

18. RIO

This is an acronym, and it stands for Research, Imagination and Observation – the three essential skills that each writer should cultivate.

The exhortation that is given to every new writer – ‘Write about what you know’ – does not mean that you cannot write about a place unless you have visited it, or that you cannot write about a particular line of work without having undertaken it yourself. If that were true, then the criminal activities of Agatha Christie and Ruth Rendell should have been investigated long ago. Instead, you can **Research** a lot about the world by visiting your local reference, library, trawling the Internet with the help of a useful search engine such as Google, or simply by watching television documentaries.

Your local reference library will, for example, provide you with a wide range of guides to most countries and cities in the world, many of them providing you with street maps, details of local events and even some examples of local colour. These days, you can follow them up by going on-line to local Internet sites, which will, in turn, produce links to a number of other sites so that, gradually, you can begin to piece together a good idea of what life must be like there. Similarly, you will find that career guides can give you a good idea of the skills and training required for a particular occupation, and you may even be able to find autobiographies written by people who have followed those occupations. If you want to set your story at a particular time in history then, again, there will be a number of books written about that period, and you may even be able to access more immediate accounts through eye-witness reports, newspaper archives or personal diaries. Once you have this sort of background material – and don’t forget that small details often provide more flavour than broad descriptions – you can place your characters in that new world and let them loose. Human behaviour is remarkably similar the whole world over.

That said, you can’t know – or discover – everything, and that’s where **Imagination** comes in. The one question that should always be uppermost in your mind is ‘What if...?’. It can be as broad as the alternative history scenario – ‘What would have happened if Hitler had won the Second World War?’ – but it can be as narrow as ‘What if my character turns right here instead of left, or wears a yellow sweater instead of a red one? What if they say yes instead of no?’. Small changes can have dramatic effects and you might gain a lot from exploring such side paths. As the American novelist Gore Vidal once said, “Someone who only writes about what they know has no imagination.”

Finally – and this is the one skill that all writers should cultivate – we come to **Observation**. No matter how much research you do, no matter how many hours you spend lost in your imagination, unless you have an eye for the telling detail you will always find that your work lacks that essential spark of life. You should never stop observing – and noting down – the world around you, whether it’s the way that light changes at different times of year, or the ways in which different people react to the same piece of information. Every observed detail will be unique to you, but you will share it with enough of your readers to make them feel that you are speaking directly to them.