

Alternative history (AH/althist) handout

Alternate/alternative history stories:

- The historical timeline has split at a 'point of divergence' in the past.
- The new timeline follows a different path forever – there is no going back.
- Not parallel or 'secret' history like *The Da Vinci Code*
- Stories should show the ramifications of the split and how the new reality works.

Types of alternative history

Alternate history varies in 'hardness' depending how plausible the alternation is measured against historical reality. At the 'hard' end are well-researched pieces based on historical sources and logical changes from the point of divergence. At the 'soft' end are works of pure fantasy and obey the 'Rule of Cool'.

- **Type I – Hard Alternate History:** Works that stick to strict, sometimes scientific, standards in their plausibility. Research is often detailed and intensive. Most historical counter-factuals fall into this category.
- **Type II – Hard/Soft Alternate History:** Often well researched with historical logic and methodology, but allows room for adventurous outcomes or touches of Rule of Cool or comedy.
- **Type III – Soft Alternate History:** Setting up a world that fits the writer's creative objectives is more important than the plausibility of the alternate history. Research is often minimal to moderate and plausibility will take a back seat to Rule of Cool.
- **Type IV – Utterly Implausible Alternate History:** Works so 'soft' they melt and so implausible as to be effectively impossible. Often, the author prioritises their own ideology at the expense of research, historic details or sensible logistics. Readers with even a passing familiarity with history can't take it seriously.
- **Type X – Fantastical Alternate History:** In contrast with Type IV, these works are deliberately designed as pure fantasy, typically following the Rule of Cool. Mad ideas prevail such as Nazis on the moon in the 2012 film *Iron Sky*.

Perception is subjective and depends upon whether the individual reader is looking for a serious historically logic development, a lighthearted, if not positively wacky, adventure story or something along the scale in-between. Of course, no amount of plausibility, research or attention to 'da rulz' or sense of fun will disguise poor writing, shallow characterisation and losing the plot.

How does AH differ from other speculative fiction: science fiction, fantasy, steampunk, paranormal, urban fantasy, etc.?

- **Sci fi** - futuristic settings, futuristic science and technology, space travel, time travel, parallel universes, and extraterrestrial life and often explores politics, identity, desire, morality, social structure, and other literary themes.

- **Fantasy** - commonly uses magic and other supernatural phenomena as primary plot element, theme, or setting. Predominantly medievalist, with magical creatures, swords, quests and myths (elves, rings, ice-walls, dragons, fae). Includes urban fantasy where the fantastic narrative takes place in a city setting.
- **Paranormal romance** is a sub-genre of romance with the love interest a vampire, shapeshifter, ghost, or time traveller. Can also include characters with psychic abilities. Paranormal romance has its roots in Gothic fiction.
- **Steampunk** – a sub-genre of science fiction with steam-powered machinery, inspired by the industrialised society of the 19th century. Often with fantasy elements such as fairies and other planets, which tip it more into fantasy or science-fiction (Liesel Schwarz's *Chronicles of Light and Shadow*.)

World building

If you set your story in a different country, you can visit the places the characters would live in, smell the sea, touch the plants, walk under the hot blue sky, or freeze in a biting wind. You might have a nice holiday as well!

But inventing a country you have to get your imagination going hand in hand with research and Google Earth. We're creative beings, we've imagined alternative realities since we were children and that's what will drive your world building.

But you have to be practical as well, and believe me, fans will expect you to know everything from costume, social philosophy and weapons to food, transport and childcare provision. (*Yes, I was asked that at the launch of my second book.*)

No country can survive without a functioning government, an economic, social and political system, food, law and order and income. You don't need to mention these as such, unless it impacts on the plot, but you need to have it all worked out in your head, or in a notebook or a file on your hard disk or in the cloud.

Some questions to ask yourself... How do people make their living? How are they educated? What kind of industry is there? Is the government representative? Are laws authoritarian or permissive? Who holds the power? What is the food like? Are there markets, little shops, big chains? What does the money look like?

One big thing to think through apart from its history is what your alternative world looks like. If it's a country we already know, has transport developed beyond the horse and cart to steam trains or electric trains in your new timeline? Is it safe to travel from one town to another?

If it's an imaginary country, are there mountains, seas and rivers? What's growing in the fields, does the countryside consist of plains, valleys or desert?

You may like to draw a map, however crude, just to keep track of where you're sending your characters on their adventures. And spare a few moments for the climate. No wine or grapes without some rain and a lot of sunshine...

Practical tips

- Anchors and links to 'normal' e.g. a cop is always a cop
- Juxtaposition: reinforce a setting or details of your alternative timeline through a character's eyes when she sees and reacts to something that seems impossible.
- Drip-drip: local colour or period detail is essential, but only where necessary and when relevant. 90% of your research does not belong in your narrative.
- Names, everyday words and slang: Make it different but keep it simple, so it doesn't jolt the reader out of the story.
- Mine history carefully but not fearfully

Characters

Three key points that apply to alternative environments:

- Characters have to act, think and feel like real people whatever language they speak or however they're dressed.
- Characters should **live naturally** within their world, i.e. consistently reflecting their unique environment and the prevailing social attitudes.
- The permissions and constraints of their alternative world should make additional trouble and conflict for them.

Love and emotion

Similar to any romance/emotional relationship, but the big additional conflict zone (and very fruitful extra dynamic for your story) is your invented social structure.

However alien or unfamiliar the setting though, **the core emotional relationship must resonate with readers and link with their own actual or wished for experiences.** They have to root for the heroine and hero, flinch with them and celebrate with them.

Readers want to smile and sigh at the heroine's and hero's tender moments and agonise when they argue or misunderstand each other. And don't we as readers love to watch the characters' growth in commitment to each other and the moment they realise they are made for each other?

More on Alison's blog at <http://alison-morton.com>

See also: [Alt Hist: Historical Fiction and Alternate History](#) - magazine
[Alternative History Weekly Update Wikipedia](#) – Alternate history article
[Uchronia: The Alternate History List](#) is an online database that contains 2900 alternate history novels, stories, essays and other printed material
[Althistory.wiki](#)