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The Why's, How's and Where's of Research

By Lisa Hood

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When I decided to write a murder mystery; with my main characters as the investigators, I had a few problems to overcome:

- 1) I have never been murdered
- 2) I have never committed a murder
- 3) I have never investigated a murder
- 4) I have never known anyone who has been murdered, committed a murder nor investigated a murder

I'm sure, as a writer, you have heard the cliché, "Write what you know". So herein lays my dilemma. Obviously not all murder mysteries have been written by authors with first hand knowledge. Of course we know there are cops (John Douglas), robbers (Donald Goines), lawyers (John Grisham) and medical examiners (Patricia Cornwell) who use their personal experiences to create factual fiction. The rest of us though, must rely on thorough research.

Why Conduct Research?

After all, it is fiction, right? Well yes and no. If you are writing Fantasy or Sci Fi, you have a bit more latitude, but even so, research could prove beneficial. For example, you may discover a new invention or scientific theory which you can build upon. You may learn of a certain insect or animal with ritualistic behavior that you can incorporate into one of your creatures.

For the rest of us though, research is non negotiable. If you have based any part of your story in the "real world" in a real place, developed characters with real personality traits or real occupations, then someone, somewhere will know the facts. They will recognize your ignorance in a heartbeat and likely lose respect for you as an author.

For me, there is nothing better than losing myself in a good book, so when I run across a blatant error or oversight, it snaps me back into the real world. Then I forget about the story itself and start critiquing all that came before or will come after.

The Why's, How's and Where's of Research

Not only will your research build your audience's confidence, it will build your own. As you learn more, you can apply that knowledge. You may learn that something doesn't work the way you thought it did. You're surprised. Suppose your character stumbles upon this bit of information too? Now they can be surprised. Or maybe they can be the expert, who explains away the misconception to your audience. It could be something small, or something so significant it changes the course of your story.

Research allows you to make informed decisions. I've also found it helps me get past writing blocks or awkward transitions. I've included: crime statistics, historical references and details on personality traits (one of my characters suffers from depression so I've added a lot of information on mental health and treatments).

A Research Strategy

Once you've decided to conduct research for your story, you may be overwhelmed. The first thing you need to do is define your goal. Research is merely the act of searching for an answer. So what is your question? It's critical they are specific as possible. You can waste many hours surfing through endless web pages or reading articles and books, getting sidetracked and frustrated. It may help if you determine why you need this information and what you plan to do with it.

Next, you can determine what types of information will answer your question. For example, let's say your question is: "How do guns work?" this may not be specific enough depending on why you need this information and what you plan to do with it. With a specific question you know the type of information needed to answer your question. Sure you can delve into the history of gun making, waste a few hours or days, or you can use a web site like <http://howstuffworks.com> and find your answer in a minute.

We're spoiled today with so much information at our fingertips; sometimes we overlook the best resources for information, a public library. If you just want general information, you may want to look it up in an encyclopedia: more detailed information, such as statistics may be found in trade magazines, almanacs, or reports.

Sometimes the best resource is the Source itself. I think people like talking about themselves; what they do, their life experiences. Have you ever sat down with an older person and heard all their tales of the good old days? Sometimes it seems like they could talk forever if they had an audience. Be that audience. Ask questions. People can surprise you with their wealth of knowledge and experience.

Garbage in - Garbage Out

Not all information is good information. You may have done your part, decided to conduct research, asked specific questions and found the answer. Or so you think. Before you accept that information as fact, you need to consider the source.

– Is it Reliable? For example, did the information come for a impartial source? Are they trying to influence your thinking with propaganda, rather than non biased fact? Are they trying to sell you something? Keep in mind, any data can be skewed if the source has an agenda.

The Why's, How's and Where's of Research

– Is it Qualified? Does the author of the information have credentials? Are they stating fact or opinion? It's ok if the source is stating an opinion, as long as they are identified and informed opinions, which may or may not be supported by data.

– Is it Relevant? How old is it? Life changes fast, and facts even faster. What was 100% true five years ago may be 100% untrue today. Has the data been taken out of context?

You can give your audience much more than just an entertaining story. You can give them knowledge. If you do thorough research and make informed decisions in your writing, you will develop trust and respect with your audience. Don't forget, research is a SEARCH. It is not always easy to find the information you're looking for, you may have to try several sources before you find your answer. Consider it a treasure hunt, with nuggets of knowledge more valuable than gold.

Lisa Hood is the author of "Shades of Betrayal" and "Shades of Revenge". She has been writing for over 10 years and is presently working on her third suspense novel, "Shades of Jealousy." She is also the Talent Liaison @ BOOKJOBBER.com. Other articles by Lisa Hood can be downloaded from <http://www.bookjobber.com/articles.asp> or mailto:lisa_j@bookjobber.com

Change Your Site Now!

By Holly Janion

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Change your site! That's right, if you want the edge in this highly competitive market, you need to change your site now!

In order to increase your traffic you need to change the content on your site to reflect current trends. By this I don't mean simply changing a few words, layout etc etc, I mean really changing it to keep ahead of your competition by providing services that people really want.

This by no means has to affect the theme of your site, you simply need to enhance it to provide additional much sort after services or products. If you're happy with the amount of visitors your site is currently receiving, and I doubt you are, then leave it as it is, but if you want more visitors, and you want your visitors to keep coming back, then read on!

Let's get to the how's and the why's.

How?

The Why's, How's and Where's of Research

Firstly find out what people want, what they're really looking for. If you can offer this service or product, people are more than likely to buy it from you. Remember they're looking for it because they want it and if you provide it, chances are they'll buy it from you.

To find out what people are looking for go to a site like Searchwords.com. If you think you know what the most popular search word at the moment is, you may be somewhat surprised when I tell you its MP3. That's the word now, but things change so fast in this technical age, you need to keep a close eye on this.

Why?

There are two major reasons for doing this. Firstly, if people want it and are looking for it and you consistently fill this need, you will soon establish a reputation for always being "hot". Make the most of the current trends why they're happening. I am not talking about words that have always been

searched for or products and/or services you would not want to associate your site with, but new and different trends. If you discipline yourself to check these trends on a regular basis, you can offer the desired services long before the word is out and everybody else is doing the same thing. This is a major key to how successful you will be – act fast and stay ahead!.

In order to have your own site ranked well with the search engines, you need to have relevant keywords in your metatag area. What could be better than having the most popular search words in your own metatags? Of course you would have to have that content on your own site. If people are searching for Holly Janion, and you have Holly Janion in your metatags, be sure to contain information on Holly Janion somewhere within the content of your site. How many times have you looked for something via the search engines and visited the sites to find they have nothing to do with the subject in hand. This is a dirty trick and won't do the webmaster any favors in the long run. Be professional, make sure your metatags correctly reflect the content on your site.

Key Benefits

1. By changing your content regularly, your visitors will come back often because you offer the services they want.

Your site is interesting and doesn't have the same old stuff on month in and month out. By keeping your site content current, you will be one step ahead of your competitors.

2. You'll be seen as a site that is current, knows what is going on, a true professional. This will increase your visitor returns. If someone has purchased from you once, they will be more likely to purchase from you again. Look after your current visitors, don't lose them to other sites that keep current!

3. If your main theme is kitchens but everyone is looking for MP3, add it to your site. It doesn't have to be a huge section that detracts from your theme at all, something small will be enough. Remember just because I'm on your site looking at kitchens, doesn't mean I don't have any other interests!

4. Don't depend totally on people using kitchens as a keyword. You know they they're using MP3, so use it too – get them to your site!

5. You'll still get the visitors you would have had anyway as kitchens is still your main metatag word and what your site is about. This method only increases your site visitors. You're getting visitors that weren't looking to buy a kitchen

at the moment but may soon be, or know people who are, and now they know you provide a great kitchen service.

Wade's World is an internet business solutions company offering various free marketing resources, but we've added a whole page on MP3 to our web site and people are using it! For how long I don't know, but I'm keeping a watch and when the trend changes, so will our site!

Holly Janion is webmaster for Wade's World Ltd, a UK Internetsolutions company. To contact Holly, send an e-mail to webmaster@wadesworld-usa.com or visit the Wade's World site at <http://www.wadesworld-usa.com>



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