

Research—How much is too much?

Most writers (myself included) can't look up a word in the dictionary without stopping to read other nifty stuff along the way. (Yeah, writers are probably some of the few people who find dictionaries cool.) Sometimes I get so engrossed in reading other stuff that I forget the word I was looking up in the first place. The same thing can happen with research.

For certain genres, it's critical to do at least some research before you start writing. Say you're doing an urban fantasy, thriller, mystery, romance, or pretty much anything that takes place in an actual non-make-believe place. You have to know about the place where your story is set, pertinent details about your characters' professions, and any items that your characters might either have or use—for example a Prada bag or night vision goggles—or, even more intriguing, both. When you're dealing with actual places and real things, it's critical that you get the details right. Your readers will know, and they'll call you on it if you try to fake anything. But at the same time, we writers can get so engrossed in digging out those fun facts and details that before we know it, our deadlines are a heck of a lot closer than they should be. So do the research you need to get it right, then get back to work. You can always read more about Elizabethan country house architecture later.

Then there's the question of how much of your research to include. When it comes to weaving in authentic details about your protagonist's career, for instance, your readers don't want to know every aspect of a character's daily work life. However, well-placed details that pertain to your character's personality or have a direct impact on the plot will make the story more real and help draw your readers in. The devil's in the details, so never underestimate their importance for enriching your story.

However, research doesn't have to be dry fact finding. It can help you to differentiate your characters and your work. It's important to read what's popular in your chosen genre, so you know what's been done to death. And since you'll have plenty of competition for readers' attention, whatever you write has to be different, or take what the readers expect and turn it on its head for a fun twist. It's worked great for me with my goblins. Most people think of goblins as gnarled, ugly, with post-nasal drip, and either stupid or only moderately clever. I went with tall, sexy, chiseled features, and a formidable intellect. It was different from any other goblin out there, and it's gotten me a lot of nice attention.

Research can help you set your work apart by enriching your book with details, inspiring you to strike out in a different direction, and taking a character type that's become a cliché and spinning it into something fresh. Something that is uniquely you.