

## Investigative Techniques from the Trenches

Your writing can only breathe reality and authenticity if you know intimately what you're writing about. But if you haven't lived in, or at least visited, the locations where your novel takes place, how can you bring it alive for readers so they can see, hear, smell, touch, taste, and understand your story world? Here a few tips:

1. **Collect experiences.** The wider your base of experiences, the greater variety of situations on which you will be able to write with authority.
2. **Collect contacts.** You don't need to know all things about every subject you want to write about. You just need to know someone who does. Keep your eyes and ears open for people with expertise and experience in a background where you do not yet have knowledge or experience. They are not as hard to approach as you might think.
3. **Collect characters.** The more people with whom you interact, the greater the pool you'll have from which to draw characters. And don't avoid the unpleasant ones. When eccentric, annoying, or nasty people cross your path, don't get irritated or even. Just write them into your next book!
4. **Immerse yourself in your subject.** It isn't enough to collect interesting experiences and interview people. These must be tied together with thorough research so that you understand the implications of what you've seen and heard. Read histories, biographies, political commentary, regional literature, travelogues, video documentaries—even before you pick up a pen or sit down at a computer keyboard.
5. **Use the Internet as a valuable tool.** For every place you write about, keep a Google Alert set for daily news digests. Follow blogs and travelogues of people whose lives and professions mirror the characters you're writing about.
6. **Combine experiences you do have with thorough research to create a reality you can't experience.** Develop a wide frame of reference in which to fit your research so that you can describe places as vividly as though you'd really been there. Once you've gone through a particular experience, you can use it in similar but different settings.
7. **Have experts read your manuscript.** You can catch plot holes and inaccurate details by having an expert on the subject read what you've written, even if few readers would ever know the difference.

The ultimate compliment for an author is to get fan mail from those who are or have been in the field of which you write that say, "You really get it. I can tell from your writing

that you've been where we're at." Fiction or not, that should be our ultimate goal as writers.