

## **“What’s the Best Weapon against Writer’s Block? Find Out Now!”**

Sometimes writing isn’t fun; sometimes it’s a real chore. I guarantee that you’ll have to trudge through episodes of writer’s block just as much as you’ll skip past easily-crafted scenes. But never fear because we authors have a few weapons in our arsenal to help us break down those ugly creative barriers to get to the beautiful prose on the other side.

One of my favorite personal siege engines against writer’s block is research. Now calm down before your collective groans start drowning out my sentences. Research can actually be a ton of fun because it helps satisfy our natural curiosity as human beings. The other reason research is fun is because it makes our jobs as writers much, much easier.

Imagine this: you are writing a scene where two characters are eating in the middle of a deli-style café, but you’ve never actually set foot inside a deli. It’s going to be very difficult to accurately describe what’s going on around your characters or even what they’re eating if you have no experience in a similar sort of setting, isn’t it?

We writers have words as our only essential tools for building a story, so we must describe everything to our readers. That is extremely difficult to do if we don’t understand how something works or the way an object or person looks. This is why research is so essential to writing and why it becomes one of our most important weapons against writer’s block.

There are essentially two types of research. One is what I call focused research and the other is called ambient research. Ambient research is a type of research that most people don’t even know they are doing when they do it. Ambient research occurs when writers learn something new about a subject while they are doing something unrelated to an actual focused study of that subject. This could be anything from learning a piece of trivia while playing a game or experiencing a new place for the first time during a vacation. Ambient research is very different from focused research.

When most people hear the word “research”, they immediately think of hours spent studying dusty volumes in the stacks of a local library. Library reading is part of what I call focused research and it is quite useful when authors need to answer specific questions in their writing. However, focused research is much more than simply wading through library bookshelves. Focused research also means that an author might need to interview a key expert in a particular field or participate in a certain activity in order to “really get a feel” for a specific aspect of his or her story such as its plot, setting, or characters. While focused research seems to happen more often for nonfiction writers, I promise that fiction writers will find it just as useful no matter their genre.

We’ll use me for an example of dealing with the two types of research since I am an easy target. Like any good author, I write what I love. I am a fantasy author and I also love watching movies and reading books in the fantasy genre. I learn a lot from fellow speculative fiction authors, but I principally read their stuff because it’s highly entertaining. Keeping all of this in mind, let’s say that while I’m watching the *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides* movie for the thousandth time that I suddenly become interested in reading more about pirates. I pick up Tim

Powers' book *On Stranger Tides*, which loosely inspired a couple parts of the movie. After I read that book, I go on to Michael Crichton's *Pirate Latitudes* novel because I'm still interested in reading more stories about eighteenth century buccaneers—both real and fictitious. This is called ambient research because I have learned more about a particular subject through various forms of entertainment without doing a serious study of it. Some of what I have learned will be inaccurate because the information that I learned came from entertainers instead of scholars; however, some of my new knowledge—like the basic parts of a ship—will be likely be very accurate. However, if I suddenly decide that I want a deeper knowledge of the actual pirates who lived in the 1700s, my interest is now intently focused and so my research will be specifically directed toward nonfiction sources such as *The Republic of Pirates* by Colin Woodard with the specific goal of gaining a deep understanding of my subject. Hence my research will become focused research.

Because I write what I love, I don't mind doing research of either type because the research that I do—whether ambient or focused—is about subjects that I find genuinely fascinating in the first place. I often like to approach writing a specific story by reading fiction and nonfiction books of a similar nature or subject-matter before, during, and after the writing process. This constant flow of focused research, ambient research, and general inspiration helps me more easily work around those writer's blocks caused by a lack of knowledge. I also love to use photographs from my and other people's travels as a guide to help me describe certain scenes more easily. I use focused research in the form of personal experience, expert interviews, scientific journals, and full-on, library-haunting study sessions to punch through those more persistent blockades.

Whatever research you do, please remember that the key to getting the most out of research is to always make sure your stories reflect your personal interests. Making your stories personal and your subject matters interesting will help drive your passion toward them and your passion will help you ensure that your stories are written accurately. Accurate research is one of the best ways to create high quality writing that readers adore, so make it count. Your readers will pay attention to your story's details and they will complain when something is incorrect. The last thing you want is to be remembered as a lazy writer, so get your details right before you share you work with the world.

Even if your characters set foot in a completely imaginary realm, you should do some research to find out what realistic place and time period most closely resemble the fantasy world you are trying to build. Remember, good writing plunges the reader into the middle of a story's world. Good research should do the same for the author.

Until next time, may we each rewrite our world for the better!

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