

THE NEWBIE'S GUIDE

to

WRITING

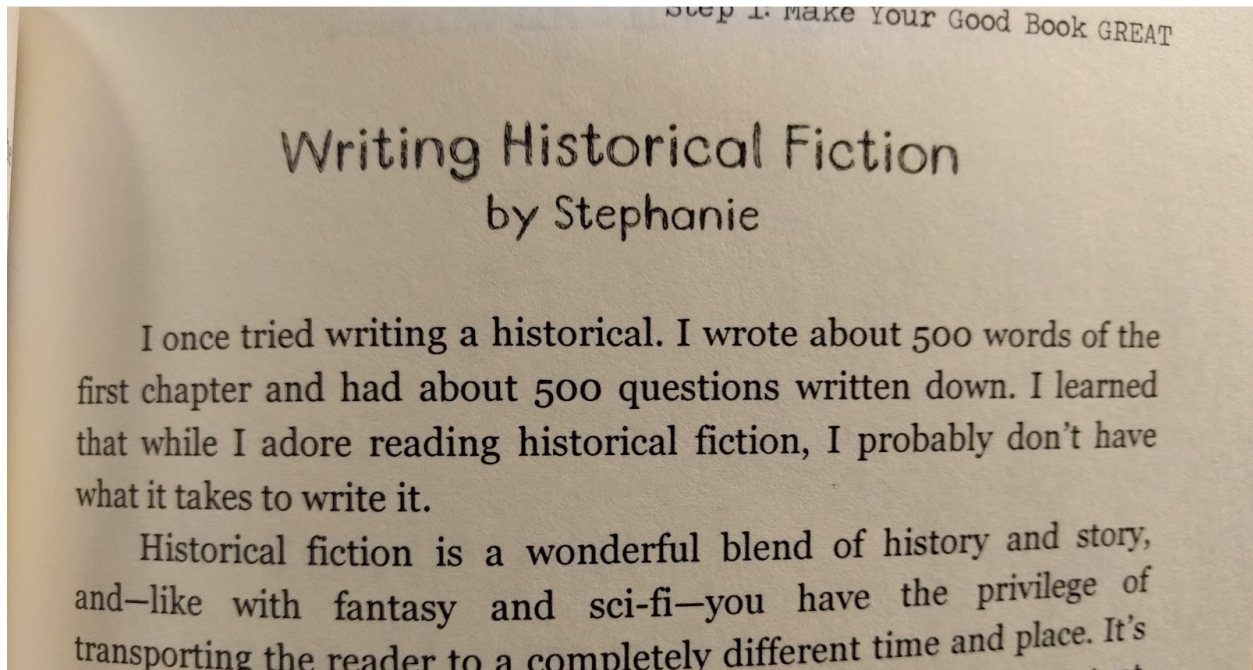
*Historical
Fiction*



STEPHANIE MORRILL

The first time I started a historical novel, I made it through about 500 words before I closed out the document and declared, “I’m just not cut out to write historical fiction!”

I even documented this in my 2013 release, [Go Teen Writers: Edit Your Novel](#) that I co-wrote with [Jill Williamson](#):



Then, just months later, I had An Idea. Not just a story idea, but A STORY IDEA, if you know what I mean.

As I put away laundry in my daughter’s room, the idea plopped into my head: *Veronica Mars* meets *Downton Abbey*. I saw the book as an amateur sleuth story with a teenage girl detective and a rich historical setting.

I wanted to write it so badly because I wanted to *read* it so badly.

So, my first piece of advice is this: If you want to write a historical novel—or any novel, really—I think you must have an idea that you are head-over-heels in love with. That first time I tried to write a historical novel, I had only vague notions about a story that involved the World Series of 1919 and maybe a boarding school.

Anything vague can become frustrating in writing, but it’s especially true for

historical fiction. You need specific details to hang your story on, and a wishy-washy notion of what you maybe, probably, kinda, sorta think your storyworld will look like simply isn't enough.

If you want to wade into the rewarding waters of writing historical or historically-inspired fiction, wait for the idea you're madly in love with. Once you have that, the rest of the advice in this tutorial will be much easier to apply.

As soon as I had *Veronica Mars* meets *Downton Abbey* (which became [The Lost Girl of Astor Street](#) and released in February 2017 from Blink/HarperCollins) I was so hooked on the idea that I knew I had to figure out how to do this whole write-a-historical thing.

Setting

I'm fortunate in that my best friend, [Roseanna White](#), happens to be a historical fiction writer. That's handy, right? I sent her an email that was a half-excited, half-panicked, rambling mess that boiled down to, "What do I do first?!"

She said, "Before you can do much of anything, you need to know where your story is happening and at what point in history. Like, as specific as you can get. Then you'll know what's worth researching."

This is brilliant, and it's become the place I always start when I have a new historical idea. Your first job is to narrow down your time and place. With some stories, that's easy. With others . . . not so much. Let's explore what to do in either situation.

If your story idea comes with a time and location included

Some story ideas are kind enough to come as a package deal with a time and place.

Like my idea of, "What if a Caucasian girl was in love with a Japanese American boy, and he was taken away to the concentration camps during WWII?" This idea became [Within These Lines](#), which released in 2019 from Blink/HarperCollins. I knew

the story would be set on the west coast of the United States in 1942, because that's when and where the Japanese Americans lived when they were taken away.

Or maybe you want to write a story that involves a character witnessing Jesus dying on the cross ([*A Stray Drop of Blood* by Roseanna M. White](#)) or about a real life orphanage scandal in the 1930s ([*Before We Were Yours* by Lisa Wingate](#)). Those are ideas that quite conveniently come with details like when and where already solved for you. Even if they're just broad strokes.

Next, your job is to get super specific about time and location.

Within These Lines went from being set on the "west coast" to San Francisco, because my character's uncle was serving a sentence in Alcatraz. (If you've read the book, you know this didn't make it into the final cut.) Once I decided on San Francisco, I then had to narrow to a neighborhood. And then a street.

Same with timing. Did I want to start before the bombing of Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941) or after? These are the kinds of decisions you'll need to make even when you already know your general time and setting. You can keep this timeline flexible while you're in the brainstorming stage, but it's wise to be on the lookout for what kind of historical events will impact your story, and how you want to fit your plot around them.

What to do now: Make yourself generally familiar with your chosen era and time. You're still in the early stages of exploring, so I would recommend not buying any books yet. (I know it's hard!) Use the internet and look for what your library has. Request an Interlibrary Loan or two if you need additional resources. Your goal right now is just to familiarize yourself with the era and location so that you can make informed choices about specific locations and dates.

If your story idea does NOT come with a time and place

But some historical ideas don't come with a fixed time or location. Like *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*. Since my concept was, "Veronica Mars meets *Downton Abbey*," that left me like, "Okay . . . when and where should I set this story?"

I could have told a similar story in tons of different time and place combinations.

1930s New Orleans. 1880s Rio de Janeiro. 1910 Reykjavic, Iceland. How do you pick?

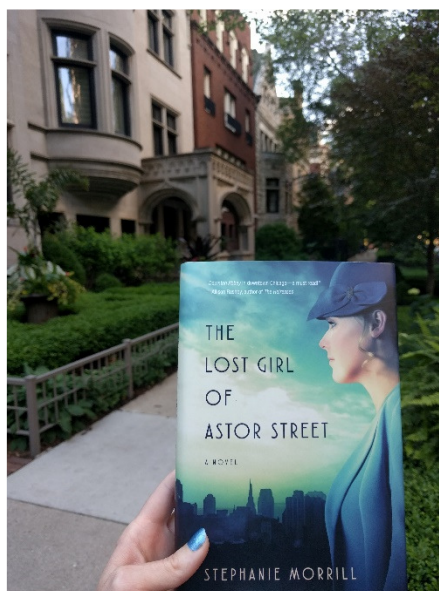
I think it's best to start with your own curiosity and interests. Is there a time or place you're interested in or would like to know more about?

You're looking for a place that won't just be a pretty backdrop, but will offer its own push and pull of the story and characters. A time and place that has something going on, something of interest to look at.

The 1920s was the first choice I made for *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*. My reasons were vague at first. I didn't want to deal with wars, so the teens and forties were out. The depression sounded, well, depressing, so I skipped that one. And I liked the hats girls wore in the 1920s. Done!

For Americans, 1920s is best known for prohibition (it was illegal to sell alcohol in America) and the lawlessness that came with it, especially in New York City and Chicago. I'm a Midwestern girl, and I've always loved Chicago, so I said, "Okay, 1920s Chicago. That's where I'm setting this story."

To find my neighborhood, I asked a friend of mine who grew up in Chicago for her thoughts on what would be an affluent neighborhood. She suggested the Gold Coast, right off Michigan Avenue, which at the time was called The Astor Street district. As soon as I "visited" via Google Street View, I was hooked. (After the book was published, I got to visit in real life too!)



I picked my specific year because of when cloche hats became popular (1924), and my season based on when my character wouldn't be too clogged up with school (the summer).

To pick a really good time and place for your story, you might need to spend a little more time thinking about what will happen in it. Like for me, before I made my choices, I knew my teenage girl sleuth would be looking for her missing best friend, who disappeared from their safe, beautiful neighborhood. That gave me a few clues about what my setting would ideally have.

Again, there's no right or wrong with this. I could have told the story I wanted in Sydney, Australia during the winter of 1875, but that's not what I was naturally curious about. Follow your natural curiosities, because they will carry you through the hours of research ahead of you.

If your story idea is just borrowing a historical time and location

But maybe you're not writing a true historical. Maybe instead you're writing a fantasy or paranormal novel, and you're actually borrowing an era or historical setting for world building purposes.

This is true for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series, which are medieval fantasy. Fantasy can be set in any era you like. [Shades of Milk and Honey by Mary Robinette Kowal](#) is a regency fantasy, or [The Scorpio Races by Maggie Stiefvater](#) has an early 20th century British feel to it. You can also add a fantasy twist to a familiar story, like Nadine Brandes's [Romanov](#).

If you're a new writer and working on a historically-inspired novel, it's easy to think, "It's fantasy. It doesn't need to be historically accurate."

True. But if you want your readers to get immersed in the storyworld, the historical details do need to *feel* authentic. Like it would be weird if Frodo picked up the telephone to call the Shire and see how everyone back home is doing, right? That would pull you right out of the story because the characters are using lanterns and swords, so logically a phone has no place in their technology. The setting needs to feel authentic for the reader to get lost in it, and historical inaccuracies break the authentic feel.

A fab resource for developing your fantasy or science fiction storyworld is [Jill Williamson's *Storyworld First*](#). This will walk you through an incredible amount of storyworld details.

What to do now: Pick your era and do some general research. For example, if your story is a medieval setting, a book like [The Time Traveler's Guide To Medieval England](#) by Ian Mortimer would be a good place to start. Unless you're doing an alt-history type of story (like "What if the Confederates won the Civil War?") you don't need details about specific historical events, but rather details of day-to-day life. For fun—and to push yourself creatively—try to think about what would change if you lifted up your story and plopped it into another era.

The settings within the setting

After I picked my time and place for *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*, I realized I needed my places within the place. What kind of house did Piper live in? Where did she go to school? Where did she hang out with friends?

How do you go about figuring this out?

Generally speaking, the farther you go back in history, the fewer resources you will find. There are huge differences when writing a story set in the 1920s versus a story set in a very well-documented era like World War II. I'm grateful to be a historical writer in the era of the internet, because that's the first place I head when I'm trying to figure out details like where my character will go to school or hang out with her friends. (We will get to research tips in a later section.)

For *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*, once I had picked a neighborhood for my character, I hopped on Google Maps and ran a search for schools around her. This gave me a couple of choices. But of course not all these schools that exist now also existed in the 1920s, and not all the schools that were around then are still up and running.

So then I ran an internet search for "Chicago high schools 1920s." This helped me find a database that a beautiful individual created for all Illinois high schools. They have a lot of scanned yearbooks and ways to connect with people from your graduating class, and in the process of poking around on there, I found an all-girls Catholic high school

located just a few blocks from Piper's house that closed down in the 1960s. I decided this was where she would go.

But then I ran into some problems that led me to wonder if this was the best choice.

Is it okay to make up a town or place in historical fiction?

Because I'm a Protestant girl who attended an all-girls Catholic high school, my choice for Piper's school didn't strike me as a problem until I researched more about the 1920s. As I learned more about the era and the divide that existed between Catholics and Protestants, I learned that at the time, only Catholics would have attended a Catholic school.

I looked into Lincoln Park High School, the closest public school to Piper. I briefly moved her there, but I struggled with a detail. One of Piper's teachers punishes Piper's behavior by smacking her hand with a ruler. This is historically accurate and maybe even happened at public schools, but since Lincoln Park High School is a real school that still exists, I felt a bit weird saying something undocumented and negative about them.

So instead, I used the Catholic school as inspiration, both in location and classes they offered, and I created my own school, Presley's School for Girls. Later in my story, when Piper goes looking for her missing best friend, I made up other places. A laundromat, a diner, and a tailor. These are places that Piper went only once, and they're not cast in a particularly flattering light. There's no rule that says, "Thou shall not say anything negative about anything real in a book," but for this story, that felt like the right call.

But I used many other real locations as well. I used The Congress Hotel, Madame Galli's Italian restaurant, Pompeii's Pizza, and John Barleycorn, which was a speakeasy at the time. Having a mix of real and invented places is fine. No one will make you turn in your historical writer badge. (Or at least, no one has asked for mine.) You can even make up a whole town, if it makes sense for your story. I'll talk about that after we cover research.

When you publish your historical novel, you'll most likely add some kind of

author's note at the end about what was real and what you made up. I find these to be a great way to relieve my conscience by confessing all the things that aren't true, as well as an opportunity to acknowledge all the resources that helped me write the book.

Characters

When I went to my first writer's conference in 2006, I had no interest in writing historical fiction, but for some reason this moment has stuck in my brain. One of the editors who acquired for a line of historical romance novels talked about how many submissions she received that had female heroines who bucked against the idea of their life purpose being to get married and have children.

She said, "As modern women, yes. That grates on us. But these were the expectations they were raised with, and that every generation of women before them had been raised with. It doesn't feel authentic to have them be horrified by the idea. This is what they knew."

The editor wasn't saying, "Have your character blindly follow the conventions of their society." She was saying, "Don't insert your modern mindset in a historical character."

This is one of the biggest struggles for writing historical fiction, I think.

Our modern readers need to be able to relate, and they need to like and root for our main characters. Yet they will get mad and declare our books "historically inaccurate" if we make our historical characters too modern. How do you find a balance?

I think we can find a clue to the answer in *Pride and Prejudice*. Lizzy Bennett is a strong female character that readers have loved since 1813. If you're unfamiliar with the story, Lizzy refuses multiple marriage proposals that would have offered her security but not love. As modern readers, it's tough to understand just how brave and bold a woman had to be to refuse a good match, yet still Lizzy's character continues to resonate with many.

Lizzy believes something that the majority of us can get behind—she believes

marriage should be about love. She's willing to sacrifice a lot for that belief, including her own security. She isn't against the whole institution of marriage, she doesn't go on tirades about it being ridiculous that women can't inherit their family property. She has one piece of the equation that she takes issue with and fights against.

We can do the same with our historical characters by identifying what common ground they have with modern readers.

What to do now: Consider what the beliefs of society were at the time your story takes place. What would be expected of your main character? What would motivate them to push against societal norms? What are they willing to risk? What might scare them enough to get them to fall in line?

Historical figures or fictional characters?

Instead of making up characters, you might instead choose to write about historical figures, like in the musical *Hamilton*. If this is the choice you make, you gotta really know your stuff. Especially if it's a well-documented person from history, like Julius Caesar or Abraham Lincoln. You have a responsibility to portray them accurately, and it shouldn't be taken lightly.

There's also the option of taking someone who's a footnote in historical records and imagining their full-blown lives. Anita Diamant did that with [*The Red Tent*](#), pulling a person from the Bible (Dinah, the only daughter of the patriarch, Jacob) who is only mentioned a few times. This approach can feel delightful and fresh, and it affords you more freedom to play with the character than writing a well-known historical figure as your main character. There's still a lot of responsibility for accuracy, of course.

My personal preference is to have a main character who's born of my imagination, and to keep my historical figures on the sidelines, but each writer differs in this!

What to do now: What do you think works best for your story? Can you write the story you want to write using a real historical figure, or do you need to make someone

up? What kind of personality do you need for your book?

Plotting With History In Mind

With *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*, I had a time and place, but I had very few fixed historical events that I had to work around. I made sure to know which mobsters were in control during the summer of 1924, but mostly I could put my plot points wherever I pleased.

So luxurious.

Then I started to work on *Within These Lines*. Taichi, one of my main characters was in a historically-accurate concentration camp, Manzanar, so I researched the events there. I learned there had been a big riot, which seemed ideal for the climax of my novel. Once I had Taichi in the camp—about a third of the way through the story—it occurred to me that I should start laying the groundwork leading up to the riot by introducing the characters who were involved.

As I researched the conflicting, confusing, and emotional stories of the protests within Manzanar, that's when it hit me. These were real people. These events had really happened to them. They had ancestors or, if they were very young during the war, they might still be alive. I couldn't just do what suited my story best and call it a day.

I felt as though I had been stomping carelessly across a field, only to discover that I was walking on holy ground. These stories were sacred and special. I couldn't just yank and twist them about to suit my selfish purposes. I needed to take off my shoes and tread carefully.

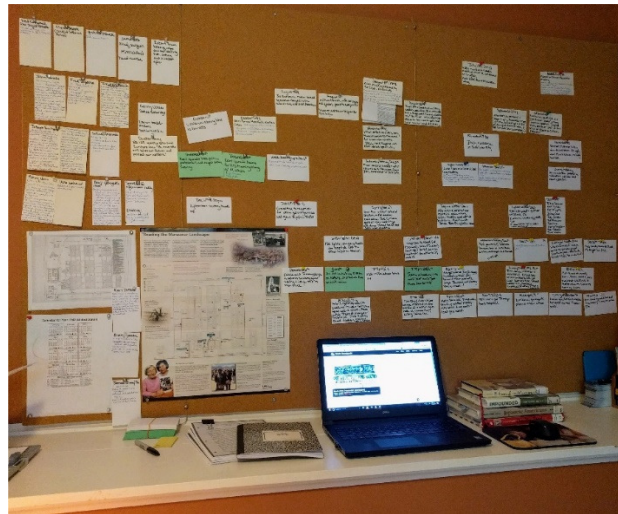
I spent the next fifteen hours of my work time reading every account of the riot that I could find. (I know it was fifteen hours because I'm a dork, and I logged all my writing time for this project.)

I took notes about the individual people involved. I was fortunate enough to come across an original source document, written by a Manzanar resident just weeks after the riot. It was over a hundred pages long, and I read every bit. I watched videos of those involved, whether they were talking specifically about the riot or not, just to get a feel for who they were. I read the accounts in several memoirs as well as in the camp newspaper.

Many of the details conflicted. My opinions about who was right and who was

wrong changed multiple times as I sought to make sense of all the events. When I had exhausted every resource I could find, I looked at my pages of names and dates and events and thought, “Okay . . . now what?”

I cleared off my corkboard, and I pulled out my notecards. Historical facts went on white cards. My imagined plot went on green. When I finished, my board looked this, with lots and lots of space for the fiction plot that needed developing between those historical details:



Even when you’re writing a novel like *Within These Lines* where you’re working with many historical events, it’s important to keep in mind that you’re writing a novel, not a history textbook. You will often have to walk the line of historical accuracy and telling a good story.

For me, it’s always felt comforting to know that I can note my “historical tweaks” in my author’s note. In [Stalking Jack the Ripper by Kerri Maniscalco](#), she shares in the author’s note about a few dates she adjusted to fit her timeline. These are details that maybe nobody would notice, like “I have this murder happening on Saturday, April 8th, but really it happened on Monday, April 10th.” Pointing them out yourself keeps you out of trouble with those who *do* know!

Research

When I started drafting *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*, I felt like every sentence I wrote invited a research question.

What kind of school uniform would a girl wear in the 1920s?

What were park benches made of?

What kind of hats did men wear?

What kind of cars did well-to-do families drive?

What route would the chauffeur take home from their school?

Did they have curbs and sidewalks yet?

So. Many. Questions.

For the first few pages, I stopped to look them all up. This meant I would write a few sentences—maybe a paragraph, if I was lucky—and then click over to the internet to run a Google search that lasted anywhere from five to forty-five minutes.

I decided this couldn't continue. Because I was writing just a few sentences at a time, I wasn't getting engrossed with the story the way I normally did. I decided that unless a detail impacted the plot, I wasn't going to look it up. So, questions about clothing, food, or other details instead received asterisks to remind myself that I needed to research this detail later. A sentence might look like:

I sat on the concrete park bench* and rearranged my uniform skirt* around my knees.

But when I had bigger questions that impacted the plot, like, "How did they treat epilepsy in the 1920s?" I would stop and research.

I encourage you to set boundaries for yourself as well. I often get asked if I think it's best to research before, during, or after writing the book. The answer is YES. I don't know how to get around doing all three of those. The system I've landed on for research now looks roughly like this:

1. I have a story idea or a story spark.
2. I do the least amount of research possible to flesh out my idea and get some brainstorming done.
3. I write a story blurb (like backcover copy) which gives me an idea of where I think the plot will go without having to invest loads of time in research. Something always changes from my blurb once I actually get into the

- research, but this at least gives me a direction to go.
4. Now I pause to research the things I think I'll need. Like with *Within These Lines*, I did some general reading on the evacuation experience for Japanese Americans so I could figure out what the timeline looked like and where my Japanese American characters would go.
 5. I typically do some character work in here too to figure out what my main character(s) are like, and I'll fumble my way through a chapter or two to give myself an idea of what the storyworld is like and who the major players are. I have found that I can't do a very good job of outlining if I skip this piece. There's just something about mucking around in the world that makes for more effective outlining.
 6. Next I write my synopsis. At this point, I've done enough research to have a general idea of the historical timeline.
 7. After my synopsis is written, I dive into the first draft. From that point on, I only pause to research if it's something that will majorly impact the plot.
 8. When my first draft is done, I usually have a list of questions that I need to find answers to before I start edits. Again, I've already looked up big stuff as I wrote, so there shouldn't be any hairy surprises that drastically change my plot, though sometimes I do find things that I wish I had known earlier.

Tips for doing research

I've noticed those who write historical fiction tend to fall in one of two categories: Category one: "I loooove research. Research, research, research! Oh, right. I'm trying to write a story. I guess I should maybe stop researching and start writing. After I read this last book..."

Category two: "What's the bare minimum of research that I can get away with?"

Writers fall on a spectrum of the two extremes, but you probably lean one way or the other. Whichever one you are, here are some thoughts on how to find what you're looking for:

Run a Google search for your location and year: This is a good way to find any major events that were going on in your character's world. I stumbled upon this tip

when I was typing in Chicago 1924 and Google auto-filled “Leopold and Loeb.”

I recognized the names from *Gilmore Girls* (in a dream, Lorelai is pregnant with twins and teases Luke about naming them Leopold and Loeb) but I didn’t know what it referred to.

Turns out, Leopold and Loeb are famous murderers who killed a boy just to see if they could get away with it. (If you’re an Alfred Hitchcock fan like me, you’ll recognize this as the plot of *The Rope*, which was inspired by this case.) This is a murder that took place just a few blocks away from the Astor Street District, and it happened only a few weeks after Piper’s best friend went missing. If I hadn’t done a general search for my setting and year, it’s likely I never would have found this detail.

Find other novels set in the same era and look in the back of the book for a list of their resources: When you go to pitch your novel, this is something you’ll need anyway, a list of “comp titles” which is other books that have been published recently and are similar to yours. Historical authors are almost always happy to talk about their resources, so if they don’t have them in the back of their book, they can often be found on their website. [Here’s a list of mine for *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*](#). Your nonfiction resources should have lists in the back of them as well if you need even more books.

Diaries, letters, or newspapers from the same era: Anytime you can find something written during your time period, you’ve struck gold. I stumbled across a teenage girl’s diary from 1926 that her family uploaded to Amazon.com (which is why I dumped all my teenage journals, thank you very much) and it really helped me get a feel for the language, expectations, and freedoms/limitations put on teenage girls of the time. Also, my father-in-law loves family genealogy stuff and came across family letters written in the 1920s. He shared them with me, and even though they had nothing to do with my story, they still helped to build my understanding of the era.

Library of Congress website: If you write historicals set in America, there are treasures here for you. <https://www.loc.gov/>

Newspaper archives: The Library of Congress has many newspaper archives, or if it’s a newspaper that’s still in existence, sometimes they have digital archives on their website. Often they restrict these to subscribers.

Social Security Administration website: If your story takes place after

1879, you can find information about popular baby names on the Social Security Administration's website, <https://www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/>

Etymonline: Was the word “teenager” used in 1924? When did the word “purse” come into existence? Questions like this can be answered on this site, <http://etymonline.com/> During the editing process, this website is open on my browser at all times.

National Weather Service: When I wanted to know what the weather was like in Chicago in May 1924, this is where I looked it up, <http://w2.weather.gov/climate/>

Read other books, particularly novels, written in that era: This is a great way to grab hold of the language being used in the day, as well as the views of society at that time. The same can be said for movies or music, if that applies to your era.

Historical societies: Many counties, towns, and cities have historical societies with excellent websites or enthusiastic members.

Books with vintage photographs: My favorites are [from the Images of America series](#) put out by Arcadia Publishing.

Stuff You Missed in History podcast or social media: This podcast releases new episodes twice a week, and has been on for years. If they haven't covered your specific topic, you will likely find new things you want to write about too! Their social media sites are great as well.

Real people! (Talk to actual people? Say what?): During my research for *Within These Lines*, I kept reading about Caucasians being able to visit the Japanese Americans who had been sent to the concentration camps. But I couldn't find any details about how it actually worked. So, I got on the Manzanar National Historic Site website, used their contact form, and sent in my question. I felt super weird doing it, and weeks went by with no response. Then a very nice park ranger sent me a lengthy email about inmates receiving visitors during their time at Manzanar. And she emailed me a digital map of the camp of the 1940s. And she volunteered to snail mail me a brochure and map of the camp today. Amazing!

A year later, when I was done with *Within These Lines*, she read an early draft of it for me to check for historical accuracy. She helped me fix a lot of smaller things, but also a few major items! Then, when the book came out, she invited me to come out to Manzanar as a guest speaker. Here we are together, along with an intern and the county

librarian:



All that to say, sending that email felt scary in the moment, but it paid off big time!

How to keep track of all your research

Not too far into your research process, you'll find yourself drowning in notes.

For *Within These Lines*, I ordered dozens of books from the library, read original source documents I found online, watched several DVDs, followed the social media accounts for Manzanar National Historic Site, watched online videos, looked through historical photographs, emailed with the above-mentioned park ranger, and much more.

Some notes were on my phone, others were handwritten during documentaries, and others were printed out and piled in various places around my office. I was

desperate to bring organization to my notes because I was tired of not knowing where things were.

My system will surely evolve as I continue to write historical fiction. Even with the few I've written, some books have different needs than others, so you might find that your system changes for each book.

I wanted to find a system that was either completely digital or completely physical (a binder, file folders, etcetera). I have a tendency to get a bit perfectionistic about these kinds of things, and when I do, my husband likes to remind me, "This is a tool. It's only effective so far as it serves you." So I ended up with a hybrid system.

Digitally:

In my web browser, I create a folder specific to my story, and any research I do gets bookmarked there, whether it ends up mattering to the book or not.

Another option for this is Pinterest. I have a Pinterest board as well, but since that's a public space, I like for my story Pinterest boards to reflect the finished book. If you really want to use Pinterest, you could have your project be a secret board, and then make it public later if you decide to.

Google Keep is my favorite app for taking notes. Everything is searchable, taggable, and archivable. And because I use a ton of other Google products (Drive, calendar, Gmail, etc.) Keep plays nicely with my other online spaces. If I'm making notes in Keep about a library book, I'll create a note with the book title, take a picture of the page or jot down the information I want to remember, and then tag it with the label I'm using for my work in progress. I can access these notes both on my phone and my computer, which is wonderful.

Physically:

3-ring binder: When I'm working with a lot of original source documents, I like to have a three-ring binder. Here's how I divided mine when I wrote *Within These Lines*:

- Front cover: My year-at-a-glance calendar for the year the book takes

place. 1942. This lived by my computer for the months I worked on this book.

- Story: Probably obvious, but these were all notes for the fictional plot. This isn't research related, but these notes needed a home too!
- Era notes: This where I file all my general notes about the 40s as an era, whether it's the notes I took on what Italian restaurants served before WWII, pop culture notes, an overview of the progression of WWII, whatever.
- Fashion Notes: Pretty self-explanatory
- List of Digital Resources: Here's where I keep a list of all the books I've made notes on in Google Keep and websites that were particularly useful to me. For example, I used Densho encyclopedia a ton for this project, and jotting it down here, even though it's saved in my bookmarks bar, is a good way to remind myself of other work I've done.
- Original Source Documents: Here's where I keep newspaper articles, government documents, and other source documents written during the era.

A quick note about language

Writers often ask about language when writing historical or historically-inspired fiction. How true to the era should you be?

Here's the goal: You're striving for historical accuracy while also maintaining readability for your modern audience.

You don't want to write your medieval fantasy in old English, but you do want to use period appropriate words and phrases. When it comes to slang from the time period, I find a little goes a long way. Same as now. While some trendy people may seriously say, "my boo is acting cray-cray," the majority of us would say, "My boyfriend is acting weird." Especially for eras that have particularly odd slang (like the flappers with all their bee's knees and elephant insteps) you'll want to go light on that. Otherwise it distracts from the story instead of enhancing it.

Yes, the language matters, but don't get too hung up on it. You can always dial it up or down when you're editing.

Some final thoughts before we part ways

When you first start the story, especially if you're writing in a time period that's new to you, you're going to feel unsure. It might feel like you're stumbling around, or like you're leaving details way too vague. That's okay. As you grow accustomed to the era, you'll get better at naturally writing in a voice that depicts the time. Vague can be fixed in edits, I promise.

After my first draft of *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*, I realized I had never once mentioned a character's clothes, nor had Piper done anything distinctly 1920s, like going to a speakeasy. I made those changes in edits, and nobody ever knew that I left them out the first time. (Except for you!)

Mistakes will happen, and that's okay. When *The Lost Girl of Astor Street* was being line edited, the editor flagged the make and model of the car that I had said the detective bureau used. She said that Nash Lafayettes weren't around in 1924. But I was sure that I was right; I never would've mentioned the car by name without a source!

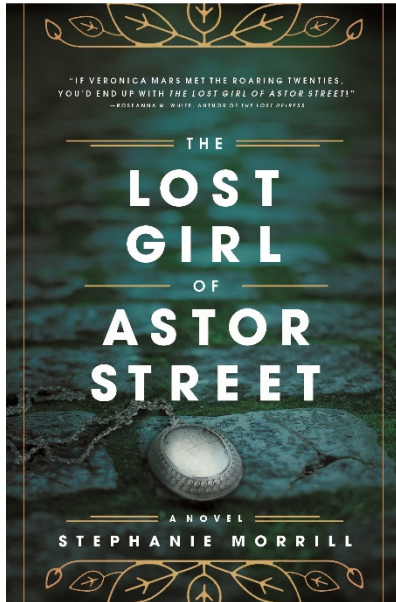
Well, I went back to my source, which was a labeled vintage photograph. Aha! Then I ran a quick internet search for Nash Lafayettes to verify ... only to realize that my editor was right! Not only were they not in production yet for my story year, but they didn't look like the car in the photograph with the detectives. Someone had mislabeled it.

Fortunately, my editor found my error. But even if she hadn't, and even if my book had gone to press with that small mistake in it, it would've been fine. Be kind to yourself!

I hope this guide has been helpful, and I wish you the best of luck with your historical writing endeavors!

Happy writing!

Stephanie



Praise for *The Lost Girl of Astor Street*:

“Morrill has a keen eye for historical details and setting, making Jazz Age Chicago Piper’s invisible yet omnipresent sidekick. Here’s hoping this won’t be the last case for this strong and admirable female sleuth to solve.”

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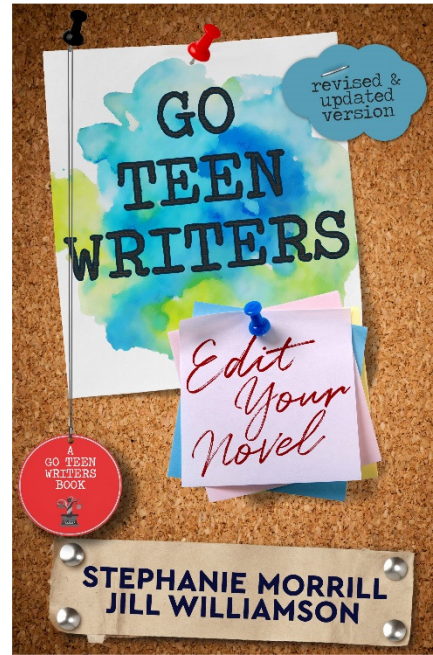
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