



Story Prompts: Historical

Introduction

The following story prompts are designed as entry points to new stories. Some of them will spark an idea. Some of them won't. With the ones that do spark an idea, can you keep pushing that idea into something completely unique? Perhaps the story you come up with in the end only references the prompt in a very oblique fashion. Perhaps it sticks to it more closely.

Alternate history

Imagine an alternative life for a character who died young, perhaps a villain who takes a different path or a martyr whose martyrdom never happened. For example, see: <https://newflashfiction.com/revision/>

The artist

Describe an artist, composer, writer, poet or sculptor in the process of creating their most famous work. What is the historical context that swirls around them? What are the burdens playing on their soul as they strive for greatness?

Before the horizon

Write a story set just before a catastrophe where a character is completely unaware of what is about to happen. For example, you might choose the hours before the eruption of Pompei or the hours before the explosion at Chernobyl.

Behind the man

Much of history shines the spotlight on men. But who were the women behind those men?

A childhood moment

Pick a famous person from history and imagine a moment from their childhood, thinking about what they might have learnt / done in their childhood to make them who they were in later life.

Contemporary parallel

Use a historical story to reflect on a contemporary issue. For example, you might use the little ice age to reflect on climate change; you might use a story about the Luddites to reflect on the rise of technology and AI.

Daydreams

Create a character from history who is in their youth, not someone historically important but a 'normal' person. What do they dream about? How do they see their future? How do they imagine the future of the world?

Deathbed regret

Pick a character who has either done something bad during their life (for example, you might pick Richard III) or has set in motion future problems (for example, you might pick James Watt, inventor of the steam engine, whose invention perhaps set the path towards the modern-day climate crisis) and have them reflect on those actions with regret.

Dorothy doesn't

Write a story that contrasts what a character doesn't do against what they do instead. This might be a comparison of how something is generally done in the present against what was done in the past—for example, it might be a woman washing clothes that contrasts 'Dorothy doesn't tumble the pile of clothes into a metallic drum...' with 'Instead, she washes each garment in the stream...' Or it might be a comparison between different identities—for example, it might be a comparison of foods eaten by rich and poor in a specific time period like 'Dorothy doesn't have quail's eggs for breakfast. Her larder is bare...'

Dragons' Den pitch

Write a story where an inventor from history makes a pitch for investment from a group of billionaire-equivalents in their time period.

The first person to know

There is always a first person to know. Imagine what it would have been like to be the first person to become aware of the Great Fire of London. Imagine what it would have been like to be the first person to become aware of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand.

Future knowledge

Imbue a character with knowledge that wasn't known in their time period and place them at a moment in history where that knowledge would be useful. For example, you might have a character know all about germs and infection during the Black Death or you might have a character know all about nutrition and physiology during the first Olympics.

Historical profession

Research a profession that existed in the past but no longer exists—see pages 3-5 of my list of [unusual professions](#)—and write a story about a character who is employed as such. For example, see: <https://flashbackfiction.com/index.php/2019/12/02/life-at-the-colliery/>

Holiday guide

Write a holiday / vacation guide for a time-travelling family going to a specific place in a specific year.

A house through time

Write a dual timeframe story about two characters who live in the same house in different time periods. How do their lives differ? How are their lives the same? What story might emerge from the juxtaposition between then and now?

Humorous construction / discovery / invention

Pick a famous construction, discovery or invention and write it from a new angle by making it humorous—for example, you might pick the discovery of America and have the pioneers be unimpressed or you might pick the invention of gunpowder and have the inventors be disappointed that there isn't a bigger boom. For example, see: <https://flashbackfiction.com/index.php/2018/06/18/wheel-of-fortune-by-nick-black/>

Illegal happenings 1

In Paris in the 19th century, it was illegal for women to wear trousers. Christmas festivities were banned by the Puritans in 1644. Alcohol was banned in America during Prohibition. Choose something that used to be illegal and write a story about a group of characters who choose to flout that law.

Illegal happenings 2

Coca Cola used to contain cocaine. Opium dens used to be a thing. Gentlemen used to partake in duels. There was baby-farming and prostitution. Schools had corporal punishment. Research something that was common in the past but is either frowned upon or illegal now. Use it as the scenario for a story.

The last of the...

Who was the last child chimneysweep in London? Who was the last lover of Casanova? Who was the last person to see a dodo before they went extinct? Did they know they were the last?

Letters on a historical event

Communication was very different in the past. Write an epistolary story (told through letters / other correspondence) between two characters about a major historical event. Weave together the big story (the historical event) with something reflective within the two characters' lives (for example, you might pick the short reign of Lady Jane Grey, the first woman to be declared queen of England, and write it from the point of view of two housewives, reflecting on the general subjugation of women at the time).

A love story

Have two historical ghosts fall in love. Look for an interesting juxtaposition—for example, Mother Shipton (a famous “witch”) and Matthew Hopkins (the “Witchfinder General”). What might attract them to each other? How might the juxtaposition create tension between them?

Lunchtime chatter

Frame a story around a group of historical characters having their midday meal. What do they eat? What do they talk about?

Murder mystery

Create a detective who is trying to solve a crime during a major historical event. Use the solving of the crime as the narrative arc, but weave the historical detail of the event around that journey.

Non-human perspective

Describe a historical event through the eyes of an animal, bird, plant or tree. Consider their unique perspective. What do they think of the event? How does it make them feel?

Obituary

Write the obituary of a famous historical figure.

The place before

What was Stone Henge like before the stones were there? What was New York like before the first building had been built? What could be found at the site of the Colosseum before all that blood was spilled? Set a story in a place that is now associated with a landmark or an event before that landmark had been built or the event had happened.

Point of view of a servant

Kings and Queens often hog the limelight when it comes to the history we are taught, but what were they really like? Imagine how a servant might view them. Can you subvert the “facts” and find a new angle on the past?

Process as framework

Use the steps of a historical process as the structure around which you build a story. This might be a process that has completely died out or one that is still around but would have been much more common in the past. For example, you might use the stages of shoe-making or the stages of printing a newspaper with an old-fashioned printing press. Your story might form itself as a hermit-crab story or it might describe a character (or group of characters) working through the process, thinking about how you might use that description as a backdrop for a story about the character(s) themselves.

Quirky details

In 1752, there were riots because 11 days had been cut from the calendar when Britain shifted from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar. What other historical quirks can you find? How might you use them as the setting for a story?

Ridicule the ridiculous

Use a wry tone of voice to ridicule something historical that seems ridiculous to us as we look back on it. The Children's Crusade for example, or the Great Emu War, or the Kettle War, or King Xerxes 'convicting' and 'punishing' the sea.

Social media

How might George Washington have used Twitter? What would Mother Teresa have posted on Instagram? Who would Genghis Khan have been friends with on Facebook? Pick a historical figure and imagine they had access to social media. Think about tone of voice and historical detail as you curate the sort of things they might post about. Can you use a succession of posts to tell a story?

Sweet child of mine

What was it like having Charles Darwin as a father? What was it like having Marie Curie as a mother? What was it like having Charles Dickens as a brother or Jane Austen as a sister? Tell the story of a family member in the shadow of someone who achieved historical greatness or notoriety.

The tension in the everyday

Choose an everyday event that is generally tension free in the modern world but would have been much more stressful at a specific moment in the past (for example, the arrival of the postman during the war). Describe the scene in rich detail.

Theme through time

Pick a theme like 'clothing' or 'food' and write five micros that connect with that theme at different time periods (e.g. five micros that describe characters getting dressed or describe characters eating dinner). How might you build a journey through the five micros, thinking about movement and change and what you want to say in terms of deeper message (e.g. 'you are what you eat' or 'clothes don't make the man')

A Prompt from Sharon Telfer

Think of a short family anecdote about a relative you never met. Did a great-aunt dance a mean Charleston? Did your great grandfather come to this country from another? (Think the intros to the BBC TV series: *Who Do You Think You Are?*) Why is this story still told? What has kept it glowing? Find that spark and use it to ignite your own story. (NB This is a fiction prompt, not a memoir one, so take this where you want - don't feel bound by family context.)

Tips

Remember you're telling a story, not giving a history lesson. Find the human connection.

Close your eyes and walk round your character's world. What do they hear, see, smell or touch? What feels everyday to them; what is startling? What would they definitely not experience?

You don't have to be accurate – you're writing fiction – but be careful. Keep references within the world your story is inhabiting, unless you want to be deliberately anachronistic. Don't make assumptions, check.



ENDNOTE

Bio:

This resource has been created by Matt Kendrick. Matt is a writer, editor and teacher based in the East Midlands, UK. His short fiction has been widely published both online and in print. His work has been included on the Biffy 50 list for 2019-20, in Best Microfiction 2021, Best Small Fictions 2022 and the Wigleaf Top 50 list for 2022. He has also been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize.

Other Resources:

For links to other free resources, please visit my website: <https://www.mattkendrick.co.uk/resources>

Services and Courses:

Information about my [courses](#), [workshops](#) and [editorial services](#) can also be found on my website.



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