

Historical Fiction Assignment

Week of Feb .2

So what is historical fiction? Fiction set in the past. It's a story set in a time that you didn't live through, so the only way you can know what it was like is through research.

What kind of research? We're going to spend part of February in the library. We'll talk about what kind of sources you can use but here's one rule: **No Wikipedia sources.** I might make exceptions for certain online sources—like if you're writing about the White House and want to use the official White House Web site—but mostly I want you to avoid Internet sites. They're untrustworthy a lot of the time because it's hard to tell who's writing the information.

What sort of material are you looking for?

1) *Get a general idea of what's going on.* Find a source or two that gives you an overview of the time period you're interested in. Don't spend too long on this. You need to understand the big picture, but you're more interested in what it was like to live during this time.

2) *You want to find out the specifics of your setting.* So what do I mean by "what it was like to live during this time?" What kind of clothes did you wear? What was your house like? Was there, for instance, electricity? Candlelight? How did you travel? What did you eat? What's a profession you might have? What are books you would read or songs you would sing? This kind of detail gets a little easier the more you know about the main character in your story. For instance, if I'm writing about a nurse, I'm going to want to find out what hospitals were like.

3) *Photos are always good.* Photos give great details about everything from clothes to pets to tools and food. If you find a book with great photos, study them closely and take notes. Try to imagine yourself in them—how do things feel or smell?

4) *First-hand accounts are excellent—diaries, memoirs, etc.* Diaries will tell you how people felt, what scared them, what they were excited about and what they dreaded. You'll get great personal details from diaries, and it'll make the past more real to you to get inside someone's head who actually lived through it. Plus, you'll probably get great details that help you with specifics. You might read in a history book that women wore starched crinoline in the 1700s, but a girl's diary might let you know that crinoline was scratchy and uncomfortable and she hated wearing it.

5) *Keep your story in mind—don't get lost in research that's not related.* Remember what you want to write about, and try to focus on details that will help with that specific story. Don't let your research get too big. So if you're going to write a story about a woman dressing up like a man so she can fight in the Revolutionary War, you don't need to know

every battle fought in the war. (You might need to pick one or two for her to fight in.) You don't need to know all the political causes of the war. Spend maybe half an hour learning about the war itself, then focus on researching what it was like to be a soldier fighting a battle.

Note-taking:

If I were you, I'd jot down some headings/questions on several sheets of notebook paper, leaving half a page in between each topic. They might be something like "1) General Info on Lewis & Clark [or whatever your historical event is], 2) Descriptions of what they saw on the trail; 3) Descriptions of what they did; 4) Dangerous moments, 5) What They Ate and How They Made Camp, 6) Encounters with Native Americans, 7) Miscellaneous.

Then you can jot down your notes from each book under the right category. It'll make it easier to sort through your notes at the end. (Remember to mention which book the information came from. You might number each one of your sources, so, say, *The Diary of Lewis & Clark* would be #1, and any note from that book would have a "1" by it.)