

Photography for Writers - Addendum
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Photography for Fiction Writers - Research & Note Taking

After you've read *Photography for Writers*, you'll know what you need to about what equipment is needed, how to get it, and how to use it, but you may still question why a fiction writer should use photography. Photography has two primary uses for fiction writers: 1) research, and 2) note taking. These two areas overlap in many situations.

The principles of photography are the same for fact and fiction writers, but because you won't be selling the photos, the skill level required can be a bit more relaxed. You don't have to satisfy an editor, only your own need for information.

Before starting my first Benjamin Bones mystery, I naively thought that because it was fiction, I could just make it all up. Walls, even buildings, could go wherever necessary for the plot or action without regard to physical facts. Wrong. I found that I was doing as much research, and in equal depth, as when I wrote *Photography for Writers*.

Memory is fallible and deteriorates as time passes. You simply can't remember everything. Another problem is that we miss details when visiting somewhere, even if you're scribbling notes and making diagrams like crazy and grabbing every brochure you can lay hands on. Examining photos later at leisure, there will always be more in them than you thought, always plenty of detail.

Reality must be served, and the fiction writer who describes a place, weather condition, activity, or historical situation had better get it right. Your credibility is always on the line with perceptive readers. You've all heard stories of incorrect firearm details such as a character clicking off a revolver's safety. Too bad for that writer. If a reader catches one factual error in your work, your believability is gone. And readers tell their friends.

Just as we must have our facts, procedures, and technical details right, environment can't be left to chance either. Suppose you go somewhere to research a venue that's going to be some character's birthplace, or the place that a formative event occurred. It might be the scene of the kidnapping, robbery,

murder, or terrorist assault that is at the center of your plot. Get it right; one of your readers has been there too. Don't disappoint with factual gaffs.

Benjamin Bones, my protagonist, has sent me to Rome, Georgia four times and Gadsden, Alabama twice. I shot three to four rolls of 36-exposures each time. But sitting down to write with 3x6 proof prints tacked to a huge bulletin board in front of me, details were still missing and another trip was necessary. Each time I went, the movie in my head became clearer, and each time I looked at the photos, details I previously missed when I was there and would have forgotten completely, became evident. It's these details that enrich your descriptions and make your fictional reality more real for your readers.

What should you shoot on these exploratory trips? Here's a partial list:

- Cities, neighborhoods, parks, forests, wood lots, etc. for the general flavor of a place,
- Specific building exteriors for architectural period and construction details,
- Physical locations of buildings, city streets, and alleys for blocking character movements,
- Building interiors for atmosphere and blocking character movements,
- Groups of people for clothing, behavior, movement routes and patterns,
- Individuals for later description of looks, clothing or decoration, demeanor or overt behaviors,
- Natural and man-made features that characters will notice along roads they follow, or that later may be worked into the plot,
- Weather conditions such as massing thunderheads, the peculiar atmospheric glow after a storm, early morning or late evening skies,
- Stores where characters will interact (lots of pictures of this from different angles, and lots of details),
- Tools that characters will use, especially antique or one-of-a-kind items that you won't be able to find again for inspection close to home,
- Ways of doing things: raising a barn, stalking a deer or man, cleaning a fish or a gun, putting bait on a hook, setting a trap, performing an emergency appendectomy with a plastic spoon,
- How things happen: how a burning house collapses, a volcano blows, a whale leaps out of water, how tides go in or out, how seasons change.
- And lots more details that are relevant to your novel or short story. You'll think of plenty.

When you factor the cost of traveling to your research site, car rental, the hotel bill, food, and everything else that makes these excursions worthwhile, film and processing will only be a small part of the total. Photography is well worth the expense in the wealth of information you'll be bringing back to your writing desk.