

A GUIDE FOR WRITERS OF WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

WRITING ALTERNATE HISTORY

*A Complete Guide to the Craft, the Market, and the Path to Publication, with
Special Attention to India and the First World War*



Letters Home, Brighton, 1915 · after Edward Hopper



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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Every reader of history has asked the question at some point: what if it had gone the other way? Alternate history is the form of fiction that takes that question seriously. It changes one thing in the real past and then follows the consequences, honestly and in human terms, wherever they lead.

This guide gathers in one place what a writer needs to know before writing, revising, and sending out an alternate history novel. It was prepared for a student writing an alternate history of the First World War from an Indian point of view, so the historical sections, examples, and templates are built around that book. Everything else, from the definition of the genre to agents and submission, applies to any alternate history.

Read it straight through once. Then keep it beside you and return to the section you need. The history sections are a starting point, not a substitute for your own reading in the sources listed at the end. Submission policies change often, so treat every market listing here as a starting point and confirm the current guidelines on the publisher's or agent's own website before you send anything.

IS WRITING ALTERNATE HISTORY HARD?

Yes, harder than most fiction. It asks for two kinds of skill at once: the patience and accuracy of a historian and the imagination and sympathy of a novelist. Many writers have one; the genre demands both.

The difficulty comes from several directions:

- **Double knowledge.** You must know the real history well enough to change it convincingly. A reader who knows the period will notice an error before the point of divergence at once, and will stop trusting everything after it.
- **Logic without a map.** After the change, no history book can tell you what happened. You must reason out the consequences yourself, and they must feel inevitable once the reader sees them.
- **The weight of explanation.** The more history changes, the more the reader needs to understand. The great temptation is to stop the story and explain. The art lies in letting the reader learn the new world through the lives of characters.
- **Real people.** Historical figures who appear in your book carry the weight of real reputations and, for many readers, real loyalties. Treating them fairly takes care.
- **Story first.** A clever premise is not a novel. Readers come for the idea and stay for the people. The research is the foundation; the story is the point.

None of this should discourage a serious writer. The difficulty is also the reward: a well-made alternate history lets readers see the real past more clearly, because they have seen how easily it might have been otherwise.

WHAT ALTERNATE HISTORY IS

The Sidewise Award for Alternate History, the genre’s principal prize, defines the form in three parts: “a point of divergence from the history of our world prior to the time at which the author is writing, a change that would alter history as it is known, and an examination of the ramifications of that change” (*Sidewise Awards*). Your book needs all three.

- **The point of divergence.** One specific moment where history goes differently.
- **A real change.** The difference must matter. A changed detail that alters nothing is not alternate history.
- **The ramifications.** The book must explore what follows. This is where the novel lives.

Alternate History and Its Neighbors

FORM	WHAT IT DOES	HOW IT DIFFERS FROM ALTERNATE HISTORY
Historical fiction	Places invented characters inside real events.	The events themselves stay as they were. Anand’s <i>Across the Black Waters</i> is historical fiction.
Secret history	Reveals a hidden cause behind real events.	The public record is unchanged; only its explanation changes.
Counterfactual history	A historian’s essay asking “what if?”	Argument rather than story; no characters to live inside the change. Useful as research.
Time-travel fiction	A traveler from elsewhere alters the past.	Often overlaps with alternate history, but the cause of the change is the traveler, not chance or choice within the period.
Steampunk and historical fantasy	Adds invented technology or magic to a past era.	The change is fantastical rather than plausible. Some readers accept the label; strict readers do not.
Alternate history	Changes one real event and follows the results.	Everything before the change is accurate; everything after it follows logically from it.

The Sidewise judges divide the field by length: the Short-Form Award goes to works under 60,000 words, and the Long-Form Award to works over 60,000 words (*Sidewise Awards*, “About”). A novel written for adults will almost always be long form.

THE POINT OF DIVERGENCE

The point of divergence is the heart of the book. Writers and readers of the genre often call it the “POD.” Choose it with care, because every later decision depends on it.

Qualities of a Strong Point of Divergence

- **Small and believable.** The best changes are modest: a message intercepted or not, an informer who stays silent, a decision delayed by a day. A small cause with large effects feels like history; a huge cause feels like wish fulfillment.
- **Genuinely uncertain.** Choose a moment that really did hang in the balance, where contemporaries themselves did not know which way it would go. The next section lists several.
- **Clearly dated.** You should be able to name the day, or at least the week, and the place.
- **Fruitful.** It should open conflicts for your characters, not simply a different outcome for nations.

Kinds of Divergence

- **A person lives or dies.** An assassination fails or succeeds; an illness takes or spares a leader.
- **A decision goes the other way.** A government keeps a promise it broke, or breaks one it kept.
- **A secret is kept or betrayed.** A conspiracy is not discovered, or is discovered earlier.
- **An accident.** Weather, a missed train, a ship that is or is not sighted.
- **A battle turns.** Use sparingly; battle outcomes are rarely as fragile as fiction makes them.

Butterflies and Inertia

Two forces pull against each other in every alternate history. The first is the “butterfly effect”: once one thing changes, everything after it can change, including who is born and who meets whom. The second is historical inertia: large forces such as economics, geography, demography, and the ambitions of empires keep pressing toward similar outcomes. A convincing book respects both. Ask of every later event: would this still happen, perhaps in a different form, or would it vanish?

The further your story moves from the point of divergence, the more history will have changed. A story set in 1916 after a change in 1915 will look much like our world, with sharp differences; a story set in 1960 after a change in 1915 will look strange. Decide early how far forward your book will go.

INDIA AND THE WAR: WHAT MUST BE RIGHT

Everything before your point of divergence must be accurate, and much of the world after it will still rest on real facts. Begin with these.

The Scale

- **Who served.** During the war, 1.5 million Indian officers and men served in the Indian Army. Two-thirds were combatants (sepoys in the infantry, sowars in the cavalry, sappers, gunners, and drivers), and one-third non-combatants such as doctors, stretcher-bearers, and laborers ([Morton-Jack, 1914-1918-online](#)).
- **Overseas.** Approximately one million Indian troops served overseas up to November 1918, largely in seven Indian Expeditionary Forces (same source).
- **The army in July 1914.** Before the war the Indian Army had 150,000 Indian combatants, 32,000 non-combatants, 35,000 reservists, and 2,400 British officers, plus about 20,000 Imperial Service Troops of the princely states (same source). The wartime expansion was enormous: total wartime recruitment was 877,068 combatants and 563,396 non-combatants.
- **The dead.** The Commonwealth War Graves Commission commemorates by name approximately 74,000 officers and men of the Indian Army who died in the First World War. About 8,000 have their own graves; the rest are named on memorials ([CWGC](#)). Officially, 50,000 Indian troops serving overseas were killed and 64,000 wounded ([1914-1918-online](#)).

The Fronts

FORCE	WHERE	WHAT A WRITER SHOULD KNOW
IEF A	France and Belgium	85,000 Indian combatants and 50,000 non-combatants. At First Ypres in 1914 it held about one-third of the British front line. Its divisions fought at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge, Festubert, and Loos in 1915.
IEFs B and C	East Africa	40,000 Indian combatants and 12,000 non-combatants against German East Africa.
IEF D	Mesopotamia (Iraq) and southwest Persia	The siege and surrender of Kut in 1916; later, the advance to Baghdad and Mosul with 275,000 mostly Indian troops.
IEFs E and F	Egypt, Palestine, Syria	Part of Allenby's Egyptian Expeditionary Force; Indian cavalry rode through Palestine in 1918.
IEF G	Gallipoli	Gurkha battalions reached the heights of Sari Bair in August 1915 before losing them.

Figures from George Morton-Jack's article in the [International Encyclopedia of the First World War](#). IEFs D, E, F, and G together held about 80 percent of the Indian forces overseas.

Details That Bring a Book to Life

- **The first Indian Victoria Cross.** On 31 October 1914 at Hollebeke, Belgium, Sepoy Khudadad Khan of the 129th Baluchis kept his machine gun firing after the rest of his crew was killed ([Birmingham City University](#)).
- **Brighton.** The Royal Pavilion became a hospital for wounded Indian soldiers. Its first patients arrived in early December 1914; more than 2,300 were treated there before it closed in January 1916 ([Brighton & Hove Museums](#)).
- **Laborers.** The Indian Labour Corps began landing at Marseilles in June 1917; India undertook to provide 50,000 laborers for France ([1914-1918-online](#)).
- **The war comes to India.** On the night of 22 September 1914 the German cruiser *Emden* shelled the oil tanks at Madras; the word “Emden” entered Tamil and Malayalam as a term for someone fearsome ([Wikipedia](#)).
- **Soldiers’ own voices.** The best first-hand source is David Omissi’s *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers’ Letters, 1914–18* (1999). The letters were often dictated to a scribe, then translated and extracted by colonial censors, and only those extracts survive ([1914-1918-online](#)). That chain of voices, soldier to scribe to censor, is itself a gift to a novelist.

MOMENTS WHEN HISTORY HUNG IN THE BALANCE

Indian wartime history is full of real moments when the outcome was uncertain. Any one of them could serve as a point of divergence.

MOMENT	WHAT REALLY HAPPENED	THE QUESTION IT OPENS
The Komagata Maru, 1914	A ship carrying 376 passengers, most from the Punjab, was refused entry at Vancouver and forced back to Budge Budge near Calcutta, where nineteen passengers were killed by gunfire on landing (SACDA).	What if Canada had admitted them, or the return had been peaceful?
The Ghadar rising, February 1915	A planned mutiny across the army in India. Kirpal Singh, a police spy, reached the leaders' Lahore headquarters on 15 February and informed the police; the date was moved to 19 February, but that too was betrayed (Wikipedia).	What if the informer had failed, or been found out?
The Singapore mutiny, 15 February 1915	Part of the 5th Light Infantry rose in Singapore; more than forty British officers, residents, and local civilians were killed before it was put down (National Library Board, Singapore).	What if it had coincided with a successful rising in the Punjab?
The Kabul government, 1 December 1915	Raja Mahendra Pratap proclaimed a Provisional Government of India in Kabul, with Maulana Barkatullah as prime minister, but the Amir of Afghanistan kept delaying any campaign against British India (Wikipedia).	What if the Amir had marched?
The Silk Letters, 1916	Deobandi leaders sought an alliance with the Ottomans, Afghanistan, and Germany; the plot was uncovered when the Punjab CID captured letters written on silk (Wikipedia).	What if the letters had arrived?
Kut, 29 April 1916	An 8,000-strong British Indian garrison surrendered after a siege of nearly five months; the British offered the Ottomans £2 million for its release and were refused (Wikipedia).	What if the relief had broken through, or the ransom had been accepted?
The August Declaration, 20 August 1917	Edwin Montagu announced a policy of "the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire" (Journal of Asian Studies).	What if Britain had granted dominion status at once, as a reward for India's war?

MOMENT	WHAT REALLY HAPPENED	THE QUESTION IT OPENS
Rowlatt and Amritsar, 1919	The Rowlatt Act of March 1919 allowed imprisonment without trial; on 13 April 1919 troops fired on the crowd at Jallianwala Bagh (Indian Culture, Ministry of Culture).	What if the act had never passed? A postwar divergence suits a novel about veterans coming home.

Several entries cite Wikipedia as a convenient summary. Before you rely on any detail, follow its notes to the scholarly sources and check them there.

WHOSE INDIA? CHOOSING A POINT OF VIEW

“An Indian point of view” is not one point of view. India in 1914 was many peoples, languages, faiths, and classes under one empire, and the war looked very different from each. Your choice of narrator will shape the whole book.

NARRATOR	WHAT THIS POINT OF VIEW GIVES YOU
A Punjabi sepoy in France	Trenches, cold, loyalty to regiment and village, the strangeness of Europe, letters home.
A wounded soldier in Brighton	England seen from a hospital bed; the gap between the empire’s courtesy and its purposes.
A laborer or porter	The war’s unseen workforce; caste, class, and the lowest wages for the hardest work.
A Ghadarite returning from California	Revolutionary hope, diaspora politics, the danger of informers.
A Bengal revolutionary	Secret societies, German arms, the moral cost of violence.
A prince or his minister	Princely states, Imperial Service Troops, the politics of loyalty and bargaining.
A woman in the village or the city	The war at home: absence, remittances, rumor, grief, and the politics of the household.
A clerk, scribe, or censor	The flow of language and secrets; an ideal witness to a changing history.

Think too about region, religion, and language. A Pathan, a Sikh, a Dogra, a Gurkha, a Bengali, and a Tamil would not see the same war, and a change that delights one community may frighten another. That tension is often where the best alternate history finds its drama.

CRAFT ESSENTIALS

Show the Change; Do Not Lecture

The most common weakness in the genre is long explanation. Readers should learn the new world as a person living in it would: through what is ordinary, what is feared, what is on the coins, in the newspapers, in the schoolroom. Resist the scene in which one character explains history to another who already knows it.

Avoid Easy Triumph

A story in which “India wins” at no cost is flat, and it does not honor the real people who struggled. Every change should bring new problems: tensions between communities, between princes and nationalists, between India and its supposed German, Ottoman, or Afghan allies, whose aims were their own. Ask what your changed world loses as well as what it gains.

Treat Real People Fairly

Gandhi, Tilak, Annie Besant, Rash Behari Bose, Mahendra Pratap, and others may appear in your book. Give them the words and motives that their real record supports, and let them change only as the new circumstances would plausibly change them. Avoid making a real person a villain simply because the plot needs one.

Follow the Ripples

Keep a timeline that records, year by year, what has changed and what has not (see Template 2). Consistency is the reader’s chief test of a changed world. If railways, prices, borders, or the names of offices change, they must stay changed.

Language and Names

Use the terms of the period where they help: sepoy, sowar, jemadar, havildar, subedar, risaldar; Mesopotamia rather than Iraq; Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. Use Indian words without italics or glossing where the context makes them clear, as many South Asian novelists do. If your history diverges, consider whether names would diverge too.

The Letter as a Device

The real letters of Indian soldiers passed through scribes and censors. An alternate history might be told through letters, intercepted reports, or a censor’s notebook, letting the reader see both what was said and what was cut. It is a form with deep roots in the actual archive.

The Author’s Note

A short author’s note at the end, separating fact from invention, is standard in the genre and welcomed by readers. Keep a running ledger as you write (Template 4), and the note will almost write itself.

HOW FORMULAIC IS ALTERNATE HISTORY?

Less than most genres. The fixed elements are few: a clear point of divergence, a historically grounded world, and a logical chain of consequences. Everything else is open. Alternate histories have been thrillers, detective stories, family sagas, war novels, love stories, satires, and literary novels of the most serious kind.

A few patterns recur, and it helps to know them:

- **The near-divergence story.** Set close to the change, it shows the turning point and its first effects.
- **The far-future story.** Set decades later in a world the change has transformed; the divergence itself may be mentioned only in passing.
- **The detective or thriller.** A crime or a conspiracy leads the investigator, and the reader, into the shape of the changed world.
- **The multi-generation saga.** Families or reincarnated souls carry the reader across centuries.
- **The glimpse of our world.** Characters discover, through a book or a vision, the history we actually lived.

READERSHIPS AND HOW THE BOOKS CHANGE

The same premise becomes a different book for each audience.

READERSHIP	WHAT THESE READERS WANT	HOW THE BOOK CHANGES
Literary fiction	Depth of character, moral complexity, beautiful prose.	The change may be quiet; the focus falls on inner lives. Ambiguous endings are welcome.
Speculative fiction	A fully realized world, clear rules, a strong plot.	More attention to how the world works; the consequences are explored widely.
Popular military history	Accurate weapons, tactics, and command; campaigns.	Battles and strategy at the center; often a series. Readers are exacting about detail.
Young adult	A teenage protagonist, identity, first love, injustice.	Shorter, faster, more intimate; violence handled with care. Boy soldiers and young revolutionaries were real.
Indian readers	Their own history, told with knowledge and respect.	Less explanation of Indian terms and places; more scrutiny of communities and politics.
Diaspora and international readers	Connection to family history; discovery.	A little more context, given gracefully; links to Canada, the United States, and Britain may matter.

LENGTH: WORDS AND PAGES

Lengths vary by publisher and category. For a debut adult novel, *Writer's Digest* puts the safe range at 80,000 to 89,999 words for literary and mainstream fiction and 100,000 to 115,000 words for science fiction and fantasy, because world-building takes words; for young adult it suggests 55,000 to 79,999 words (*Writer's Digest*).

TYPE OF BOOK	USUAL WORD COUNT	NOTES
Literary or historical novel shelved as fiction	80,000–100,000	The safest range for a debut.
Alternate history shelved as speculative fiction	90,000–115,000	Baen prefers 100,000–130,000 (<i>Baen Books</i>).
Young adult	55,000–80,000	Speculative YA may run a little longer.
Novella	Under 40,000	Hard to sell as a debut, but eligible for the Sidewise short form under 60,000.

A standard manuscript page in 12-point type, double-spaced, holds about 250 words, so a 90,000-word novel is about 360 manuscript pages and roughly 300 to 350 printed pages. Write the first draft at whatever length the story needs; cut to the range in revision.

THE INDUSTRY: HOW ALTERNATE HISTORY IS PUBLISHED

Alternate history has no shelf of its own in most bookshops. It is published under one of three labels, and the choice affects your agent, publisher, cover, and readers.

- **As speculative fiction.** Science fiction and fantasy imprints publish most of the genre. Their readers are comfortable with invented worlds and want the changed world explored fully.
- **As historical fiction.** Some alternate histories are sold as historical novels, especially when the change is modest and the setting is rich.
- **As literary fiction.** Novels such as Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* are published as literary fiction; the premise is speculative, but the treatment is literary.

Most large publishers in Britain and the United States accept submissions only through literary agents. A few genre houses and many Indian publishers still read unagented work. The usual path runs: finished and revised manuscript; query letters to agents; an agent's offer; revisions with the agent; submission to editors; an offer; editing; publication about eighteen months to two years later.

Agents and editors will ask for “comps,” two or three comparable titles published in the last five years or so, to show where your book fits. For an Indian alternate history, a recent comp is *Ten Incarnations of Rebellion* by Vaishnavi Patel (Ballantine, 2025), set in an alternate 1960s India where the British crushed earlier attempts at independence ([Book Riot](#)). It won the 2026 Sidewise Award for long form ([Science Fiction Awards Database](#)), a welcome sign of interest in South Asian alternate history.

THE DIFFERENT MARKETS

India

India has one of the largest English-language publishing industries in the world, and several of its houses still read unagented submissions. Indian editors will know your history and judge your handling of it closely. A book published first in India may later be sold to British and American publishers.

Britain

Britain has a long tradition of alternate history and growing interest in the Indian experience of the war, sharpened by the centenary commemorations. Most publishers require an agent.

The United States

The largest market for speculative fiction, with a devoted alternate history readership. Most publishers require an agent; Baen is a notable exception for science fiction and fantasy.

Other Paths

- **Short fiction.** Publishing a short alternate history story in a magazine or anthology builds a record and can be submitted for the Sidewise short-form award.
- **Translation.** A book first written in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, or another Indian language may reach English readers through translation.
- **Self-publishing.** Possible, but research carefully and beware of vanity presses that charge authors to publish; [Writer Beware](#) explains the warning signs.

WHAT PUBLISHERS WANT AND WHAT THEY DON'T

Most Wanted

- Fresh points of view from outside Europe and North America.
- Divergences readers have not met before.
- Strong characters whose lives matter as much as the premise.
- Real research worn lightly.
- A clear hook that can be stated in one sentence.
- Moral complexity: costs as well as gains.

Least Wanted

- “What if the Nazis had won?” and “What if the South had won?” unless the treatment is truly new.
- Wish fulfillment: victory without cost.
- Lectures in place of scenes.
- Battle-by-battle accounts with thin characters.
- Real people turned into cartoons.
- Manuscripts far outside the usual word counts.

An alternate First World War from an Indian point of view sits squarely in the first column. The worn premises in the second column are the reason a fresh one stands out.

LITERARY AGENTS

An agent represents your book to publishers, negotiates the contract, and takes a commission, usually 15 percent of domestic earnings. A legitimate agent never charges a reading fee.

Finding the Right Agent

- **Read acknowledgments.** Authors usually thank their agents. Check the books most like yours.
- **Use the databases.** [QueryTracker](#) and [Manuscript Wish List](#) let you search for agents who want alternate history, historical fiction, or South Asian voices.
- **Indian agencies.** Hachette India publishes a list of agencies through which it accepts submissions, including Jacaranda Literary Agency and RedInk Literary Agency ([Hachette India](#)). RedInk asks for no poetry, plays, screenplays, or short stories, and allows thirty days for evaluation ([RedInk](#)).

The Query Letter

A query letter is a single page: a hook, a short description of the story, the title, category, and word count, two or three comps, and a brief biography. Template 6 gives a model. Send it to a small group of agents at a time, learn from the responses, and revise before the next round.

WHERE TO SUBMIT AND HOW

These policies were checked against each publisher's or agent's own page in October 2026. They change often; confirm before you send.

PUBLISHER	UNAGENTED?	HOW TO SUBMIT
HarperCollins India	Yes	Unsolicited fiction in English. Email genre, a 300–500-word synopsis, at least three sample chapters, and a profile to the address on the site; allow 8–12 weeks (HarperCollins India).
Speaking Tiger	Yes	Email a query letter, brief synopsis, and three sample chapters as a double-spaced Word document; allow 8–10 weeks (Speaking Tiger).
Penguin Random House India	See imprint pages	A preliminary review of a synopsis and sample chapters; a full evaluation takes at least six months. Follow the instructions for the specific imprint (Penguin Random House India).
Hachette India	No	Adult fiction only through a literary agent; the page lists agencies (Hachette India).
Baen Books (U.S.)	Yes	Science fiction and fantasy only. A complete manuscript with a synopsis as a single .rtf file through the online form; no query letter needed (Baen Books).
Angry Robot (U.K.)	Only in open periods	Novels of 70,000 words or more. Unagented proposals only during announced Open Doors periods (Angry Robot).

How to Prepare a Submission

1. **Finish and revise the whole novel** before querying. Fiction by a new writer is sold on a complete manuscript.
2. **Read the guidelines twice.** Send exactly what is asked, in the format asked.
3. **Format the manuscript cleanly** (Template 5).
4. **Write a synopsis** of one to two pages that tells the whole story, including the ending.
5. **Write the query letter** (Template 6).
6. **Keep records** of every submission (Template 7).
7. **Wait patiently.** Many houses reply only if interested; if the stated time has passed, assume a pass and move on.

After Publication: The Sidewise Award

Anyone, including authors, publishers, and readers, may submit a published work of alternate history to the Sidewise judges. Submissions should be made no later than March 31 of the year after publication ([Sidewise Awards](#)).

MAPS, DOCUMENTS, AND OTHER EXTRAS

Alternate histories often include extra material. Used well, it lets the reader see the changed world without a lecture.

- **Maps.** A map of the changed borders or a campaign can be invaluable. Draft your own for reference; the publisher will commission the final art.
- **Invented documents.** Newspaper headlines, proclamations, telegrams, censors' reports, school lessons, or letters from the changed world, placed between chapters.
- **A timeline.** Some books end with a short timeline of the alternate history. Keep it brief.
- **A glossary.** Useful for military ranks and Indian terms in books for international readers, though many writers prefer to let context do the work.
- **An author's note.** Separates fact from invention and points to further reading.

Do not let the extras carry what the story should. If a reader must consult the map to understand a chapter, the chapter needs revising.

MODEL BOOKS TO STUDY

Classics of the Genre

- **Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962).** The best-known alternate history; ordinary lives in a changed world, and a book within the book that imagines our own.
- **Ward Moore, *Bring the Jubilee* (1953).** An early American classic about the small choices on which history turns.
- **Kingsley Amis, *The Alteration* (1976).** A literary alternate history centered on one boy's fate.
- **Keith Roberts, *Pavane* (1968).** Linked stories of a changed England; a model for structure.

Literary and Modern

- **Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (2004).** History changed and seen through one family and one child.
- **Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007).** A detective novel as the doorway into an alternate world.

- **Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt* (2002).** Seven centuries of history centered on Asia and the Islamic world rather than Europe.
- **Vaishnavi Patel, *Ten Incarnations of Rebellion* (2025).** An alternate India, winner of the 2026 Sidewise long-form award; essential reading for your comps.

The First World War

- **Mulk Raj Anand, *Across the Black Waters* (1940).** Not alternate history, but the essential novel of Indian soldiers in France in 1914, published in London in 1940 ([Australian War Memorial catalog](#)).
- **Scott Westerfeld, *Leviathan* (2009).** A young adult reimagining of 1914, useful for its pace and for how a young narrator meets the war.
- **Harry Turtledove, the Great War series (beginning 1998).** Popular military alternate history on a large scale; useful to see how the series form works.
- **Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (1991).** Historical fiction, not alternate history, but a model of how to bring real historical figures onto the page with fairness and depth.

A MODEL TIMELINE

This sample shows how to keep the real history and the changed history side by side. The point of divergence is invented for illustration: on 15 February 1915 the police informer Kirpal Singh is recognized at the Lahore meeting and detained by the conspirators before he can report. Everything in the left column is real; everything in the right is invention. Your own timeline will differ.

DATE	REAL HISTORY	CHANGED HISTORY (INVENTED EXAMPLE)
15 Feb 1915	Kirpal Singh attends the leaders' meeting in Lahore and informs the police.	Point of divergence. He is recognized and held; the police learn nothing.
15 Feb 1915	Part of the 5th Light Infantry mutinies in Singapore.	Unchanged; the news reaches India and alarms the government.
19–21 Feb 1915	The rising, moved forward to 19 February, is betrayed again; leaders are arrested.	Some garrisons rise; others hold back, waiting to see who wins. Ferozepur and Lahore see fighting. The cost begins: civilians die, and loyal and rebel units fire on each other.
March 1915	The Defence of India Act gives the government sweeping powers.	The act is harsher still, and martial law is declared in the Punjab.
Spring 1915	Indian divisions fight at Neuve Chapelle and Ypres.	London hesitates to send more Indian troops abroad; the Western Front feels the shortage.
1 Dec 1915	The Provisional Government of India is proclaimed in Kabul; the Amir delays.	Proclaimed earlier, with news of the Punjab fighting; the Amir is under greater pressure to act. Will he?
1916–1917	The Silk Letters are intercepted; Kut falls; the August Declaration promises responsible government by stages.	Your decisions: the timeline continues as far as your story needs, with each change traced to an earlier one.

Notice that the example does not give the rebels an easy victory. It asks hard questions, about divided loyalties, civilian suffering, and allies with their own aims, which a novel can then explore through particular lives.

TEMPLATES

The templates below are also provided as an editable Word workbook, *Writing Alternate History: Writer's Workbook*, so they can be filled in and revised.

Template 1. The Point-of-Divergence Worksheet

The point of divergence, in one sentence

Date and place

What really happened

What happens instead, and why it is plausible

Who knows about the change at first?
Who learns of it later?

Three immediate consequences (within a month)

Three larger consequences (within a year)

What stays the same despite the change, and why

What the changed world loses as well as gains

How far forward the story goes, and its main setting

Template 2. The Divergence Timeline

Use one row for each event, and keep it up to date as you write.

DATE	REAL HISTORY	CHANGED HISTORY	CAUSED BY (EARLIER ROW)

Template 3. The Character Sheet

Name, age, and birthplace

Community, faith, language, caste or class

Occupation or rank and unit

Family and what they depend on

What this person wants

What this person fears

How the point of divergence changes this life

Where this person would have been in real history

Loyalties, and what would break them

Voice: words and phrases this person uses

Template 4. The Fact and Invention Ledger

Record every real person, place, and event you use, and every change you make. This becomes your author's note.

PERSON, PLACE, OR EVENT	REAL OR INVENTED?	WHAT I CHANGED	SOURCE CHECKED

Template 5. Manuscript Format

- **Page.** Standard letter or A4, 1-inch margins, 12-point Times New Roman or a similar serif, double-spaced, left-aligned.
- **First page.** Your name, address, telephone, and email at top left; word count rounded to the nearest thousand at top right; title and “by” line centered about a third of the way down.
- **Header.** Surname / Short Title / page number on every page after the first.
- **Chapters.** Each chapter on a new page, its heading a third of the way down.
- **Paragraphs.** First line indented half an inch; no extra space between paragraphs.
- **Scene breaks.** A centered # or three asterisks.
- **File.** Save as Word (.docx) unless the guidelines ask otherwise; Baen, for example, asks for .rtf.

Template 6. The Query Letter

Dear [Agent's name],

[Hook: one or two sentences that set the point of divergence and the stakes.] In February 1915, a police informer fails to reach the authorities, and the rising that history remembers as a betrayed conspiracy breaks out across the Punjab. [Adapt to your own book.]

[Story: one or two paragraphs. Who is the main character? What does she or he want? What stands in the way? What must be decided?]

[Title] is an alternate history novel, complete at [number] words. It will appeal to readers of [Comp 1] and [Comp 2]. I am querying you because [a specific, honest reason: a book you represent, or an interest you have stated].

[Biography: two or three sentences. Relevant education, research, publications, or connection to the subject.]

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

[Name] · [Email] · [Telephone]

Template 7. The Submission Tracker

AGENT OR PUBLISHER	DATE SENT	WHAT I SENT	REPLY EXPECTED	RESULT	NOTES

BOOKS ON CRAFT AND HISTORY

On Alternate History and Counterfactuals

- **Richard J. Evans, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History* (2014).** A skeptical historian's view of "what if" thinking; read it to sharpen your logic ([Richard J. Evans](#)).
- **Robert Cowley, ed., *What If?* (1999).** Military historians imagine turning points; a model of plausible reasoning.
- **Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History* (1997).** Counterfactual essays by historians, with a strong introduction on method.

On Writing Fiction

- **Ursula K. Le Guin, *Steering the Craft*.** Short, wise exercises on point of view and prose.
- **Orson Scott Card, *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*.** Practical advice on building and conveying an invented world.
- **Jeff VanderMeer, *Wonderbook*.** An illustrated guide to imaginative fiction and its structures.

On India and the First World War

- **David Omissi, ed., *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914–18* (1999).** The soldiers in their own words.
- **Santanu Das, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture: Writings, Images, and Songs* (Cambridge, 2018).** Songs, letters, images, and memory ([American Historical Review](#)).
- **George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Empire at War* (2018).** A full narrative history drawing on interviews with Indian veterans ([Hachette UK](#)).
- **Radhika Singha, *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict* (2020).** The laborers and followers who are often forgotten ([Journal of Social History](#)).

ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCES

- **[Uchronia: The Alternate History List](#).** A searchable bibliography of alternate history; use it to check that your premise has not already been done, and to find comps.
- **[The Sidewise Awards](#).** The genre's annual prizes and their history of winners.
- **[1914-1918-online](#).** A free, peer-reviewed international encyclopedia of the war, with strong articles on India.
- **[Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#).** Searchable records of the dead, useful for names, regiments, and dates.

- **Brighton & Hove Museums.** The history of the Indian hospitals in Brighton.
- **Writer Beware.** Warnings about scams, vanity presses, and fee-charging agents.

A FINAL CHECKLIST

- ☐ I can state my point of divergence in one sentence, with a date and place.
- ☐ Everything before the point of divergence is accurate and checked.
- ☐ Every later change can be traced to an earlier one on my timeline.
- ☐ I know what the changed world loses as well as gains.
- ☐ My narrator's community, language, and situation shape how the story is told.
- ☐ Real people speak and act as their record supports.
- ☐ The reader learns the changed world through scenes, not lectures.
- ☐ The story would matter even without the premise.
- ☐ My word count is within the range for my category.
- ☐ I have two or three recent comps.
- ☐ My fact and invention ledger is ready for an author's note.
- ☐ My query letter, synopsis, and manuscript follow each publisher's or agent's current guidelines.

A PERSONAL NOTE

Over the years I have watched many writers discover that the past is not finished with us. The men who fought in France and Mesopotamia, the laborers who unloaded ships at Marseilles, the families who waited in villages for a letter dictated to a stranger: their lives were shaped by decisions made far away, and by chances that might easily have fallen otherwise. To imagine those chances falling differently is not to escape history but to honor how much was at stake.

Alternate history asks a great deal of a writer. It asks for the humility to learn what really happened and the courage to imagine what did not. Read widely, take careful notes, and be patient with yourself in the early drafts. Above all, let the people in your story be as real as the history around them. If readers care for them, they will follow you anywhere, even into a world that never was.

I wish you joy in the work.

JAMES MULHERN

SOURCES

Historical details and market policies were checked against these pages in October 2026. Policies change often; confirm every listing on the publisher's or agent's own site before submitting.

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2. Sidewise Awards, "About the Awards." <https://www.uchronia.net/sidewise/about.html>
3. Science Fiction Awards Database, "Sidewise Awards 2026." https://www.sfdb.com/Sidewise_Awards_2026
4. Book Riot, "This Alternate History Shows How to Overthrow an Oppressive Government." <https://bookriot.com/ten-incarnations-of-rebellion-by-vaishnavi-patel/>
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23. Penguin Random House India, "Publishing FAQs." <https://www.penguin.co.in/community/publish-with-us/publishing-faqs/>
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