# How to Become a Millionaire Children's Author

## LESSON THREE

**by**

**Scott Thornton**

**You do not need any previous writing experience!**

**Use these professional techniques and insider secrets and tips to easily write page-turning stories with the WOW factor, and join the growing legion of millionaire authors.**



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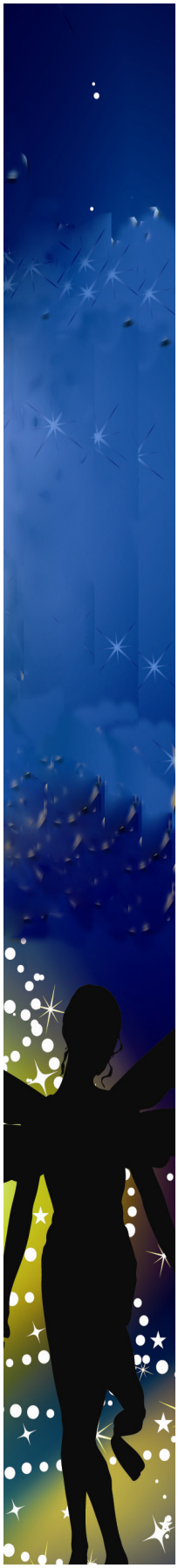


Welcome and a huge ‘Thank You’ for purchasing ‘Lesson Three’ of the twelve part course, ‘How to Become a Millionaire Children’s Author’.

Let’s continue with the hottest and latest insider tips and techniques you can use to build your own personal wealth from writing for children.

## Choosing and Developing Your Setting

I have already covered a brief look at settings in Lesson One, but because they are such an important part of any story, you need to think about them in more detail.

**No convincing story can take place in a vacuum**; it needs an environment in which the characters move. In most stories the characters interact with the world around them, and you will need to vary the level of description according to the circumstances.

For example, since all children go to school and therefore know what schools look like, you will not need to describe an ordinary school in great detail. If the school is a place where a group of children meet each day in a story which hinges on the relationships between them, you do not need to describe in detail the age of the building, how long the corridors are and where the staff-room is located.

But if a pupil needs, for the purposes of the story, to fall over, you will need to mention that the floor is slippery or the playground uneven. In other words, with a familiar setting, **concentrate on describing the more unusual features of that setting and don't waste time on the obvious**.

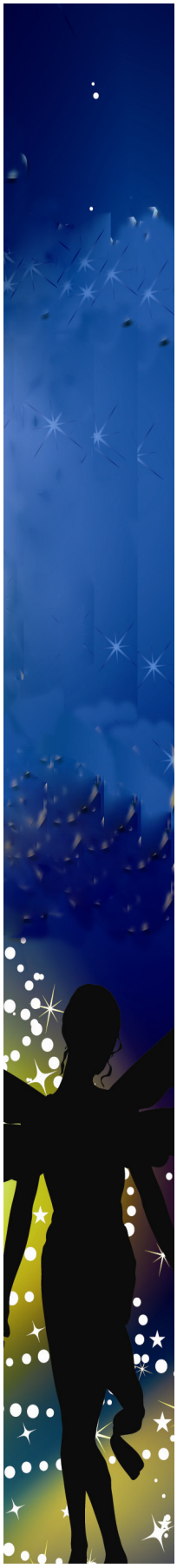
You will need to add a few descriptive touches here and there for authenticity. **Here are some examples:**

- A bluebottle buzzing up and down a window and disappearing behind a tatty blind.
- The chalk dust in the air when the board has just been cleaned.

You need to be careful about such details and I’ve included the chalk dust for a very good reason. Schools do still have blackboards and chalk, but many also have whiteboards and coloured felt-tip markers; computers, language laboratories and DVDs - and you can't leave your books in your desk anymore, or they will be stolen! If you have watched the TV drama, **‘Waterloo Road’**, you will know what I mean.

It is when **something unusual** happens that you will need to raise your level of description.

Let's say that your heroine is sent to fetch a play script from the drama room. She will leave the classroom, and there is no need to say any more than that, unless she is nervous of going into the drama room. If this is the case she



might fumble with the door handle, her damp hand slipping on the brass door knob.

There is also no need to describe her walk along the corridor and up the stairs, unless for example, you want her to meet someone furtively coming downstairs.

Where you *do* need to go into more detail is in the drama room itself, as she looks for the script. Will it be on the wooden shelves under the windows, or on the teacher's ink-stained desk? No? Then she will have to look in the big cupboard, where all the props and costumes are kept, and where she could be locked in by an enemy, among the dust and spiders.

Like many adults, children tend not to notice familiar places, and your young readers will wonder why you go into long descriptions of places that are almost incidental to the movement of the story.

**Hot Insider Tip…**

There is an established convention in story telling that **if you dwell on a description** (or linger with a camera shot) **then 'something is going to happen'**.

It is disappointing and irritating if nothing *does* happen (in a film or in a book). What children *do* notice, and will want to be told about, are new, nasty or favourite nice places.

Listen to **Jean Ure's** descriptions of two houses that strike the main character as unpleasant. The first is from her book **'Brenda the Brave'.** This book is in Heinneman's 'Banana' series, aimed at newly fluent readers.

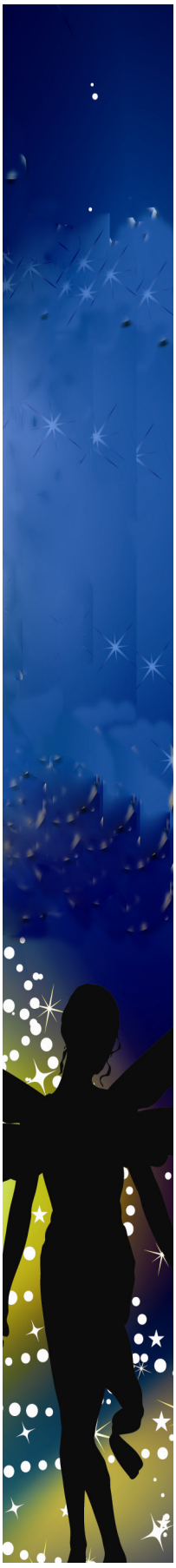
**Brenda goes to meet her friends:**

"She found the others clustered round a tiny cottage which had a big FOR SALE notice outside it. The cottage was old and crumbly; it looked as if it hadn't been lived in for centuries. The door was closed with a rusty padlock, and all the windows were boarded up."

The key words in this description are **'old and crumbly'**. They immediately tell you that the house looks as though it is about to fall down.

The second description, in **'Faces at the Window'** (Corgi), a book for teenagers, is of a large country house, which the heroine's parents are thinking of buying.

**They arrive to see the house in the dark, on a winter afternoon:**



"Shallaford Hall looked just as it had in the newspaper cutting; solid, four-square, and ugly. It also looked vaguely menacing, though Jane couldn't quite decide how. The sheer bulk of it, perhaps; the great slab sides across which the ivy, like some obscene growth, crawled and clung; the massed banks of windows like eyeless sockets, blindly staring into the night; the clustered groups of chimney-pots behind their parapet, marching in ranks across the skyline."

The key words here are that it looked **'menacing'**, that the ivy is like **'some obscene growth'** and that the windows look like **'eyeless sockets, blindly staring'**. All these words conjure up images of **threat** and help to build suspense.

**Jean Ure** is particularly good at such descriptions. Here she is again, in the same book, **describing Jane's Grandmother's flat:**

"...just off the Goldhawk Road. It was on the sixth floor of a tower block and looked out onto another tower block. The lift smelt of unmentionable smells and the flat itself was dark and cramped".

After reading this, you can see why the family think it would be better to live in the country!

Neither the house nor the flat are located any more precisely than "twelve miles from Lewes" or "off the Goldhawk Road". You don't need to be any more specific than this, **unless part of your action takes place in a well-known public place**.

You could use the Albert Hall or Hyde Park (assuming, of course, that you are familiar enough with them not to make any boo-boos) but it is not wise to identify real privately owned houses, or small towns, especially if you are to imply anything derogatory about them.

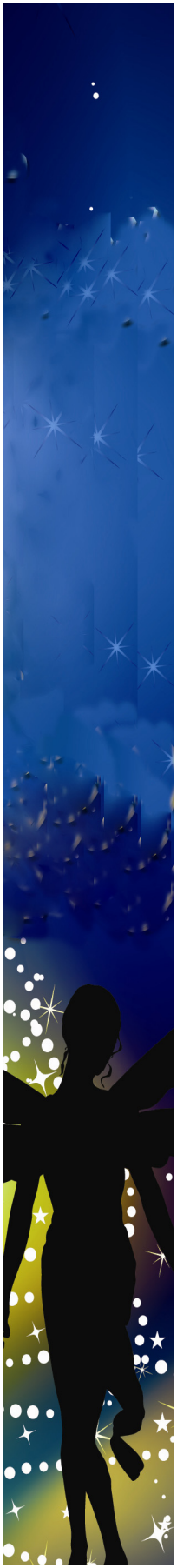
If you set a mystery in the town where you live, and imply that the local police are useless, or that the junior school headmaster is a crook, you will soon find that you have made yourself unpopular.

The better technique is to use the **geography** of your home town if you wish, but change its name (make-up one, and check that your new name is original) and change some of the street names to keep it anonymous.

Historical stories are less of a problem, although you may find it difficult to get friendly co-operation from the owners of the location you choose for your second book if you have been unkind about the location of your first book.

## Historical Settings

Whatever the period of history, you will have to include plenty of description, but it must be done subtly. Young readers will not wade through pages of description, nor would they spend many minutes describing a place to each



other, so you need to employ devices to sneak in description. I'll give you some examples.

**Example One:**

"The last mile of the journey to my aunt's house had always been my favourite. The road wound up through the beech wood, with its layers of leaves muffling the sound of the horse's hooves; then crested the hill so we could see the house below us, its mullioned windows reflecting the setting sun. Smoke rose from the great central chimney stack, promising warm rooms and a hot supper before I climbed the stairs to my room and the luxury of a feather bed."

**Example Two:**

"Pip gazed about him in wonder. So this was London! Well, the streets didn't seem to be paved with gold, or if they were he couldn't see it for the filth beneath his feet. The road seemed to be made of horse manure, there was so much of it; and small wonder that was. There were so many horses pulling carts and carriages that he couldn't see across the road for them. So many horses and so many people and so much noise that he began to wonder how anyone in London kept their sanity."

**Example Three:**

"Ianto heard the shouting as he got to the colliery gates. There was a cloud of dust rising around the great wheel that pulled the cages up from the pit, and men running from the office block and the workshops. Then the alarm began to whoop and he realised that there had been some disaster down below. He started to run straight towards the winding house, all thought of retaining the shine on his boots gone from his head. The layer of coal dust on the tarmac hid a little used railway track from his sight, until he caught his toe in it, sending him sprawling and making him drop his dad's dinner tin. A figure loomed out of the dust and pulled him to his feet with a coal-blackened hand."

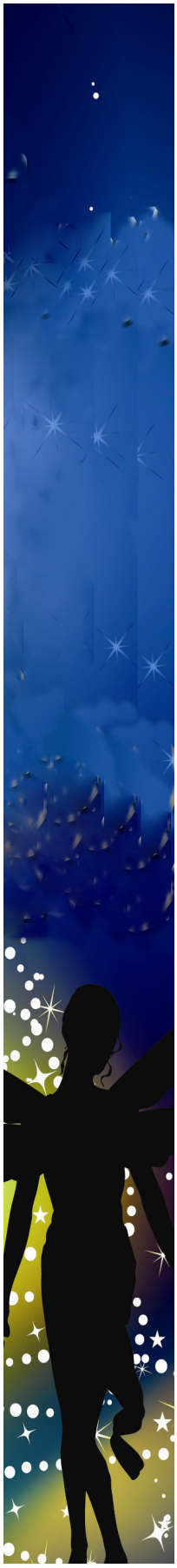
All these examples, even taken out of context, are obviously set in history, the first two by the mention of horses as a method of transport, and the last one by the boy wearing shiny boots and taking his dad's lunch to him at work. All would be suitable for the opening of a story for that very reason.

It is important that you **make it obvious straight away** that your story is set in the past, or your readers will **assume the setting is modern.** If they get well into the story before they discover it is set in 1590 or whenever, it will destroy the mental images they have built up and put them off the story.

You may think that the period will be obvious from the cover picture and the jacket blurb, but you can't rely on this. Again, you have to employ devices rather than making crude statements.

**This is a bad example because it's simply a bald statement:**

"When I went to visit my aunt at the beginning of 1590…"



**This is a better example of giving the reader the information they need:**

"I was sixteen when my uncle died, and my great ambition was to go to sea with Drake."

**And another good example:**

"A great coach with a coat of arms on the door paused in the crush of traffic and Pip caught a glimpse of a stout lady in velvet robes. He turned to the man beside him.
'Is that the Queen?'
'Nah. Queen Anne don't come down 'ere.' "

## Weather and Climate

There are other aspects of settings which are just as important as place and time. One of these is the weather. In the UK, where it is said that we have weather, when the rest of the world has a climate; both the seasonal and the day to day changes from wet to sunny, and from windy to calm, effect everyone's mood. In the winter, some people even suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder, a depressive illness that is thought to be due to a shortage of sunlight.

Let's take a look at the effect weather has on people's moods, and the constraints it has on outdoor activities.

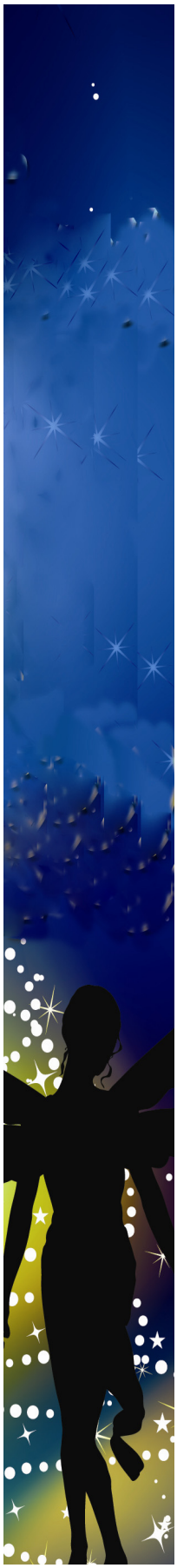
**How you can use weather to add detail and richness to your stories:**

- A long period of **hot sunny days** makes everyone happy (except those who have a fair skin and gardeners who have to carry water).
- **Long periods of rain** make everybody miserable, partly from the grey skies and partly because it makes you wet and cold.
- **Wind** makes you exhilarated, unless it is **a hurricane**, when it is frightening to be outdoors in flying debris, and even more frightening to be high up in a tall building that shakes in the gusts.
- **Thunderstorms** can be frightening or exhilarating, depending on your characters' temperaments.
- **Snow**, in all its moods, either falling or lying, is magical to children, as is hoar frost with its patterns on windows and branches.
- Early morning **mist** is magical, making the tops of trees appear to float on a sea of white, but **fog** is sinister in the way it surrounds you, is cold and clammy and disorientating.

Here is how **David Belbin** describes fog, in his book **'The Foggiest'** (Swift):

"The road they turned on to was narrow and unlit. You couldn't tell where the road ended and the verge began, or where a ditch was covered by old snow."

**Here's a later passage:**



"It was damp and dark. The fog hung in the air, unmoving."

Add this ingredient to a tale of brother and sister left alone in their new home in the country, with their father unaccountably missing and a sinister tramp hanging around, and you have a classic story of suspense.

If you have never taken too much notice of the weather, you should begin to do so. Notice, for example, how the arrival of a thunderstorm is immediately preceded by wind, as the approaching cold front pushes the warm air out of its way.

## A Weather Diary

Keeping a weather diary is a valuable tool for fiction writers. You simply record each day's weather as it occurs. You don't have to be scientifically accurate. As long as your comments make sense to you, subjective reports of the temperature as 'cool' or 'very hot' are perfectly adequate. However, note exceptionally high or low temperatures or measurements of heavy rainfall.

The interesting thing about keeping a weather diary is that you will find definite patterns emerging for your locality when you have been keeping records for a few years. But most important, from a writer's point of view, is that **when you are sitting at your desk in June, writing a story of events in October, you won't have to guess what the weather should be like!**

I also write down what **various plants** are doing. It's all too easy to make such mistakes as describing bluebells flowering in March, or the leaves on a mulberry tree in April. Unless you are a keen gardener with a good collection of horticultural reference books, it can be very difficult to find out exactly when different trees grow and shed their leaves, or which flowers bloom together.

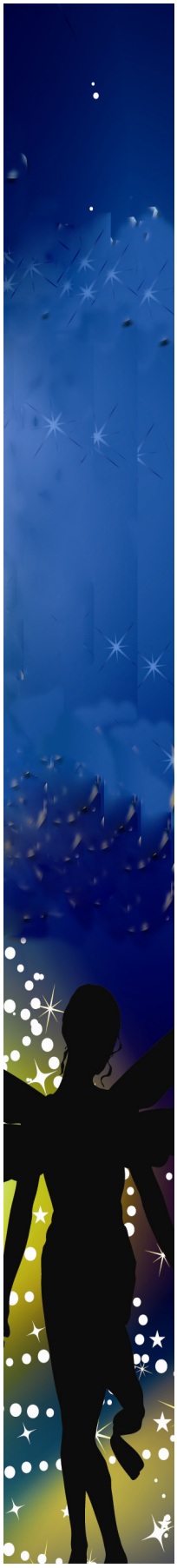
Even if your readers aren't interested in flowers, you will enhance the idyllic nature of a scene in a May beech wood by mentioning the hyacinth-like scent of the misty-blue carpet of bluebells.

If you know which bushes have a solid cover of leaves, it's easy to write a scene where the hero creeps up on villains or the villains hide and ambush the heroine.

## Weather and Historical Stories

If you are writing historical stories, don't assume that the climate we have today is 'normal'. Even without the consideration of global warming, we are enjoying a **warm phase** in an **interglacial period** which has included a 'little ice-age' between 1550 and 1700, and a series of cold snowy winters in the 1850's.

At the other extreme, there was a period of warm years between 1100 and 1300 which allowed the cultivation of vineyards as far north as Yorkshire!



The moral here is to **check** before you commit yourself to print, or you could make a mistake as bad as a recent story of Regency times which was set in the 'idyllic summer' of the year after Waterloo - 1816. In fact the weather that year over Europe was so bad that it was known as 'the year without a summer'. The sun was never seen, it rained constantly, and there was such widespread crop failure that it sparked off the Corn Riots.

## The Emotional Atmosphere

The final important part of setting your scene is the **emotional atmosphere** of your character's everyday life.

Here is **Jean Ure** again, **first setting the scene in Jane's home before the pools win** which allowed her parents to think of buying Shallaford Hall (**'Faces at the Window'**):

"Jane's dad was a builder with his own small business, working from home. Her mum did the books and looked after the correspondence - when there was any, which just lately there hadn't been. It seemed that people in London didn't have the money any more for loft conversions or patio extensions... 'Another few months and I reckon we'd have gone under' "

An all too common story of a recession struck business and the effect it has on family life is summed up here in three sentences.

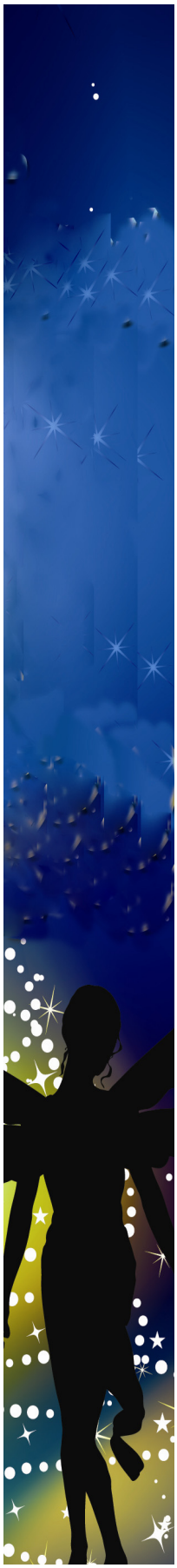
In **'The Fright'** (Orchard), **Jean Ure** tells of her **heroine's dislike of school**:

"Catherine Onslow was in Class 5. She had been at school for four whole years yet still her heart sank at the start of each new term. It began sinking the night before, when she went to bed, and it went on sinking as she slept, until by the time she woke up in the morning it was somewhere down by her knees."

At first glance, this could be taken for a description of Catherine's character because it tells how she feels. But what these few sentences do most effectively is set the **mood of dread** which affects a child who is not happy at school.

The alternative is **the happy home**, here shown in **Tony Bradman's 'Gary and the Magic Cat'** (Hodder and Stoughton):

"Gary liked his granny. He liked her little house with its little backyard. He liked her little kitchen, and the little sandwiches she made for him. But best of all he liked her big smile."



## Using all the Senses

In discussing the importance of **setting the scene** of your story, so far I have mainly covered descriptions of how places **look**. However, as you know, we have other senses besides sight, and all of them - smell, hearing, feeling (both physical and emotional) and taste - are equally important when writing a story.

The fact that your readers are using their sight to absorb your words off the page does not mean that visual details should predominate, or that they are the only details which readers can absorb. If you think this, then you might as well say that a child can only absorb descriptions of sound if the book is being read to them.

**Whichever of our senses we use to gather information, it is immediately available in our brain for comparison with other, existing, information filed there**, and since we tend to have memories filed in multi-sense chunks, one bit of a memory triggers the whole thing.

For instance, mention the scent of lavender, and you will recall not only the actual scent of it, but **the incident in your life that you most strongly associate with this smell.**

Let's assume we have a character with a grandmother who puts lavender bags in her linen cupboard. **This character will:**

- See the cupboard.
- Remember the feel of the smooth linen on their hands.
- Feel the weight of it as they lifted it out of the cupboard.

A myriad of memories and sensations brought back by the phrase 'the scent of lavender'.

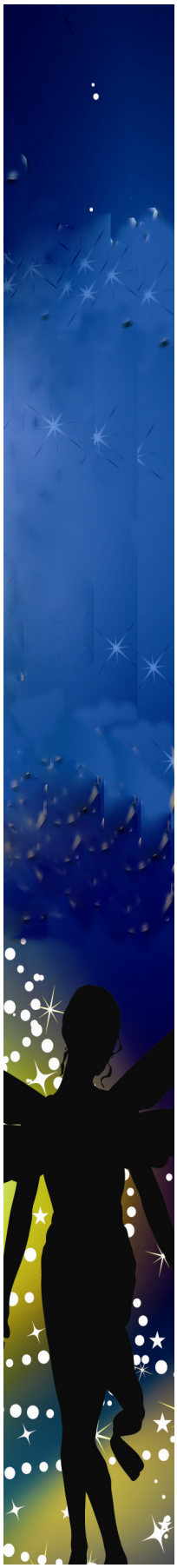
The skilful writer uses 'props' like this to evoke the desired effect not only with specific incidents, but with the whole story. If you plan your story with its **dominant mood** in mind (whether it is romantic or adventurous) you can slip in incidents with **different moods** when a change of direction is needed, as long as you revert to the **dominant mood** afterwards.

## Changing the Pace

The best way to do this is with **a change in the type of words you use**.

A romantic story needs words that make the reader slow down as she reads them, so use longish words such as languorous, pearlescent, and meandering.

However, an adventurous dash to save the heroine from a dreadful fate needs to be described in short, sharp, urgent, staccato words that give an impression of haste. When she has been duly rescued, she will express her gratitude at first in short, breathy words like "So, brave, how kind, how clever.", then as



she calms down, she might revert to her more characteristic dreamy demeanour.

This method of engaging the emotions by the **speed of delivery** is well known to film makers. Not only do the script writers use words which are appropriate to the mood, but also the length of each 'shot' will be appropriate.

**Examples:**

- They use lingering distance shots for romantic effects, often panning slowly to dwell on the whole scene.
- Action sequences will be characterised by a sequence of short shots, cutting quickly from one small part of a scene to another.

In writing terms, you alter the length of your 'shots' by the **length of sentence**.

- **Lingering requires long sentences**, full of beautiful descriptive words through which you gradually expose the reader to the unfolding scene.
- **Urgency requires short sentences**. Quick fire. Fast. Short enough to need no commas.

Another way you can change the mood of your writing is to make use of some of the techniques of Neuro-Linguistic Programming. NLP, as it is known, is the study of how language affects our nervous system and therefore the way we react. As an insight into what makes people tick, it is a fascinating subject and, for a writer, well worth studying. I cover it in more depth in Lesson Four, when we discuss developing your characters.

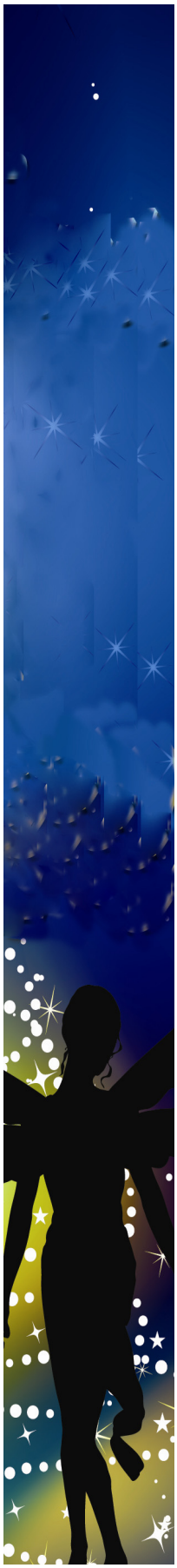
The aspect of NLP which is relevant to your immediate concern is that you can make one sense **dominate the others** by using only verbs and adjectives that relate to **that sense**. You can also switch from one sense to another by switching to verbs and adjectives that relate to a different sense.

**For example, consider your heroine on holiday at the seaside on a hot, bright, day:**

"Maggie ran down the beach and into the water until it was up to her knees, then stopped and looked around her. Across the bay, she saw white-painted houses, so bright it almost hurt her eyes to look at them. The sky was bright blue and the water reflected the sunlight, sparkling like floating diamonds. Through the clear water, she could see her feet, pink against the golden sand, and as she looked down she felt the grains of sand between her toes and the coolness of the water as it lapped against her legs. The sun was hot on her shoulders, and a little breeze lifted her hair, tickling as a strand blew across her forehead."

This switches from **visual** to **feeling** mode, but it could equally have changed to **auditory mode by dwelling on:**

- The hissing of the waves on the beach.



- The cries of the sea-gulls.
- The happy shouts of other holiday-makers.
- The chimes of an ice-cream van.

The other point you should have noticed about this sequence is that the **visual** part starts with the **large** aspects of what is, to Maggie, an unfamiliar experience, and moves to the **smaller, more personal** aspects.

The **feeling** part starts with her toes and works its way up to her head. This corresponds with the way most people take in details of any new experience.

**Here are the guidelines:**

- **Visually,** it is the **large** aspects of the general scene that you look at first and then you gradually narrow your vision down to the less important details.
- With **feelings**, you notice the **unfamiliar first** (the feel of wet sand between your toes) and the more familiar (the warm sun on your back) last.

This is based on survival reactions. **This is what would happen to your character if they were dumped in the African bush:**

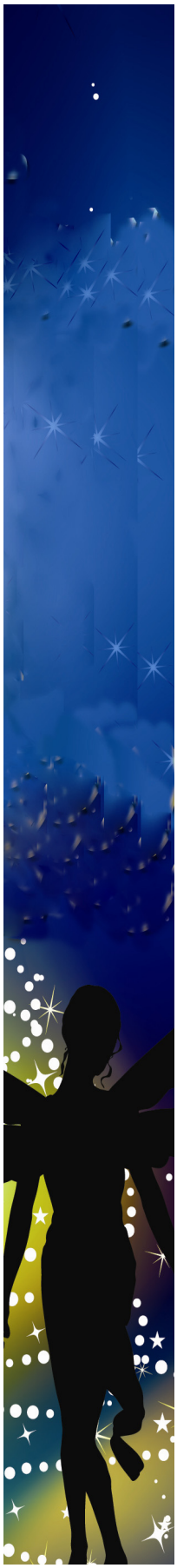
- First thought would be quickly to evaluate the 'big picture' to check for immediate threats.
- Then they would gradually narrow their vision down to the immediate surroundings.
- Next, they would check for poisonous insects underfoot.
- They would then be more concerned about the dangers of the unfamiliar tickling on their feet, which might be a snake, than about the possibility of getting sun-stroke after an hour or so.

So, you should describe new locations from the **large** to the **small** and from the **general** to the **particular,** and not in the order in which their component parts occur to your characters.

The only **exception to this is when you are writing for very small children**, who tend to **keep their visual horizons closer to them**. The whole world is new to them and big chunks of it can be rather frightening.

The final point about describing places or objects and the sensory impact they produce is that you should be as **specific** about them as you can. It is extremely annoying, when something of great interest is only given a passing mention.

This is often the case where food is concerned. Everyone eats several times a day and the tongue and nose are the most sensitive and finely tuned of our



sense organs. Yet inexperienced writers often ignore food altogether or mention it only in passing.

**Example:**

"They gave us a drink and some food."

**That description doesn't tell the reader anything. For instance:**

- Was it tasty or nasty?
- Was it enough or too little?
- What sort of drink?
- What sort of food?

**Here are two examples that work:**

"They gave us a big jug of cold milk and some hot pasties filled with cheese and onion. There were apples as well, but we were too full to eat them."

"They gave us some thin, sour-tasting milk and a few greasy little sausage rolls. They were too peppery and quite stale, but we were so hungry we forced them down and wished we had more."

Being made to eat something you don't like is a common childhood experience, often with the added blackmail of being told that there are plenty of people who would be grateful for the horrid stuff on your plate. Surely nobody could be hungry enough to be grateful for tapioca frog-spawn or watery over-cooked cabbage?

You will strike a chord with many young readers if you describe meals that grown-ups think should be eaten because they are 'good for you', when fish-fingers or pizza are far more inviting.

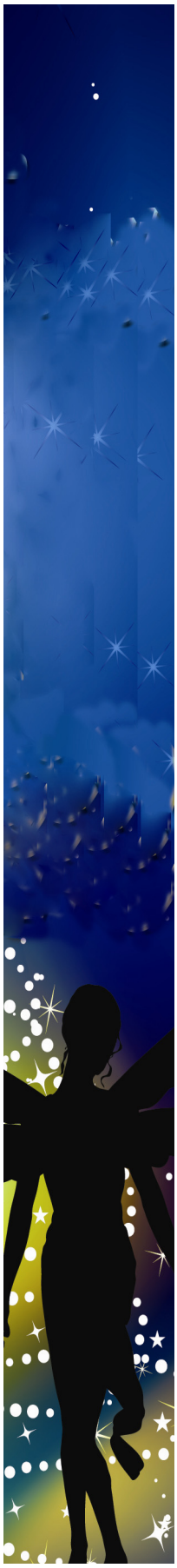
**The same principle of being specific applies to everything else**.

**Hot Insider Tip….**

You don't have to describe everything in each new scene in great detail. Instead you should sketch in enough to **give a general impression** and then **add a few precise details** to bring the whole thing to life.

**Example:**

"It was a big room with very little furniture, just a couple of wooden chairs and an old desk. The carpet and curtains had seen better days, both faded so badly that you couldn't see what the pattern had been. The curtains in particular looked so old that I wouldn't have dared try to pull them for fear they would collapse to the floor in a cloud of dust. The only bright object in the room was the crystal ball, sitting on an elaborately carved wooden stand



on the desk where a shaft of sunlight filtered through the grimy windows, lighting up the crystal as though it were an electric lamp."

The main problem is that unless you have trained yourself to observe things as they really are, or unless you have been taught to draw, you get into the habit of not looking at things properly.

You look at a familiar object, and because you know what it is, you say to yourself "Ah yes, that's a bicycle", and you file it in your memory under the label 'bicycle.' This is fine for most purposes, **but not good enough when you have to make a picture of a bicycle, either as a drawing or as a word picture**.

You might remember that the bicycle you saw Jem on yesterday was quite big and had fancy reflectors on the wheels, but you would be lost if you had to say what the brakes were like, or whether it had multiple gears, or how the saddle was attached.

These details may or may not be important for this exact story, but if you do refer to such details, make sure you have your facts right - and don't think you know about bicycles because you had one twenty years ago! They've changed, like everything else.

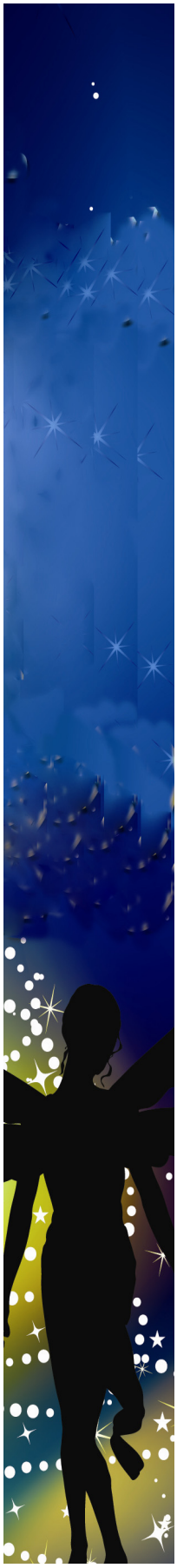
When you learn to draw, you find that the reason you can't produce a decent representation of familiar things is not inexperience at controlling a pencil, but because you can't conjure up a clear picture of what it is you are trying to show. You may know perfectly well that a tree is an oak, and maybe produce an outline of its general shape, but you can't make a convincing drawing of an oak tree because you don't know how its branches go.

**Unless you know what any given thing looks like in all its relevant details, you can't tell someone else enough about it for them to make a positive identification.**

**Children don't have these stereotyped file images**. The younger they are the more new things they encounter every day. They look at them with enquiring eyes, absorbing the whole thing as they try to determine which bits of what they see is useful information.

And what does every young child do when handed an object? A soft toy or a cloth book after a cursory glance goes in the child's mouth, where they can taste it and feel the texture.

You can get away with generalised descriptions of things children see every day, like a school classroom or the family car and they will fill in the gaps with a 'picture' of their own classroom or car, but anything out of the routine 'furniture' of everyday life and they will want good solid details about it.



As well as the weather and plants diary most writers keep a notebook of their impressions of the things around them and the people they see.

**One of the best exercises is to set yourself the challenge to describe people and objects you see in detail and look for fresh impressions to colour their description, rather than fall back on the old clichés.**

**Bad Examples:**

- ‘The great oak tree.’
- ‘The cosy little cottage’.

**Good Examples:**

- ‘The oak is tall as a house with a trunk so big that it would take four of us to get our arms round it.’
- 'My aunt's cottage is tiny, but she has everything neatly arranged and it is always warm.'

## Night Time

Do not forget that things look different at night. Children are instinctively afraid of the dark, and have very little experience of going out at night.

What was a perfectly ordinary bush in daylight becomes a sinister moving shape in the dark, like a great predator waiting to pounce. Unless, of course, there is a bright moon, when the whole world takes on a silvery sheen and magic waits to transport the reader to a world of fabulous adventures.

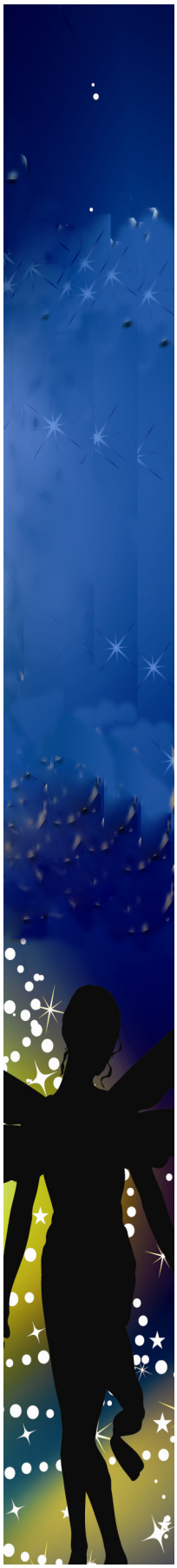
And that, of course, is the whole point of reading. It is an easy way of escaping from boring everyday life into a place where problems are solved in a satisfactory way, where the baddies get their comeuppance and the heroes and heroines achieve their desires.

But don't forget that if the world you describe is two-dimensional and uninteresting, your readers can escape from it as easily as they got into it, by merely closing the book and picking up another.

## Setting as a Backdrop to the Action

No story is complete without a setting to act as a backdrop to the action. Just as a play would seem very stark and boring without scenery, you can only breathe real life into a story by providing a **suitable and convincing** setting. This includes the real physical setting, and the emotional setting of the piece.

Avoid long tedious descriptions. This was charming in Dickens' day when people of leisure had far more time to read and there was no TV or radio or film, but nowadays books are required to have more pace. Always try to include descriptions of the scene as a part of the action, rather than in large indigestible blocks of prose.



**Always remember the emotional setting and try to weave this emotional tone throughout your writing, rather than describing it directly.**

Above all, your settings should be 'coherent'. That is, no one element should 'jar' with another. There are no fixed rules on this subject, and rules are made to be broken, but it would be unwise, for example, to describe a bright sunny day and then introduce a main character who is very sad.

Similarly, you should not describe a cold, grey, frightening building and then move on to describe the happy warm interior housing a family of contented, much-loved children.

These points may seem obvious to you, but it is surprising how easy it is to overlook them. Be sparing with your descriptions, but make every word count. If possible, make each word have two or even three different functions.

An example:

"Mary screamed in rage. The jagged wind from the moor screamed back, and whipped her hair into an angry tangle. The sharp rain lashed her face, mingling with her tears of frustration."

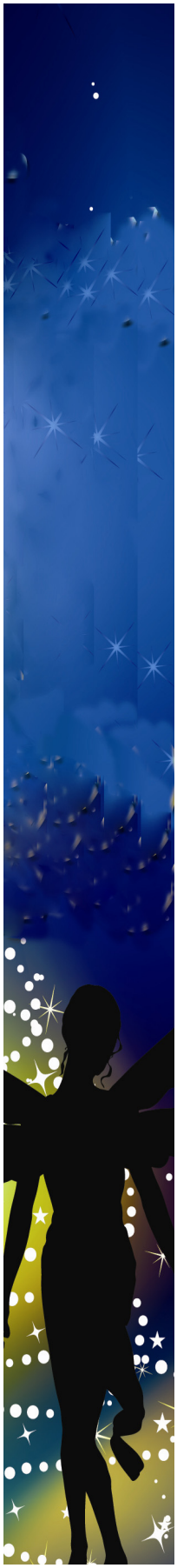
This short section tells us a lot about Mary's **emotional state,** it **sets the tone** of the moment, **describes where she lives** (the cold moor) and even **covers the weather** – all in 31 words!

The wind is described as 'jagged', which again echoes her emotional state. There were many possibilities here. 'Cold' is obvious - and obviously wrong because Mary's feelings are 'hot' (rage). The 'strong' wind? The 'harsh' wind? The 'bitter' wind? The 'keen' wind? The 'cutting' wind? There are dozens of possibilities and it is up to you, the writer, to consider every possibility until you select exactly the right word.

This sort of writing is far better than a descriptive paragraph about the weather, followed by another paragraph covering the scenery of the moor, followed by a further two paragraphs describing Mary's feelings.

**The skill of making each word do several jobs distinguishes the expert writer from the amateur.** In addition, the expert writer can weave descriptions seamlessly into the mainstream of the plot, and not have them as little 'stand alone' essays which stick out obtrusively and detract from the smooth flow of the text. You will learn to achieve this with practice.

When you get to the stage of agonising over nearly every word or phrase like this, then you will realise that there is more to this 'writing lark' than you might previously have thought! But believe it or not, this is when writing becomes really exciting – so if it seems daunting, don't worry, when you get to it the experience is amazing.



If you watched, ‘Strictly Come Dancing’, you will have heard all of those celebrities who took part, say what a life-changing experience it had been. That was despite the hard work, the sweat and tears, when they mastered the dance it was powerful, exciting and life-changing.

When you work hard and craft a piece of writing into a powerful story, whether it’s a novel, script whatever it is, the high you get is the same as those dancers and it can be just as life-changing. Then of course, the financial rewards will hopefully follow.

## Researching Your Facts

Unless you are writing a simple book for very young children, set in a home exactly like your own, you are going to **have to do some research.** There is an old adage which goes, "Write about what you know". Experienced writers add, "Or what you can find out."

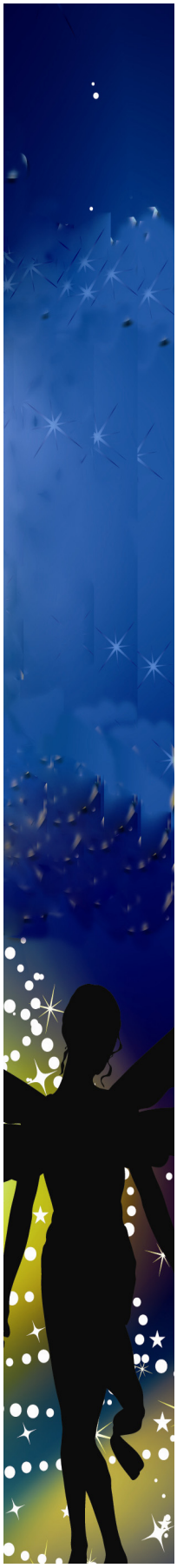
Even stories set in today's world inevitably involve facts or situations which **need verifying.** Characters have to go into hospitals, police stations, exam rooms, or music colleges. Susan and Mary's story does not have to be written by a music expert. It is a story of teenage ambition and dreams, and the focus could equally well be a veterinary college or a job with a fashion designer.

It takes a writer to tell of the dreams and their realisation, not a musician or a vet. The main part of a story is how your characters solve their problems, and if that is set against a career background, you can acquire enough knowledge to write details that make your story realistic. In other words, you don't need to know anything about music, just enough for the purposes of the story.

**For example:**

- Do music colleges hold 'competitions' for places each year?
- What form do these competitions take?
- When, and where, do they take place?
- What is the pre-competition selection procedure?
- How long will the students be at college?
- When do the college terms start and finish?
- What qualifications does the private tutor have?
- What pieces would be considered appropriate (or obligatory) for students to play at various stages of their training?
- What are Susan's job prospects when she finishes college?

That may seem like a long list, but it is the **basic** information you will need before you start writing. All of it is fairly easily acquired by spending some time in the library, writing some letters or checking out the Internet or making a couple of phone calls.



For instance, when I wanted one of my characters to be a scientist, after doing some research, I called Cambridge University and ran my questions and answers past them, just to check everything I had was correct. It took all of five minutes and they were delighted to help. If you do as much research first and then ask if your information is correct, you should have no problems. You will only come unstuck if you expect everybody else to do all of the research for you.

If you always **prepare an outline**, all of these questions will come up at that stage and you will be able to find out whether your original story-line is feasible.

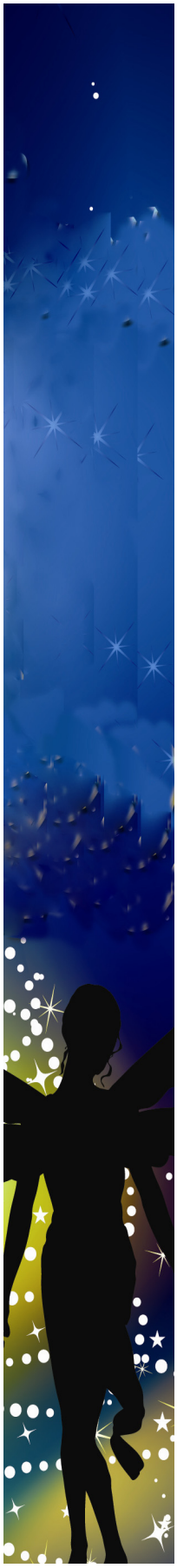
Once you get into the actual writing, you will find that there are other details you need to know. Let's decide now that Susan's instrument is the violin, unless you want to make an issue of her choice. (The cello, for instance, is cumbersome to carry about, and would either cause rude remarks about weight-lifter's muscles, or spark off a sub-romantic plot when a young man helps Susan get it onto a bus.)

**So, what might you need to know about violins? (or cellos?)**

- How, exactly, do you *play* a violin? You will need to know this to allow the tutor to give Susan tips on fine technique. You can't *guess* at this; you will have to find out.
- What common mistakes do beginners make?
- How frequently do strings break?
- Are any of the strings more prone to this than others?
- How long does it take to put in a new one and how do you do it? This will allow you to introduce some suspense at the exam.
- What makes of violin are there, and which might Susan have?
- Do different makes have different characteristics? If her tutor was to own a Stradivarius, and lend it to her for the exam, what do you need to know about a 'Strad'?
- Is it even likely that the tutor would own one (how valuable *are* they, really, press hype and hearsay aside?) and if he did, would he lend it to a student?

Some of these details can be found in a library, or on the Internet, while others mean you have to enlist the help of an expert, such as a local music tutor.

This is the second way to approach an expert and be fairly confident of getting the help you want. Make a **list of your questions** as you write the first draft of your story and ask them all at once. Then, when you have incorporated the answers in your second draft, ask the expert to read the whole thing in case you have made an inadvertent mistake.



An example of such a mistake is the author who sent a group of people fox-hunting, wearing jodhpurs. To someone who doesn't ride, it is not unreasonable to assume that jodhpurs are the universal riding garment, but in fact they are only worn by young children and the racing fraternity. Everyone else wears breeches and long boots, and you would be thought very odd and ignorant if you turned out in the hunting field wearing jodhpurs and jodhpur boots.

A quick read of this book by a horse expert before it had gone off to the publishers would have prevented this author displaying her ignorance.

**The most common error made by beginners is to assume that they know about something, when their knowledge is partial or dated.** This is the basis of the saying that 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing'. Be particularly careful of subjects of which you have a passing acquaintance.

Some experts may ask for a fee for their time, but most will be only too pleased to help. The latter should be acknowledged in the book by way of thanks. A box of chocolates or a bottle of wine will rarely be refused, either!

## Professional Researchers

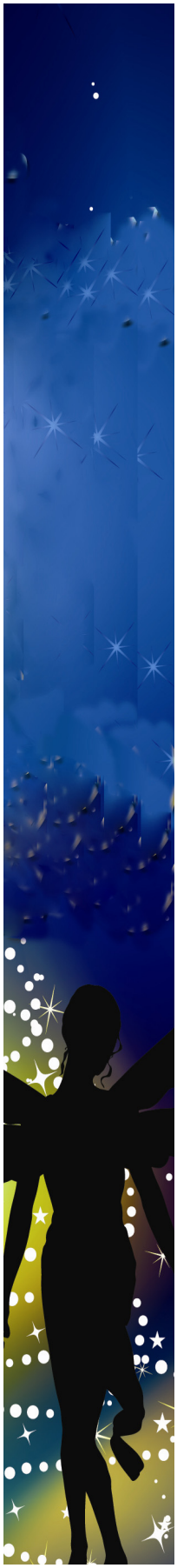
Using professional researchers can prove expensive because they charge by the hour for their time and for travelling and other expenses incurred.

But more importantly, you can never be sure that they won't dismiss as irrelevant some snippet of information that is **just what you need to bring your story to life**. You may find yourself forced to use them if your story is set abroad and you don't have the time or financial resources, let alone the language skills, to go and research yourself. Otherwise it is usually best to do your own research.

If you are to write about a micro-world in which you are unfamiliar, absorbing yourself in it through research is the only way to get a feel for it that allows you to write with authority.

**The other thing about doing your own research is that it often triggers off ideas for other stories or non-fiction books or articles.** You may have set out to write a piece of fiction for children, but there is nothing to prevent your branching out afterwards.

As far as ideas for fiction are concerned, you may find during your research that, for instance, a group of girls from an unusual ethnic background attended a particular college one year. This fact might trigger a series of 'what if?' questions which could be worked up into a story-line. You may even find enough material to set you on the road to a series if the first book is popular.



## Research

**Sources:**

- Libraries
- The Internet
- Museums
- Societies
- Newspapers and Magazines
- Non-fiction books

## Sources of Historical Research

If you intend to set stories in history, it is well worth joining **National Heritage** and/or the **National Trust.** Members get reduced or free admission to sites and houses, and there is another advantage with the National Trust.

Most of their properties include good tea rooms, and if you are travelling round the country a lot on research trips it is useful to know where you can be sure of a reasonably priced meal!

## Theme Parks

Another source of useful information is **theme parks.** Many historical houses and industrial sites operate these parks, where you can see life and work authentically reconstructed by the staff. Take your choice from eighteenth century farms through gypsy encampments to a Cornish tin mine.

Tourist boards will be able to supply you with details of opening times and will usually send brochures as well. Before you go to visit these parks, or any other site, you should read everything you can about them, as you will get far more out of your visit if you know something about them already.

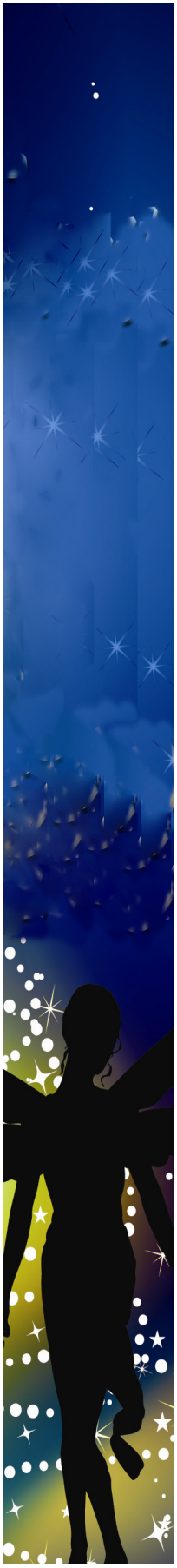
There are organisations which exist for the devotees of almost any interest you can name. These are a good source of experts and many run museums and libraries. Some of these libraries are open to the general public, but even if they are not you can usually obtain permission to visit them by arrangement.

## Press Offices

Organisations such as the police or commercial companies usually have a press or information officer on their staff. Ask if they have a press pack, or any other general information, and where you should go for further information.

The BBC has excellent resources of information for writers as well as a press office.

Most organisations are very helpful, and anxious that they should be represented accurately. If you need information on other countries, and they do not have a separate tourist office here, write to the office of the cultural



attaché at the embassy in London. Alternatively, you can use the Internet by tapping into the search engine, ‘Tourist Information’ along with the place you want to find out about.

When I tapped in, ‘Tokyo Tourist Information’, for researching a story based in modern day Tokyo, the information I got was astounding. My story took a whole new dimension and twist – very exciting.

## General reference books

These are a few of the most useful reference books.

**'Pears Encyclopaedia' and 'Whitakers Almanac'** both give vast amounts of historical and modern information.

**'Encyclopaedia Britannica'** comes in many volumes. It costs several hundred pounds new, but there is a thriving market in second-hand copies. Buy one of these and use the library copy for updates. You can also get it on CD these days.

**'The Oxford English Dictionary'** gives, as well as the usual definitions of words, the earliest date when they were used. This gives a good indication of when things were invented and when fashions started. Also useful for this purpose is **'The Shell Book of Firsts' (Ebury)**.

**'The Guinness Book of Records'** is full of the fastest, longest, biggest, smallest - every sort of record you might need, and there are many other Guinness reference books on specific areas. Alternatively, try the **'Dunlop Book of Facts'**.

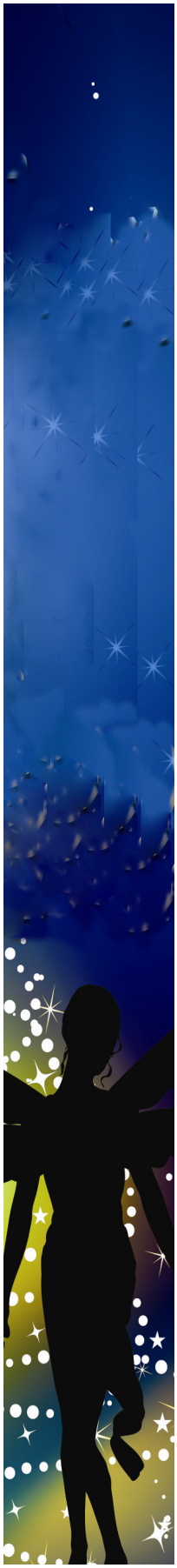
The **'Kompass'** guides list details of all the larger businesses in the UK, with names of people in each company. This is useful if you need to know about a particular industry's processes and practices.

Professional associations publish lists of their members and their specialities.

**Ordnance Survey Maps** and **Gazeteers** are invaluable for details of places and towns. A to Z maps are available for all the big towns and cities, and street maps of smaller areas are available from **Estate Publications**, Bridewell House, Tenterden, Kent. TN30 6JB.

**National Geographic** magazine is extremely useful for details of places, people, customs, and wildlife. It has cumulative indexes from its first publication in 1899.

All of these books will be available in your local library. They can be expensive when new, but older versions can be had from second-hand book shops, or even the library's own 'sale' shelf.



For books on specific subjects, you will find that there are book sellers who deal in these subjects, who can usually be found at book fairs. Alternatively, give yourself the treat of visiting Hay-on-Wye, the town that is one big second-hand book shop. If you can't find it there, you won't find it anywhere.

If you want to attend lectures by top authors or meet and chat with a few, there is also the Hay Festival, run every year at the end of May beginning of June, website address is www.hayfestival.com.

If you subscribe to writing magazines, you will find details of all of the writer's conferences and conventions throughout each year.

## Organising Your Research Material

It doesn't matter exactly how you organise your research material as long as you end up with a system that allows you to find what you want without a prolonged search. The more information you accumulate over the years, the more time you can waste looking for a particular item.

For a short book for the younger reader, little if any research will be required, but for longer books and for older children it is surprising how much research is needed.

**Choices are:**

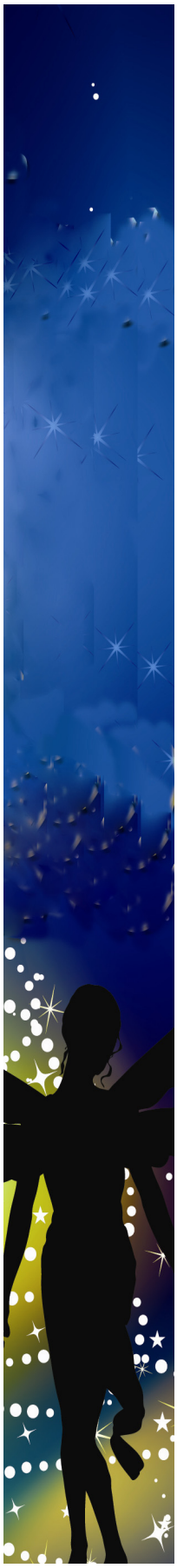
- Swipe files
- Computer files
- Cards
- Notebooks

## Logging the Source

Whether you use a computer, shoe-boxes, cards or swipe files and in whatever order you file them, there are two essentials that you must not neglect.

- **The first** is to record **where** you got the information. If it was from a visit to a site, or interview, note the location, date, and names of people you spoke to. If it was a book, note the title, author's name, publisher, copyright holder, publication date and ISBN number. If it was a magazine article, note the title, author, title of the magazines, publishers and date of issue. All of this will enable you to give whatever acknowledgements or bibliography details are appropriate. (When you use cards, a simple way to do this is to have coloured cards for the source details, and give each of

- **The second** essential is that when you take material from books or magazines, you must copy the exact words. You will not be using these exact words when you write your book, for that would be plagiarism. You will be using them to prompt your memory, but there



is a danger that if you paraphrase what you read onto your notes, you may paraphrase them back into the original form in your own writing, and commit plagiarism inadvertently.

Good research shows. Publishers will recognise that you have done your homework. It is disheartening to receive a rejection slip at the best of times, but to receive one because the factual elements of your story are inaccurate, is a waste.

Remember that all but the simplest stories usually require some research. Do not rely upon your memory of 'how things were'. Everything changes. Human memory is notoriously faulty.

## Research and Writing

When you are collecting research information for a project you are currently working on, it is vitally important that you are organized.

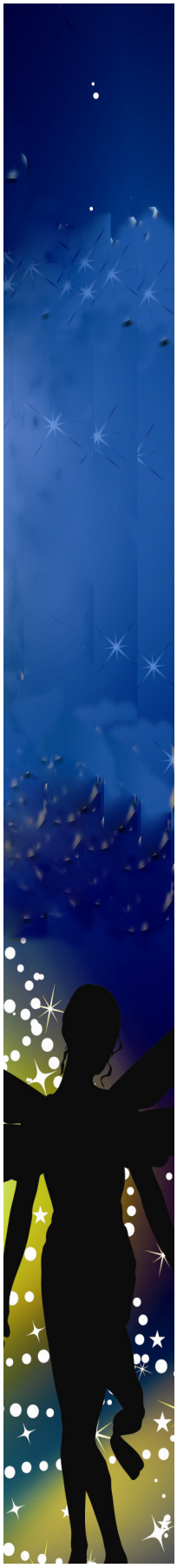
Every writer chooses their own personal method, so here is the method I use in case this appeals to you. For large writing projects, such as a novel or a screenplay, this is what I do. I use A4 spiral bound pads with lines for hand-writing the early notes on characters, scene and sequence ideas, settings etc. I also cut out magazine articles and pictures that contain something that I need for the story.

Once I have collected enough research material and written enough on the characters to lay the foundations of the story, I purchase a display folder and dividers. This is how I divide a folder for a screenplay:

- Story Map
- Background and Character (this relates to the backgrounds of each character)
- ACT I
- ACT II
- ACT III
- Costumes
- Scenery and Sets
- Research

Then I go through all of the handwritten notes and make a circle above the good passages and type up all of those on each of these subjects and file it under the appropriate sections. If you're wondering why I don't merely delete all the passages that aren't chosen for typing up, it's because it's easy to dispatch an idea as no good, when in fact it turns out later, to be the missing link for your story.

Then I just keep adding good information and pulling out the obsolete information and dialogue as the work progresses. In sections such as



'research' I put them into transparent folders and insert them into the main folder.

This method works equally well for a novel. You can either make divisions for the 'beginning', 'middle' and 'end' of your novel, or keep it as 'acts'. It amounts to the same thing. Every story, whether it's for the stage, radio, TV, big screen or a novel, has three parts to the plot – where the story starts, the middle and the end.

**Golden Insider Tip…**
Never throw away any of your ideas for a project, until it's published or filmed. And if you have a sequel in mind then still don't throw any snippets and ideas away. And if you like the idea but it just doesn't fit in with the project originally intended for, file it away for another project.

Keep things until you are **one hundred percent sure**, they are surplus to requirement.

## Your work place

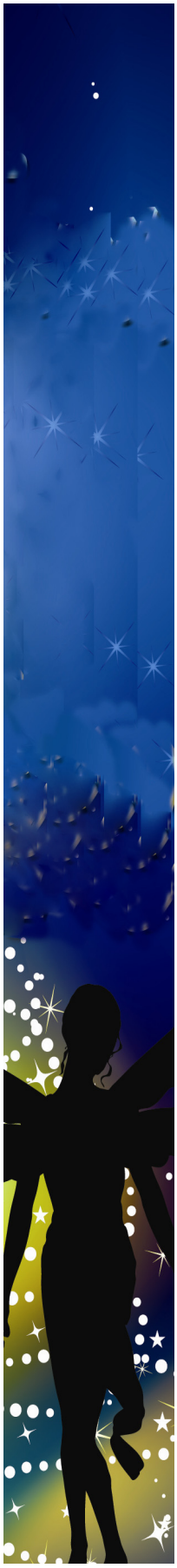
You need a proper place to work. Many writers do work on the kitchen table after the children have gone to bed, and manage to produce publishable material but it is just that much more difficult to do it that way.

The point is that having a specific place to work is part of getting your brain into writing mode. People who don't write, or do anything else creative or artistic, just don't understand the importance of having everything in its proper place, and having the right things to hand.

Have you ever watched concert pianists as they settle at the piano? They all have their own little **ritual** of sitting down, getting the stool in the right place, stretching their arms and flexing their fingers before they can start to play. If they were prevented from doing this, they wouldn't be able to concentrate on playing properly; **and it is just the same for a writer.**

Very few new writers are able to have a separate office or writing room, especially if they have a family, **but you should strive to have your own desk**. If your family tends to borrow your pens or pads, get one of the old-fashioned bureau with a flap that closes and locks (at a second-hand shop if you can't afford a new one).

If you have favourite pens or pencils, keep them in the locked desk to prevent them going walkies in someone else's emergency.



## The Importance of Ritual

If conditions are really so cramped that you can only work on the kitchen table, keep all your equipment and books in a special box or briefcase and make a little ritual of setting them out on the table in your favourite preferred order. Settle in your favourite chair, and you are ready to write.

When you are experienced, you may find you can write anywhere. After all, newspaper journalists often have to work in noisy offices with telephones ringing and people talking all round them. But when you are learning your craft, you need to concentrate without distractions and you will appreciate the soothing nature of a familiar place.

## Work Routine

Just as it is important that you work in a **place** that is familiar, so it is important that you work in a **way** that is familiar.

People who don't write, have the idea that writers wait for inspiration to strike, then clap their hand to their forehead before getting their whole book down on paper in an unbroken session of writing before 'the muse' deserts them. There are a few writers who work like that, although their writing usually comes after a long period of planning and incubation; but almost all professional writers work at their writing as they would any other job.

Please read that last sentence again.

They go to their desk at the same time every day, and they stay there for a set number of hours or until they have produced a set number of pages. It has been truly stated that writing is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration!

Inspiration is a strange beast. It is more likely to come to you when you are working at writing than when you are doing something else.

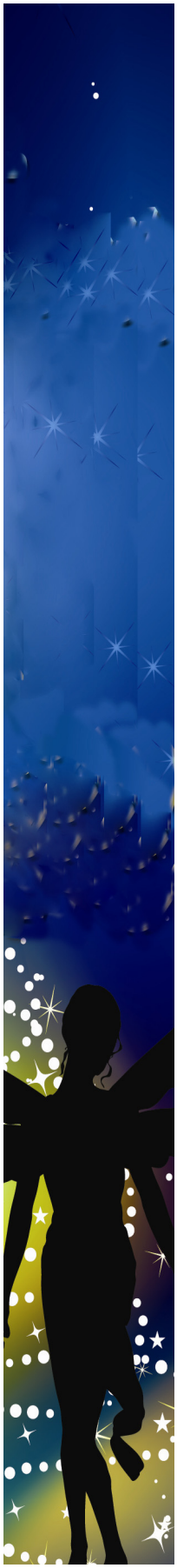
Tell yourself that **writing is your job** (your second job, if you have other work).

## The Power of Discipline

If you work in a shop or an office, you have to be at work at the same time every day, so apply the same discipline to your writing. To be a successful writer, you have to be as consistent and professional at writing as you are at any other job. Which is not to say that professional writers don't suffer from reluctance to start writing!

## Procrastination

This is a great enemy of every writer – amateur and professional! How do you recognize it? If you are making sure all the pencils are sharp, that you have enough paper, checking how a couple of words are spelt, stopping to clean the



oven… anything to stave off the moment of starting to write.

Perhaps it is caused by fear of going down the wrong track, but as you will find with experience, it is very important to **make a start**. You aren't carving your words on tablets of stone, so if they turn out to be other than what you intended, just alter them at the revision stage.

**There are two main reasons why you should write every day**:

- The first is that this is the only way you will develop a good consistent style. Writing is rather like picking sweet peas. If you don't keep picking them, they stop flowering.
- The second reason is that the longer the periods between writing sessions, the more difficult it is to get back into the story.

**Inertia takes over**. Even with non-fiction, where the facts you are writing about are established, it is difficult to maintain the flow and remember from day to day what you have dealt with and what is still to come. With fiction, you try to live in the imaginary world you have invented.

The best way to 'live' in that world is to take up your pen and describe its events on paper.

## Helpful Devices

It may help to play music, or decorate your work area with maps and pictures. Even if your story is set in your home town in the present day, visual reminders will help you to get back into your imaginary world.

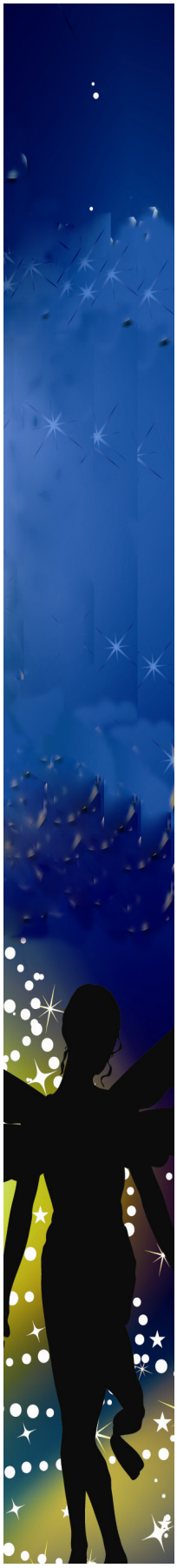
My office walls are always used as storyboards. Illustrations of characters, the actors I want to play them, even family trees and set designs are pasted up. They’re not meant for anybody else but you, as the writer. So you choose what goes up, if you enjoy the visual representation of your stories in front of you, rather than all of it in files.

**For example:**

- Costume designs and swatches of material.
- Pictures of props, characters.
- List of characters.
- Family trees.
- Story sequences.

## Writing Methods

Although I've mentioned pens and paper, you don't have to use them. When you have finished your work, it will have to be typed, and you may prefer to work straight onto a typewriter or word processor. One of the great advantages of good word processing packages is that they will give you a running word



count at the press of a button. They also have superb ‘find and replace’ features so if you decide late in the day to change ‘Jack’ to ‘John’, this can be done in seconds, rather than hours.

However, this is a good idea only if you are a skilled and rapid typist, able to get your thoughts onto the machine without slowing up the flow. Otherwise, do it the old-fashioned way with a pen or pencil. An interesting feature of the way the human brain works is that there seems to be a direct connection between the sub-conscious and the hand that holds the pen.

Experienced writers often say, "I have to write it by hand - it comes down my right arm". They go on to explain that when they read back what they have written the previous day, often they do not remember writing it, and they didn't realise that they knew some of the things they had written about.

**It depends what sort of person you are**. **And it can also depend on deadlines.** For speed, if I’m struggling to meet a deadline, pen and paper are unceremoniously chucked aside and typing directly to the computer takes over. My advice is to try both ways. Most authors use a combination of pen and paper and computer.

Many writers who use a word-processor could not imagine going back to the days of using a pen and paper. But some authors are techno-phobes and have hate-hate relationships with anything electronic. Phillip Pullman hand writes all of his wonderful novels.

Some authors claim that another advantage of writing by hand is that you can make a habit of starting each day's work session by typing what you wrote yesterday. The very act of doing this will take you back into the story to the point where you can carry on. If you do work straight onto a machine, start each day by reading through the last few pages of what you wrote yesterday.

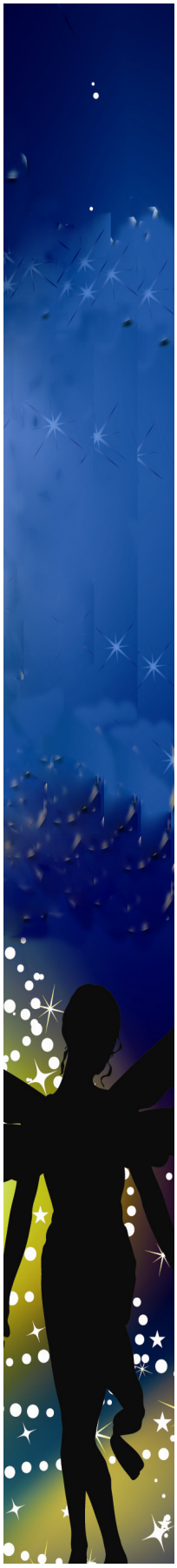
Some writers believe that you shouldn't finish a chapter or a scene or even a sentence before they stop work. Odd though this may sound, it does work. If you stop half-way through, with a scribbled note on what happens next, it will be easier to carry on than if you reach a natural conclusion. It is easy to 'draw a line' under something that is neatly finished, whereas an incomplete sentence will grab your attention and draw you back into the story.

## Common Mistakes

## Quoting Modern Prices

In a world where inflation seems to have become the norm, and where changing taxes can affect the price of everyday items from year to year, it is not a good idea to mention the **actual price** of thing in your stories.

It is better to say "It cost all this week's pocket money" than to say "It cost £3", when a similar item next year could cost £12 or only 50 pence.



It is better that the character's parents are thought to be generous (or mean) with pocket money than make your book look old-fashioned. Like other incongruities that bring the reader out of 'living' in the story to realising that they are reading, it could be enough to make them close the book and put it down.

**Children are amazingly astute when it comes to the price of things and even a slight discrepancy can cause them to pause and wonder.** This breaks the flow of the story.

**Few things change faster than fashion, so avoid direct descriptions of clothing, unless it is essential for the plot.**

Other things which date rapidly are makes of car, television and radio programs, popular music and politicians! Be particularly careful with 'pop' music. You might think you are being 'cool' and up to the minute to mention that one of your characters was listening to a (named) latest pop group, but it is almost certain that this group will be **ancient history** even before your story hits the bookshelves.

That's all for this month!

Good luck and enjoy your writing until next month when I have more information on how to become a millionaire children's author.

Scott Thornton