaic words sparingly to avoid alienating readers.
- Incorporate period phrases naturally into dialogue.
- Maintain consistent verb tenses; past tense is common in historical fiction.
- Consider footnotes or endnotes for obscure references, but use them judiciously.

8. Draft an Outline Before Writing

Outlines keep you organized and prevent plot holes. A simple structure:

- Act 1: Set up setting, characters, and inciting incident.
- Act 2: Develop conflict, subplots, and historical events.
- Act 3: Resolve personal and historical arcs.

Include chapter summaries and key scenes to track progress.

9. Embrace the Revision Process

Historical novels require meticulous editing. Focus on:

- Accuracy Checks: Verify dates, names, and events against your research log.
- Consistency: Ensure character voices, timelines, and settings remain coherent.
- Pacing: Balance exposition with action; avoid info dumps.
- Clarity: Simplify complex historical explanations without losing depth.

Consider hiring a professional editor with a background in historical fiction to catch subtle errors.

10. Add Rich World Building Elements

Immersive details elevate your novel. Think about:

- Architecture: Describe buildings, streets, and interiors with sensory detail.
- Technology: Explain how transportation, communication, and industry shape daily life.
- Social Norms: Highlight gender roles, class divisions, and cultural practices.
- Food & Clothing: Use accurate descriptions to ground scenes.

11. Manage Historical Accuracy vs. Creative License

While authenticity is vital, creative storytelling sometimes requires bending facts. Use discretion:

- When altering a historical event, ensure it serves the narrative and does not misrepresent key truths.
- Provide context in an author's note if you take significant liberties.
- Respect sensitive topics—like slavery or war crimes—by handling them with care and nuance.

12. Prepare for Publication

Once your manuscript is polished, you're ready to publish. Consider these steps:

12.1 Choose Your Path

- Traditional Publishing: Requires a literary agent; offers wider distribution.
- Hybrid Publishing: Combines agency and self publishing services.
- Self Publishing: Full control over design, marketing, and royalties.

12.2 Write a Compelling Query Letter

Highlight your unique angle, research depth, and target audience. Keep it concise—ideally one page.

12.3 Design a Professional Cover

Historical novels benefit from evocative covers that hint at the era. Hire a designer familiar with period aesthetics.

12.4 Marketing Your Novel

- Leverage SEO by optimizing your website and Amazon listings with keywords like "historical fiction," "historical novel," and the specific era.
- Engage readers on social media platforms—Pinterest for period visuals, Reddit's r/historicalfiction, and Goodreads groups.
- Offer free samples, author interviews, and behind the scenes research insights.

13. Engage with the Historical Fiction Community

Networking can open doors and provide support.

- Join writing groups such as Historical Novel Society or Society of Historical Fiction Writers.
- Attend conferences—e.g., Historical Fiction Writers Association annual meeting.
- Participate in workshops to refine your craft and receive feedback.

Conclusion

Writing a historical novel is a rewarding journey that blends rigorous research with creative storytelling. By selecting a focused era, immersing yourself in primary and secondary sources, crafting authentic characters, and balancing historical facts with narrative flair, you can create a compelling narrative that transports readers across time. Remember to outline, revise diligently, and embrace the rich world building opportunities that history offers. Whether you choose traditional publishing or self publish, your dedication to accuracy and artistry will resonate with readers who crave the depth and drama of the past. Happy writing!

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