

Research through primary sources and “touch and try”

- Menus
 - What they ate, how much it cost
 - Ads for grocers are also great for finding this information, as are commerce/agricultural reports for your time and place, which could list average prices across the country for various meats and produce
 - National Library of Australia (NLA) has awesome collection available to peruse online: <http://bit.ly/1Jv2B9W>
 - New York Public Library: <http://menus.nypl.org/>
 - Restauranting through History: <http://restaurant-ingthroughhistory.com>
- Other ephemera
 - Anna: Playbills & other popular entertainment brochures - National Library of Scotland (<http://www.nls.uk/collections/british/theatres/index.cfm>) (<http://digital.nls.uk/playbills/history.html>)
 - Bradshaw’s railway timetables — time of journey, station names, maps, ads. Complete reproduction, including all original advertisements, available to buy.
 - Epistolary material (postcards, journals, letters)
 - Photos (Example: Edinburgh Vennel)
 - Popular magazines — articles, ads (SO much great info in ads!), language used
 - Travel brochures — costs, landmarks, ways to get there
 - Letters, memoirs, journals
 - Anna: Websites of local villages can be tremendous tools. Post their colorful local history, old stories from the area, pictures (old & new), sound recordings, maps, and more.
 - (<http://www.yetholmonline.org.uk/Features.htm>)
 - (<http://www.eckford.org.uk/history>)
 - EdinPhoto: Edinburgh history in photos & postcards (<http://www.edinphoto.org.uk>)
- Oral histories, either transcribed or recorded
 - WW2 People’s History Project (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/>)
 - Imperial War Museums’ Voices of the First World War (<http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war>)
- Shout-out to HNS! The “Features” section on the Historical Novel Society website often has articles that include great links to primary sources.

Clearly, no list can be exhaustive! Use these to give you ideas for ways to approach the search for primary sources for *your* time period and place.

Discussion:

- **When is there too much research?**
- **How do we manage our time when it comes to research? (in other words, what are our processes) Do they change with each new work?**

Questions? Comments? Additions? Contact us!

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- To broaden your search beyond U.S. and U.K. — Wikipedia has links to Free online newspapers, listed by country:
 - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_online_newspaper_archives]
- Census records
 - USGenWeb project (<http://www.us-census.org>)
- British Pathé – 85,000 films.
 - “Spanning the years from 1896 to 1976, the collection [85,000 films] includes footage from around the globe of major events, famous faces, fashion trends, travel, science and culture.”
 - Not only are these great visuals of events, but even just listening to the narration you can get a good feel for the prevailing attitudes, language, outlook of the times.
 - Jennifer: I love the films of everyday street scenes: how they dressed, how they moved, what they would have seen around them.
- Google books
 - Can search books by topic and year of publication. Great way to find out of print and obscure non-fiction books.
 - Jennifer: From Google books I have used material written in the 1850s, to show me just what was known and available at the time: a tourist guide to London, a book on horse care and diseases, and a “how to” book for wet plate photography. Also, the vocabulary of the time.
- Maps
 - Libraries:
 - National Library of Scotland (<http://maps.nls.uk/view/74400027>)
 - South Dublin Libraries (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/southdublinlibraries/4340002501>)
 - Interactive maps, where you can actually peel back layers to see the info for the year you want (<http://sdublincoco.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=e0c5595b033341dea7661e248d2e9ee9//>)
 - Schools & Universities
 - University of Edinburgh (<http://www.geos.ed.ac.uk/public/hsy/>)
 - Osher Map Library & Smith Center for Cartographic Education at University of Maine (<http://www.oshermaps.org>)
 - Other Collections
 - David Rumsey Map Collection (<http://www.davidrumsey.com>)
 - Historic Map Works (<http://www.historicmapworks.com>) With some maps, can add Google Earth overlays to compare historical map to present day.
 - Local transportation department websites. (Jessica: I was surprised to find detailed historical maps on the NevadaDOT website.)
- Shipping lists
 - Ellis Island database (<http://libertyellisfoundation.org/passenger>)
 - Immigrant Ships Transcribers Guild (<http://immigrantships.net>)
 - Great for passenger names, details on the amount of time a journey would take, ports of call, etc.

Research through primary sources and “touch and try”

- Maps
 - Help you and your reader accurately place your characters and their movements in a city or country, or even on an estate or in a large building
 - Give you a sense of relative distances, especially in times when travel wasn't easy
 - Example: Mid-19th century High School Yards, Edinburgh - Anna used this map to help her plot part of *A Study in Death*.
- Plot generation
 - Could be the basis for a whole story or just a scene
 - Example on HNS website, “Mrs. Astor’s Horse”:
<https://historicalnovelsociety.org/hidden-treasures-for-historical-research/>
 - Perhaps it provides a germ of an idea, which you can develop in any direction you choose.
 - Examples (Jennifer):
 - In *An Heiress at Heart*, the heroine masquerades as a missing heiress, essentially stepping into the life of another person. Inspired by *The Return of Martin Guerre*, which was based on a true incident in medieval France.
 - *A Lady Most Lovely*:
 - The hero and a horse survive a shipwreck, swimming 7 miles to shore. Based on a short article in an 1840s Australian newspaper about a racehorse who survived such an incident—and raced again.
 - The hero and a detective set up a way to reveal and trap a blackmailer. Based on a case in the Old Bailey Online. The detective is based on a real person described by Dickens in the periodical he edited called “Household Words.”

Types of Primary Sources Available Online:

- Online Newspapers
 - Some can be searched for free on websites
 - One example is National Library of Australia
[\[http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper\]](http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper)
 - Some are fee-based, such as the British Newspaper Archive (BNA)
[\[britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk\]](http://britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) (Spans 1710–1959)
 - Currently £9.95/month or £79.99/year.
 - Some are fee-based but can be accessed for free from libraries that have subscriptions
 - Jennifer: In my town I can go to Duke Univ. Library, and sitting at their public computers I can access the *Illustrated London News* from 19th century.
 - <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>
 - This is from the U.S. Library of Congress website. Various newspapers in digitized form, dating from 1836-1922. Not always the best-quality scans, but still an excellent resource. Great for American-set historicals, although plenty of ideas can be mined for use in other settings as well.
- Old Bailey online [oldbaileyonline.org] (Spans 1674–1913)
 - “A fully searchable edition of the largest body of texts detailing the lives of non-elite people ever published, containing 197,745 criminal trials held at London's central criminal court.”
 - Transcribed testimony from all classes of people; gives a sense of the vocabulary and cadence

Research through primary sources and “touch and try”

- Experiences
 - Practicing a character’s handicraft or occupation
 - (Anna - oil painting - the smells, the weight of the brushes, the feel of the brush against the canvas)
 - (Heather— sculpture, YouTube of bronzing, first motor car)
 - Trying out characters’ mode of transportation (horseback, Model T, unsprung carriage, steam train, camel, elephant, canoe, wherry boat, steamship) (Video of wherry boat on Norfolk Broads)
 - Trying out real-world movements to see how to construct a scene
 - Jessica: In order to write a fight scene in *At the Edge of Summer* where my protagonist ends up with a specific set of facial injuries, I made a ballistics gel head and set upon attacking it with various weapons and tools that could be present in the scene. I was able to determine not only what the best weapon was, but how it needed to be wielded. My husband helped me act out the movements of the fight scene so that I could best explain it. I wonder what the neighbors were thinking that afternoon when they looked out their back windows...
 - Anna: I’ve also acted out fight scenes with my husband. Wear the types of clothing your characters will, and wield the same/similar weapon. Discuss with a weapons expert. (HNS Facebook groups are great resources for getting help. Figured out what type of pistol to give Lady Darby in *A Grave Matter* by conferring with people on HNS’s group.)
 - Staring through the arrowslit of a castle
 - Weather (Anna drove/hiked through the fog of the North Yorkshire Moors.) (Misty rain in Highlands.)
 - For when you can’t be there: YouTube or Virtual Tours
 - (Jennifer: I watched a step-by-step demonstration of 19th century wet plate photography, which I used to describe the characters’ movements as the scene unfolded.)
- Anna: In some cases, the touch and try method is obviously not possible. Then you must rely on written accounts. For example, you can’t try a poison to see how it tastes, or feels, or smells without seriously injuring or killing yourself! Which leads us to...

Primary Sources – Books, diaries, newspapers, ephemera, etc. – Physical and Online

How can using primary sources vastly improve your novel?

- Provide “eyewitness” accounts by those who lived it, not distanced by time or distorted by a historian’s point-of-view
- Cultural and sensory details
 - If able to read books or novels from your time period, look closely at what is in the “background.” What day-to-day aspects of living/eating/food/travel/social interaction are taken for granted?
 - Cultural details— (Heather: books, art movements, songs, fashion that are popular—give examples from Josephine)
- Language
 - Vocabulary of the day (both common words and slang)
 - Dialect and accent depending on location, class, and education
 - Formality of language for type of character/type of relationship

Research through primary sources and “touch and try”

- Not all are available to smell, though some have since been recreated, especially with perfumes. In some cases, finding old descriptions will give you a sense of what notes were in that scent.
- Byproduct smells (woodsmoke, coal smoke, peat smoke) (dye vats, sugar refineries, rendering tallow, brewing beer) (from painting - linseed oil, gesso, various pigments, charcoal)
- Some of these can be experienced at living history sites or reenactments, or on factory tours, if it is something still being produced
 - Jessica: Visiting a blackhouse at the Highland Folk Museum gave me a sense of the close quarters, the darkness, and the thickness of the peat smoke in a house like this. In *Letters from Skye*, my heroine comments on her writing conditions and often writes outdoors, with good reason.
- Sounds
 - Popular music — bagpipes
 - Background sounds of your time and place (horses, creaking of carriages, cries of street vendors, etc.)
 - Background: (Heather: reference films)
 - Sounds that specific tools/objects/weapons might make (YouTube is great for this. You can see people playing instruments, using firearms, blacksmithing, etc. for the era in question.)
 - The resonance of a particular chamber or building
 - Example: In Anna Lee Huber’s *A Grave Matter* - the acoustics of the Chapter House at Dryburgh Abbey
 - Don’t forget nature! Based on the season and the part of the world, what sorts of bird cries might the characters hear? Insects? Night sounds? (Jessica: I spent some time listening to clips on YouTube to know how the cicadas and birds sounded as my characters hiked through a French wood.) (Sound of ocean crashing against the rocky coast of Cornwall.)
 - Nature sounds (Heather: thick jungle - Latin America)
- Touches
 - Textiles
 - Natural materials (wood, horn, bone, sinew, wool, plant fibers, flint, stone)
 - Clothing (weight of layered Victorian petticoats, lack of mobility in early WWI French uniform, feeling of “straight” shoes)
 - Instruments & Tools (medical instruments, weapons, curling tongs, fireplace tools, farm equipment)
 - Heather: An artist’s studio & their materials and tools
- Sights
 - Many sights much more vivid in real life (Anna: the colors of the Lake District - photos and video just do not do it justice.)
 - Anna: Sometimes sight has to do. Viewed pepperbox pistols in a castle’s/museum’s weapon’s display because not allowed to touch, and could not find an authentic replica.
- Visiting historical sites or “living history” sites (Anna: the worn-smooth stone steps of an old castle - the height of each step & difficulty of climbing quickly)
- Visiting geographic location (Jessica: Feeling the red, sticky mud of the Somme battlefields brought home what so many soldiers in WWI had been talking about)
- Visiting locations (Heather: more than just the visceral. I’ll go into detail)

Research through primary sources and touch-and-try: the next-best thing to time travel

Presented by: Jessica Brockmole, Jennifer Delamere, Anna Lee Huber, Heather Webb

OVERVIEW:

- Types of primary sources and how to locate them
- How can using primary sources vastly improve your novel?
- Touch-and-Try ideas, sources, and examples
- Thinking outside the box when it comes to research
- When is there too much research?
- How do we manage our time when it comes to research vs. writing?

Locating primary sources

- Websites
- Librarians
- Archives
- Docents at museums
- “Living history” sites
- Preserved historical buildings or landscapes
- Historical Societies
- Family storage

Benefits of “Touch and Try”

- Gives you the opportunity to personally interact with and experience the sights, sounds, smells, etc. Not relying on the descriptions of others.
- Then you can process it in order to describe in your own unique way, in your “voice” and through your character’s viewpoint. Add depth and richness to the writing.

“Touch and Try” sources:

- Senses
 - Tastes
 - Recipes authentic to your time and place
 - Methods of cooking (over a fire, in a wood-burning oven, etc.)
 - Unfamiliar foods or beverages (Anna: tasting Scottish whisky-truly does burn)
 - Seasonal produce (check out markets or local farmers to see what’s in season and for the taste of fresh-off-the-farm produce)
 - Smells
 - Natural smells (in-season flowers/plants/trees, sea air, mineral water, dry air of the desert) (the must and dust of an ancient stone castle)
 - Example: In Anna Lee Huber’s *Mortal Arts* - touring and experiencing an old, crumbling castle firsthand was essential to being able to authentically write several ending scenes of the book.
 - Manufactured smells (popular perfumes or cosmetics, e.g. bay rum oil or rose water, cleaning, e.g. lye soap or carbolic acid).