



Historical Fiction.

*the past, told
from the inside.*

A working field guide to historical fiction: the period as pressure rather than wallpaper, research that serves the story and knows when to stop, a voice that feels of its time without costume, the line between the record and your invention, a protagonist who belongs to their era, the mistakes that make the past ring false, and a printable worksheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you draft.

Historical fiction is not a costume worn by an ordinary story. Every craft decision in this guide traces back to one job: let the period **shape the choices**, so the book could only have happened then, to those people.

The genre has no single author. What follows distills the working practice shared across the sweeping epic, the quiet domestic novel, and the fictionalized life alike, with a running example - an invented historical novel carried from its first page to its last - so you can watch the machine move. The spine it rides lives as a free fill-in planner on our site.

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What historical fiction is.

a story set in a documented past, where the period decides things.

Historical fiction is a story set in a documented past, usually before the author's own lifetime, in which the period is not decoration but **pressure**. The laws, the beliefs, the prices, the diseases, the roads and the distances all bear on what the characters can want and what it costs them to want it. Move the same story to the present and it should fall apart. That is the test. If the era could be swapped out and the plot would survive, the book is a modern story in period dress.

The genre is wide because the past is wide. It holds the intimate domestic novel and the war epic, the courtroom and the kitchen, the century-spanning saga and the single terrible week. What unites them is a bargain with the record: the writer invents freely inside a world that really existed, and takes on the duty of knowing that world well enough to move around in it.

THREE SUB-MODES

- **The invented protagonist in a real era.** A made-up person living through documented conditions. The commonest mode, and the freest.
- **The real figure, fictionalized.** A documented life given interiority, dialogue, and private hours the record never kept.
- **The real event, seen sidelong.** A known moment witnessed from the edge, by a servant, a clerk, a child, a neighbor.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

Historical fiction is a story that could only have happened in its time and place, told with enough lived detail that the reader stops visiting the past and starts standing in it.

The reader's contract.

texture, not a textbook. a story, not a tour. and an honest note at the end.

The contract has three clauses, and the first is **authenticity of texture**. The reader does not want a lecture on the period. They want to feel its weight in the small things: what a room smelled like, how far a letter had to travel, what a coin bought, what a woman could not sign. Texture earns trust, and trust is what lets the reader stop checking and start believing. The moment a detail feels borrowed from a museum caption, the spell breaks.

The second clause is that the book must be a **story that could only happen then**. The reader has picked up historical fiction because they want the past to matter to the plot, not merely to furnish it. The pressures of the era should drive the choices, close the exits, and set the price of every want. A story that would survive a transfer to the present has not kept this clause, however lovely its wardrobe.

The third clause is **honesty about invention**, and it is paid at the back of the book. The author's note is where you confess what you moved, compressed, or made up, and why. Readers grant enormous license to a writer who tells them plainly where the record ends. They withdraw it entirely from one who lets them find out on their own.

THE SWAP TEST

Set the same plot in your own city this year. If the protagonist's want is still possible, the obstacles still stand, and the ending still lands, the period is wallpaper. Find the want the era forbids, and the story will refuse to move.

The period as pressure.

a want the era forbids, and stakes the era sets.

Every historical novel that works runs on the same engine. A protagonist wants something, and the **era forbids it**, whether by law, custom, poverty, faith, distance, or the plain facts of what was possible that year. The forbidding is the plot. The reader watches a person push against the walls of their own time, and the walls are real, which is why the pushing costs something on every page.

The second half of the engine is that the **era sets the stakes**. A debt in one century means a bad year; in another it means prison, or a sold child. A cough is a nuisance or a death sentence depending on the decade. When you know the period well enough, you do not have to invent danger. You have only to place a person you care about inside conditions that were genuinely dangerous, and let those conditions do their work.

THREE THINGS RUNNING AT ONCE

- **Want:** a desire the period makes hard or unlawful. Name exactly what stands between the character and it.
- **Stakes:** a cost the era sets. Know what failure meant then, in the courts, the street, and the body.
- **Belonging:** a protagonist who is of their time, not a modern visitor holding the reader's hand.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • THE SEARCHER

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented historical novel, working title **The Searcher**. London, summer 1665. Nell Aske, a widow in the parish of St Giles Cripplegate, is sworn as a searcher of the dead, one of the women paid to view corpses and report the cause to the parish clerk for the weekly Bills of Mortality. Her want is to get her daughter Bess out of the city before the plague reaches their court. The era forbids it. She is sworn to the parish, and no certificate of health is written for the likes of her.*

A small spine for a big canvas.

the era supplies the pressure at every turn. the spine supplies the turns.

A big historical canvas still needs a small spine. The temptation is to let the sweep of events stand in for structure, so that the book moves because history moved. It will not hold. Underneath the period, the story needs the same load-bearing shape as any other, and the cleanest is the **Three-Act Structure** below. Read the beats as the places where the era must press hardest, not as rooms to furnish with research.

ACT ONE

01	Setup	~5%
02	Inciting Incident	~12%
03	Plot Point One	~25%

ACT TWO

04	Rising Action	~40%
05	Midpoint	~50%
06	Crisis	~75%

ACT THREE

07	Climax	~90%
08	Resolution	100%

The percentages are targets, not laws. What matters is that each turn is driven by the period, not merely dated by it. The inciting incident should be something that could only happen that year; the crisis should be the era closing its last exit. In **The Searcher**, the setup is Nell's oath in June, the midpoint is the sickness crossing into her own court, and the crisis is the September week when the Bills count more than seven thousand plague dead. This guide rides the Three-Act Structure start to finish, and you can draft against it directly in the free planner named on the last page.

Research that serves the story.

read until you can move around the room. then stop.

Research is not preparation for the novel. It is where the novel comes from. The primary sources do the most work: diaries, letters, court records, account books, sermons, broadsheets, the printed orders posted at church doors. They give you the idiom, the prices, the fears, and the things people did not bother to explain because everyone knew them. Secondary histories tell you what happened. Primary sources tell you what it was like, and what it was like is the book.

Material culture matters as much as events. What people ate, wore, burned for light, believed about illness, and feared at night is the texture the reader signed up for. But there is a stopping rule. Research until you can move a character around a room in that year without checking, until you know which door they would use and what they would notice. Then close the books and write. The rest can be looked up when a scene demands it.

THE RESEARCH ICEBERG

- Nine-tenths stays under the surface. What you know shapes every sentence; what you show is the sliver the scene needs.
- Prefer the detail that does two jobs. A fact that reveals character or raises stakes earns its place; a fact that is merely true does not.
- Keep a period bible. Prices, distances, names, the calendar, the weather by month. Consistency is a form of authenticity.

THE SEARCHER • THE ICEBERG

Under the surface sits everything about a searcher's summer. The parish orders that bar her from any other trade while she serves. The red cross and the painted plea on a shut-up door, the watchmen posted day and night, the dead-cart's bell after dark, the plague pit dug in Finsbury Fields. Above the surface, in the scene, is one thing. Nell drops a merchant's coin into a bowl of vinegar before she will touch it, and knows the vinegar changes nothing, and touches it anyway.

Period voice.

of its time without costume. no forsoothery, no modern idiom.

Period voice is a balance held on every line. Lean one way and you get **forsoothery**, the stage-tavern dialect of thees and prithees that no reader believes and no character ever spoke. Lean the other and you get modern idiom in a ruff, a duke who says he is fine with it. The working answer is a clean, slightly formal register with the anachronisms removed. Cut the words and metaphors that did not exist yet, keep the sentence shapes of the time, and let the period show in what people talk about and what they leave unsaid.

The deeper problem is **modern psychology**. A character of 1665 does not think in terms of stress, trauma, or self-esteem; they think in terms of God's judgment, humors, luck, and duty. Interiority is where anachronism hides best, because it is invisible to the writer producing it. Give the character the explanations their world offered, and let them be wrong in the ways their world was wrong. The reader will feel the period from inside, which is the only place it can be felt.

ON THE PAGE

- Subtract, do not decorate. Period voice is mostly the absence of the modern, not the presence of the antique.
- Check the metaphors. Figures of speech carry technology and belief; a clockwork mind is wrong before there were clocks.
- Think as they thought. Interior explanation must use the era's own categories, even when those categories were mistaken.

WATCH OUT

The vocabulary test is easy to pass and the psychology test is easy to fail. A manuscript can be free of every anachronistic word and still be narrated by someone who plainly grew up with modern medicine, modern rights, and modern doubt. Read your protagonist's private thoughts as a historian would. If they could only have been thought last week, the costume is the only period thing on the page.

Blending real and invented.

invent in the gaps. never contradict what the reader can check.

The rule is simple to state and hard to keep. Invention is allowed anywhere the record is silent, and forbidden anywhere the record speaks. Dates of battles, names of monarchs, the outcome of a trial, the day a city fell: these are fixed, and a reader who can look them up will. Everything the record did not keep, which is nearly everything, belongs to you. Private conversations, weather on an ordinary Tuesday, the servant no ledger named, the reason a documented decision was really made.

The gaps are not a limitation. They are where the novel lives. History records outcomes and leaves out motives; it records the great and forgets the small; it keeps the public act and loses the private hour. Every silence is an invitation. When you must alter something the record does say, do it knowingly, do it for a reason the story requires, and confess it in the author's note. Readers forgive a declared liberty. They do not forgive a discovered one.

REAL FIGURES ON THE PAGE

- Keep them consistent with what is known. A documented figure may surprise the reader, but never contradict their own record.
- Prefer the margins. A real figure glimpsed by an invented witness costs less license than one made a protagonist.
- Give the private hours honestly. Invented interiority for a real person must fit the shape of their public acts.

THE SEARCHER • THE GAPS

The record fixes the frame. The court leaves London in July; the Lord Mayor, Sir John Lawrence, stays; the weekly Bills climb through August and peak in September. Nell cannot change one printed number. But the record never kept the searchers' names, which is the gap the whole book stands in. The Lord Mayor appears only as orders read aloud at the church door. Nell never meets him. She meets his paper, and the watchman it puts outside a neighbor's house.

Someone of their time.

not a modern tourist. a person the period made.

The commonest failure in the genre is the **modern tourist**: a protagonist who holds the reader's own values, sees through every prejudice of the age, and moves through the period like a visitor with a guidebook. The reader recognizes themselves and is flattered, and the past is reduced to a backdrop for a person who does not belong to it. The result is safe, and dead.

A protagonist of their time shares the era's assumptions, including some the reader will find hard. They can still be exceptional. Every age had people who pushed against it, but they pushed with the tools and the reasons their age gave them, not ours. The drama of historical fiction is precisely a person of one world straining against that world's walls. If they already stand outside it, there is nothing to strain against, and the want the era forbids becomes a want the era merely inconveniences.

BUILD A PERSON THE ERA MADE

- Give them the era's beliefs. Faith, rank, medicine, and fate should shape their reasoning, not just their vocabulary.
- Let them be wrong in period. A protagonist can be mistaken the way everyone then was mistaken, and still be loved.
- Make the rebellion period-shaped. When they defy the age, they do it with means the age actually offered.

THE SEARCHER • A WOMAN OF 1665

Nell believes the sickness is a visitation and half believes she deserves it. She thinks tobacco smoke a preservative and hangs a sprig of rue at the door, and the book does not wink. When a merchant's widow offers coin to write spotted fever instead of plague, so the house is not shut, Nell does not reason about public health. She reasons that a shut house is a death house, that the coin is passage for Bess, and that God has already counted the dead however she writes them.

Structure and the scope problem.

choose the slice. let the reader's hindsight do the dread.

The scope problem is the genre's particular trap. History offers a canvas with no edges, and the untrained instinct is to paint all of it, so that the novel becomes a chronicle with characters attached. Choose the **slice** instead. One season, one parish, one household, one decision that the larger events press upon. The great war or the great plague is the weather of the book, not its plot. The plot is the small human thing the weather makes impossible.

The gift that repays the choice is **dramatic irony**. The reader knows what is coming. They know the ship sinks, the city burns, the king loses his head, the numbers in September will be worse than August. The characters do not. Every ordinary scene is charged with a dread the writer never has to manufacture, provided the characters are allowed their ignorance. Do not let them guess the future. Let the reader carry it alone, and the quietest chapter becomes unbearable.

SHAPE THE SLICE

- Pick a span the spine can hold. A three-act structure fits a season or a year cleanly; a century needs a different book.
- Put the known event at a beat. The catastrophe the reader expects should land at the crisis or climax, not in the summary.
- Ration the hindsight. The reader knows; the characters must not. Foreshadow only with what they could have seen.

WATCH OUT

The canvas too wide for one book announces itself early. If your outline needs four viewpoint characters in three cities to cover the events, the events are running the novel. Cut to the one person whose want the era most cruelly forbids and stay with them. The wider history will still be there, seen through a window, which is how everyone who lived through it actually saw it.

Theme and the present.

the past speaks to now. it does not lecture.

Every historical novel is written from the present, and the good ones know it. The period is chosen because it says something to now, about power, plague, money, faith, or who gets counted. But the saying must happen in the story, not over it. The moment a character steps forward to explain what the past teaches us, the reader is back in the classroom, and the spell of standing inside another time is gone.

The method is to let the parallel stay **unspoken**. Build the situation with enough truth that the reader draws the line to their own century themselves, and never draw it for them. The reader who finds the resonance owns it; the reader handed it resents it. Trust the period to be about something. If you chose it honestly, it already is, and your only job is not to get in the way.

SAY IT WITHOUT SAYING IT

- Choose the period for its question. Know what the era asks that your own is still asking.
- Answer in action, not speech. The theme is what the protagonist finally does, not what anyone says about it.
- Leave the bridge unbuilt. If the parallel to now is true, the reader will cross without a signpost.

THE SEARCHER • THE ENDING

The question the book never asks aloud is who counts the dead, and who gets to leave. At the climax, with the tokens on Bess, Nell must write her own house into the Bill or hide it as she hid others. She writes it true, and is shut in with her daughter. Bess lives, as some did. In the resolution, with the numbers falling and the court not yet returned, Nell walks to the parish clerk with a page of names she once wrote wrong. The printed Bills cannot be changed. She brings the page anyway.

Seven ways the past rings false.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The research info-dump.** Paragraphs of period fact the scene does not need, paid for with the reader's patience. Fix: keep nine-tenths under the surface, and let each detail reveal character or raise the cost.
- **2. The modern mind in period dress.** A protagonist with today's values and yesterday's wardrobe. Fix: give them the era's beliefs and reasons, and let their rebellion use only the means their age offered.
- **3. Forsoothery.** Dialogue in stage-antique, thick with thees and prithees no one believes. Fix: a clean, slightly formal register with the anachronisms subtracted, and the period carried by what people discuss.
- **4. Contradicting the record.** A date, a name, or an outcome the reader can check, and does. Fix: invent in the gaps only, and confess any deliberate alteration in the author's note.
- **5. The tourist plot.** A story that exists to visit famous events and famous people in sequence. Fix: choose one small want the era forbids, and let the great events press on it from outside.
- **6. The canvas too wide.** Four viewpoints, three cities, a century, and no spine. Fix: cut to the slice the three-act structure can hold, and see the rest through a window.
- **7. The apologetic author's note.** A closing page that begs pardon for every liberty instead of explaining it. Fix: state what you changed and why, plainly and without apology. The note is a map, not a confession.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels like a museum, ask one question: what does the period forbid or cost here that it would not forbid or cost today? If the answer is nothing, the scene is wearing the past rather than living in it, and it is the scene the draft can spare.

Your historical worksheet.

print this page. the want first, then the walls around it.

PERIOD + PLACE (THE SLICE)

FIXED FACTS I CANNOT MOVE

PROTAGONIST + WHAT THEY WANT

GAPS IN THE RECORD I WILL FILL

HOW THE ERA FORBIDS IT

THE ERA'S BELIEFS MY HERO HOLDS

STAKES THE ERA SETS

MIDPOINT + CRISIS (PERIOD-DRIVEN)

WHAT THE READER ALREADY KNOWS

WHAT THE AUTHOR'S NOTE MUST SAY

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version doesn't.

The Three-Act Structure this guide rides - the small spine under every big historical canvas - exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft. The same eight beats, with a text box under each one that saves as you type, so you can read a beat, draft the moment the era presses hardest on the spot, and walk away with a full historical outline in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/three-act

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor with professional export, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, your resident story editor, whenever you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

MORE FREE FIELD GUIDES

- Three-Act Structure · the spine this guide rides
- How to Outline a Novel · from blank page to working plan
- The Hero's Journey · the mythic circle, beat by beat
- How to Write a Romance Novel · the promise of the happy ending
- The Snowflake Method · from one sentence to a full design

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ONE MORE DRAFT

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