

# Secrets of Romantic Suspense: A Series of Eight Lectures

By Lisa Gardner

*This continues this series of eight lectures, which started with the first installment, "Introduction."*

## **Lecture II. Research**

Confession time: I'm a geek. I love a good plot puzzle, a stubborn character, a new location I know absolutely nothing about. What better way to procrastinate from the sweat and tears business of writing, than conducting Important Book Research? Besides, investigating new police procedures, psychological syndromes or geographic locations is like mining for gold—you never know what perfect nugget you'll unearth that makes all the difference in your novel.

Furthermore, research is more important than ever in this day and age of "authentic fiction." Authors such as Tom Clancy, Patricia Cornwell, Thomas Harris, Stephen Hunter and Kathy Reichs, have literally built their careers by creating fast-paced fiction with real-world procedures. While editors understand that not every author has a professional background in law enforcement, the military, etc., editors are looking for that extra edge, so you'd better do your homework.

In the good news department, there is more information out there than ever before, and even the most beginning writer can acquire impressively gritty details if she's willing to push herself.

Think of research has having three levels of exposure:

- Secondary sources: True crime novels, textbooks, periodicals, articles, etc.
- Primary sources: Interviewing doctors, lawyers, agents, cops, etc.
- Hands-on exposure: Gun classes, volunteering at a hospital or police station, etc.

Utilizing any one source can help craft your novel. Being willing to follow through on all three levels of exposure, however, will yield the uncommon nuggets that can turn your ordinary plot and characters into solid gold.

### **Secondary Sources**

Thanks to the Internet, secondary sources for writers are more abundant and more accessible than ever before. Whether you visit websites to read about a new location, or visit an on-line retailer such as Amazon.com to order research books, you can find tons of information without ever leaving the relative comfort of your overstuffed office chair.

Personally, I recommend finding textbooks because they are what your genuine cop, detective, and/or firefighter studies and they often reveal details you don't expect. For example, when I wrote *Brandon's Bride* for Silhouette, my main character was a Hot Shot—the ground troop wildfire fighters. When I ordered the textbook used by the Hot Shots (I received the name of the textbook from a website on wildfire fighters), I was amazed at the amount of technical information. I had always assumed that Hot Shots had superb physical skills. The textbook helped me understand that they also possess superb mental agility. They literally have to memorize burn ratios of all sorts of wild brush, as well as grasp the impact of wind, humidity and ground cover on the behavior of fire. Then they have to use this information real time, often under very intense circumstances. That textbook was definitely an eye opener for me, and you can be sure I utilized my new understanding of a Hot Shot's job in my novel.

You can get textbook information by simply asking the people you are interviewing, by searching on Amazon.com, or by consulting writer-oriented presses such as Gryphon Books ([www.GryphonBooks.com](http://www.GryphonBooks.com)) and Paladin Press ([www.paladin-press.com](http://www.paladin-press.com)), both of which carry books on homicide, guns, poisons, terrorists, martial arts, etc. Once you order one item, their catalogues will start appearing regularly in the mail—much to the delight of your spouse, I'm sure. For other helpful sources, please consult "The Writer's Tool Chest" also available at [www.LisaGardner.com/TricksOfTheTrade](http://www.LisaGardner.com/TricksOfTheTrade). "The Writer's Tool Chest" contains my personal recommendations for suspense reference books.

### **Primary Sources**

Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to be published—or famous—to interview experts. I have yet to contact any branch of law enforcement and have someone say, "Oooh, Lisa Gardner, of course I'll help you!" Generally, the person answering the phone says, "Who are you? What do you want?" But never fear. Law enforcement agencies operate at the taxpayer's expense, and thus take taxpayer needs very seriously. More to the point, most experts love to talk about their jobs and if you're interested and professional they will be happy to assist you.

Here are some rules of thumb for conducting expert interviews:

1. Family, friends, and/or websites can help you identify leading experts

2. Cold calling is also perfectly acceptable. Most of the experts I have contacted over the years aren't people I personally knew. For example, when I needed information on FBI procedure for my second novel, *The Other Daughter*, I simply called my local FBI field office and said that I was a writer doing research on healthcare fraud. The public affairs agent kindly arranged for me to meet with two special agents from there.
3. Be professional. Rather than put someone on the spot, make an appointment to officially interview them, and then call back. This gives you the opportunity to do as much preliminary research as you can. Also, if you need a lot of technical information, it doesn't hurt to fax your questions in advance so the person understands what you are looking for.
4. Don't be argumentative. You're not an investigative reporter, you are a fiction writer and these people are speaking to you out of professional courtesy. Be appreciative. Always thank the person for their time. I tell people that I will include them in the acknowledgment section of my novel and send them a signed book as a token of my appreciation. Maybe you can offer this, maybe you can't, but anything you do will be nice. Oh, if you are going to include someone's name in your novel, always check first. Some law enforcement professionals prefer not to have their names bandied about.
5. Use one contact to help you find another contact. When I was researching *The Third Victim*, I called a DA in Portland, OR to learn about juvenile law statutes so I could properly charge the teenager in my novel. From her, I learned that charging a youth is not cut and dried—there is a whole process of evaluating the juvenile first, which involves a forensics psychologist and takes up to a year. Now I have a whole new subject to learn. So I asked her if she could recommend a forensics psychologist. Then I call that man, and told him that so-and-so recommended him as an expert in his field. Now we had someone in common, and he was more receptive to my initial call. He went on to be a fabulously patient man, as I had to interview him many times before I fully grasped the juvenile evaluation process.
6. Always leave the door open to call back. No matter how exhaustive and thorough you feel you are being, you will always end up with some sort of silly question when you go to write the novel. I always end interviews letting people know I will probably discover a few short follow up questions. That way they're not surprised to get my call (or e-mail, if that's what they prefer).
7. Finally, be pleasant, be proud. You don't need to emphasize that you're not published or that you're not sure if this book will sell. People are interested in meeting a writer and you are a writer. Furthermore, you are a writer who is doing research, meaning you are a serious writer. Handle yourself accordingly and people will respond to that.

## Hands-on Exposure

The final research avenue is hands-on exposure. For example, if you're going to use guns in your book, you might want to take a firearms course. Or perhaps you want to take karate classes or enroll in a pottery course if your character throws clay. Hands-on exposure will bring you the maximum amount of detail, if you feel that you're up to it. I took a firearms course for *The Perfect Husband*, which has several scenes involving the heroine trying to learn how to shoot a gun. This worked mostly because the heroine wasn't very comfortable with guns and neither am I. In all honesty, I still have issues getting all the gun info accurate in my novels, because I'm not that technically inclined and no amount of handling semiautomatics has helped me overcome that. Sometimes the author's limitations become the book's limitations. But if you're willing to push yourself, that will generally lead to a much more interesting novel.

## Conclusion

One final note in the research department: Just because you've learned it, doesn't mean you get to use it. The primary goal of fiction is to entertain, and you must ask yourself, does this research help you portray a more riveting story, or is it simply demonstrating what a good student you've been? Personally, I have to throw everything in first—the good student in me. Then I hack eighty percent of the research details back out—the good writer in me. The story must come first. Always, always, always, the story must come first.

Next up, finding the proper setting for your novel.