Scrhoz

Start a Historical Novel Prompt Pack

Prepared by Mia I. Bennett | Scrhoz

14 simple prompts for the first stage of a historical novel: choosing your ground, placing your character in it, planning your reading and starting your research notes.

How to Use This Pack

- Copy a prompt, paste it into any AI assistant (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini or similar), and replace each [BRACKETED] part with your own details.
- Name the period and place as exactly as you can, such as "Lyon, 1789 to 1793" and not "the French Revolution". The tighter the window, the better the answers.
- Use the AI to ask better questions and plan your reading, not to stand in for the reading. Your research and your story stay yours.
- AI can get dates, objects, names and quotes wrong, or make them up. Every prompt asks it to say what it's unsure of. Check anything you plan to put on the page against a book or another reliable source.

Note: These prompts are a starting point for planning and research. They do not replace books, archives or published scholarship, and AI can make mistakes or invent details. Where historians disagree, look at more than one account before you decide. Money and prices in the answers are rough guides only.

Choose Your Ground

1. Why This Period?

> I want to write a historical novel but haven't settled on a period. What draws me to historical fiction: [WHAT YOU LOVE, E.G. ROMANCE / WAR / MYSTERY / EVERYDAY LIFE / POLITICS]. Places or periods I already know a little about: [LIST, OR "NONE"]. Suggest five periods and places that could suit me. For each one, give a line on why it could make a good story, a line on what makes it hard to write well, and a guess at how much general-reader material exists. Say where you're unsure, and don't recommend specific books.

Tip: Choose the one you'd still enjoy reading about in a year.

2. Narrow the Window

> I'm drawn to [PERIOD AND PLACE]. Help me narrow it to a window of [5 / 10 / 20] years for one novel. Suggest three possible windows. For each, say what was going on, what kind of story could be set then, and what I'd be leaving out by choosing it. Say if any dates are uncertain or if historians divide the period differently.

Tip: A tight window is far easier to research than a whole century.

3. Find the Pressure Points

> For [PERIOD AND PLACE, AS EXACTLY AS YOU CAN], list six pressures that ordinary people lived under, such as law, money, religion, class, family duty, hunger, war, disease or what the neighbours would say. For each one, give a line on how it could squeeze a character and one kind of story it might produce. Say which you're sure of and which I should check. Don't invent named people.

Tip: Stories tend to live where two pressures meet.

4. Test My Setting Choice

> My setting is [PERIOD AND PLACE]. My story idea in two sentences: [YOUR IDEA]. Play a friendly sceptic. Tell me what could make this setting a poor fit for the idea, what a reader who knows the period might doubt, and three questions I should be able to answer before I commit. Don't rewrite my idea, and say where you're unsure.

Tip: A setting that survives three awkward questions is worth keeping.

Place Your Character

5. Choose Their Place in Society

> My main character is [AGE, GENDER AND OCCUPATION, OR "NOT DECIDED"] in [PERIOD AND PLACE]. Describe four realistic positions in society someone like this could hold, from modest to comfortable. For each one, say what they'd own, who and what they'd depend on, and who they'd have to answer to. Keep any money to rough terms only, and say where you're unsure.

Tip: Choose the position that gives your character something to lose.

6. What Could They Reach?

> In [PERIOD AND PLACE], what could a [OCCUPATION AND CLASS] realistically reach in an ordinary year: how far they could travel, who they could speak to, what they could read, learn or buy, and which doors were closed to them? Separate what was rare from what was normal. Say what you're unsure of and mark anything I should check.

Tip: Limits make better plots than freedom does.

7. Who Would They Meet in a Day?

> Describe the kinds of people a [OCCUPATION AND CLASS] in [PERIOD AND PLACE] might meet in one ordinary day, in order, from first thing in the morning to last thing at night. Give each a role, not a name, and one thing they'd want from my character. Don't invent named individuals or quotes. Say which parts are well documented and which are informed guesswork.

Tip: Every role on the list is a possible scene.

8. What Would They Never Question?

> What would a [OCCUPATION AND CLASS] in [PERIOD AND PLACE] have taken for granted and never questioned, about God, family, rank, work, health, strangers or the future? List eight. For each one, give a line on how it might show up in their behaviour, and mark which ones a modern reader would find strangest. Say where you're unsure.

Tip: A character who shares all our assumptions is probably in the wrong century.

Plan Your Reading

9. A Novelist's Reading Plan

> I'm planning a novel set in [PERIOD AND PLACE]. I have about [NUMBER] hours a week for [NUMBER] weeks. I've already read: [LIST, OR "NOTHING YET"]. Suggest a reading plan that moves from a general overview, to daily life, to the specific place and people, to primary sources. Describe the kinds of source for each stage, not specific titles, and don't make up titles or authors. Mark what I can skim.

Tip: Do the overview first. It tells you which questions are worth asking.

10. Set a Research Budget

> I want to research [PERIOD AND PLACE] for a novel without it taking over my life. I want to start writing by [DATE]. Help me split my research into what I must know before I start, what I can find out as I go, and what I'll probably never need. Give rough hours or percentages, and a simple rule for when to stop reading and write. If the cost of books or subscriptions comes up, keep to rough ranges and say they're guesses.

Tip: Research is a lovely way to avoid writing. Set the stopping point now.

11. Questions for a Librarian or Archivist

> Help me write a short, polite message to a librarian, an archivist or a local history society. My novel is set in [PERIOD AND PLACE]. What I'm trying to find out: [YOUR QUESTION]. Keep it under 150 words, say what I've already tried, and ask one specific question rather than a general one. Then list three things I should have to hand before I send it. Don't invent names of collections or institutions, and tell me if you're unsure about any detail.

Tip: Specific questions get answered. Vague ones get a polite reply.

Start Your Notes

12. Set Up My Research Notes

> Suggest a simple system for keeping research notes for a novel set in [PERIOD AND PLACE], using [A NOTEBOOK / A DOCUMENT / A NOTES APP / A SPREADSHEET]. Include headings, a way to record where each fact came from and how sure I am of it, and a way to mark facts I've used in my draft. Keep it to one page that I can set up in ten minutes. If any part of your suggestion depends on a guess, say so.

Tip: Write down the source as you go. Finding it again later is miserable.

13. Turn Reading into Story Questions

> Here are notes from something I've read about [PERIOD AND PLACE]: [PASTE YOUR NOTES, UNDER 300 WORDS]. Turn them into ten questions a novelist could ask, such as who this would hurt, what it would feel like to live with, or what a person would do about it. Don't add facts that aren't in my notes unless you label them as extra, don't answer the questions, and say if you're unsure what any of my notes mean.

Tip: Pick the question you can't stop thinking about and follow it.

14. Write a One-Page Period Brief

> Using only the notes I paste below, write a one-page brief on [PERIOD AND PLACE] for my own use while I draft: who held power, how people lived, what they believed, what changed during my story, and what I'm still unsure about. Don't add facts that aren't in my notes unless you label them as extra. Finish with the five things I most need to check. Say where you're unsure. My notes: [PASTE YOUR NOTES].

Tip: Pin it above your desk and update it as you learn more.

More from Mia I. Bennett

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