

1. Write what you want to read

This may seem obvious, but you would be surprised how many people set out to write a best-selling romance – because they think (wrongly) that it will be easier – when all they ever read are thrillers. Similarly, lots of people decide to write short stories – because... well, because they're *short* – when they never, in fact, read any modern short stories. The same goes for poetry – most poems are even shorter than short stories, and people tend to look back fondly on the poems they learned in school, not what is currently being published.

With this in mind, try the following exercise, which should take no longer than half an hour – depending on the size of your book collection. (If films or plays are what interest you, then try the same exercise with your Video/DVD collection.)

Down the left hand side of sheet of A4 paper list all the types of book you can think of (such as Detective Thrillers, Romances, Science Fiction/Fantasy, Literary Fiction, Biography, Short Stories, Poetry Collections, Non-Fiction etc).

Now go through your bookshelves and make a note of how many books you own in each category. Only record those books that you yourself have read or intend to read. (If you get most of your books from the library, this could take longer. You could try keeping a similar record over a few weeks, or else try to create your borrowings from memory. Be as honest as you can.)

Compare the results with your expectations. What are the top three types of book on your shelves? Is the type of book you wanted to write one of them? Is it number one? Did other types of book come out higher? Did you come across a type of book that wasn't on your original list?

If there is one outright winner, and that's what you've always wanted to write, then nothing's been lost, but if you're at all surprised at what you have discovered – and many people often are – then you've learned something very important indeed, and may have saved yourself a lot of time and frustration.

All genres of fiction – in fact, all different types of writing – have their own conventions: the characteristic elements that mark them out as Romances or Science Fantasy or Detective stories. Why struggle with an unfamiliar genre, when you're perfectly at home with the conventions of another?