

In honor of this podcast with Linda, here are some tips and techniques for writing a dual time, or split time, story.

**Here we go!** Let's start with the basics.

### **What is split time?**

I've heard people use the term "slip time" for split time novels, but they are not the same. "Slip" implies *slipping through time*. A slip time novel is a time travel story. In split time, the author is dividing the story between two plot lines – one set in the past, one set in the present. The characters never leave their designated timeline. Each timeline follows its own journey and the stories must merge in the end. Usually, the protagonist of the past did or possessed something that impacts the present-day protagonist. Or the present-day protagonist fixes something the historical hero or heroine could not, or did not, achieve. Perhaps the protagonist rights a wrong or completes a dream of the past's protagonist.

Split time stories might also be historical while written from two different decades, or centuries. In *A Hundred Summers* by Beatriz Williams, the split story is told from a single protagonist in different historical timelines, both in the 1930s.

One of the "must haves" of split time story development is the plot lines must mirror each other then come together, intertwining, in the end. The story lines must significantly affect the other.

In *The Writing Desk*, Tenley fulfilled a dream of Birdie's, the historical, Gilded Age heroine, and righted a wrong done to her by Tenley's great, great grandfather.

In *The Memory House*, the contemporary heroine, Beck, is changed by the actions of a woman she knew as a child but didn't remember as an adult. Everleigh, the heroine in the past, hadn't seen Beck in 18 years, yet she carefully planned something extraordinary for her. Something that brought about healing.

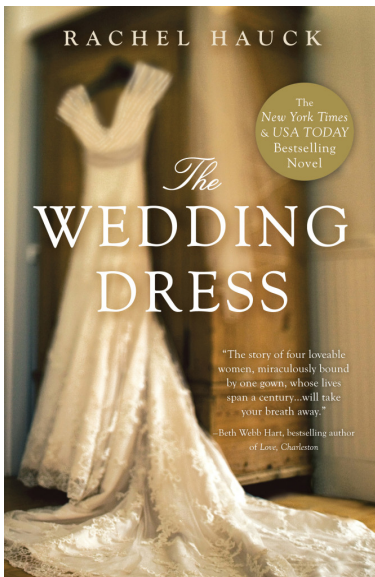
Their stories mirrored one another in pain and loss. Their “common link” was more emotional than the physical.

### Why write a split time story?

Lisa Wingate says, “There’s something about the juxtaposition of a modern life and a life (real or fictional) of long ago, that lends reality to both tales.”

The first split time novel I read was *The Shape of Mercy* by Susan Meissner. The modern heroine was transcribing documents from the Salem Witch Trials. Part of the story was modern day, part was set during the trials. It fascinated me. I loved the idea of delving into the past. The chance to imagine how the actions of our ancestors or society impacts us today. What decisions did my ancestors make that led me to this point in my life?

### What are the key components of a split time story?



Before you start, remember you’ll have to tell two complete stories: historical and contemporary. Also, it helps if you have an object, like a desk, dress, house, an historical event, to build the story around.

In split time, historical details are necessary, but the “past” has more of a contemporary feel. The historical timeline is more of a setting, yet it’s important to get the history correct.

Each story line will have 40 thousand – 50 thousand words but you’ll need about 10 thousand – 20 thousand words to tie up the story in the end. My first split time novel, *The Wedding Dress*, came in at about 93 thousand words. *The Memory House* was a little over 100 thousand words. So give yourself time to write a good size book.

### Questions to Ask if You Want to Write Split Time:

1. “*Why do I want to write split time?*”
2. “*What ties my stories together? How?*”
3. “*If I eliminate a story thread or a character, or an idea, does the book fall apart?*”

If so, you might not need a split time structure. There should be some element of the contemporary storyline that raises questions about the historical timeline.

4. “*What is my central hook or theme?*”

5. “*Does my historical story overshadow my contemporary story?*” It’s critical to have a contemporary storyline as compelling as the historical storyline. This can be challenging if writing about a real historical event. Brainstorm how the past event can cause tension for the contemporary character(s).

#### **What split time is not.**

Split time is not a straight up historical or straight up contemporary. You must carve out equal space for each tale. You must also have an authentic voice for each timeline.

#### **Your spark of inspiration.**

I was visiting with friends when the idea hit me for *The Wedding Dress*. As our host talked about finding her daughter’s wedding gown, I wondered, “What if there’s one wedding dress four women wore over 100 years?” And the idea took off from there.

Lisa Wingate says, “*The Prayer Box* was the result of a moment of irresistible inspiration, and the tale of those eighty-one mysterious prayer boxes came to me in not one, but two stories, or more accurately a story within a story.

“I glanced across the room,” Wingate said. “Saw the small prayer box that had been given to me as a gift, and thought, “What if that box contained many prayers accumulated over time? What if there were dozens of boxes? What if the letters chronicled the life of a

woman who could no longer tell her story? What effect might the prayers of a faithful servant have on a modern woman who has lost faith?"

Susan Meissner came up with *The Shape of Mercy* after reading a diary.

For any story idea you develop, ask, "Is there an historical component I can tell? Is there a contemporary?"

If so, perhaps you have a split time story in the making.

### **How to put a split time story together.**

There are no real rules, but I usually start with the contemporary protagonist. However, in *The Love Letter*, I started with the historical hero.

Ask yourself which storyline will grip the reader the best.

When you leave one story line for another, make sure leave a bit of a hook, a lingering question, for the read to ponder while in another timeline. Often, I use the end of one timeline to hook into or foreshadow the next story line.

For example, in *The Writing Desk*, Birdie is struggling to get her own book published. In the contemporary timeline, Tenley is struggling to write her second "great" novel. I may have written a scene where Birdie is writing her heart out knowing the book will not have her name on the cover. Upon conclusion of that scene, I'd open the next scene in Tenley's point of view showing how she had a promised book with her name on the cover but not story to go with it.

Leave the reader with a hook as you move from scene to scene but also satisfied with the portion of the story you just told. Often readers feel jerked around with split time, so we want to leave them emotionally satisfied with the timeline they are leaving.

If you're using an object, like a desk or a dress, introduce it into the story as soon as possible. You don't have to explain or go into great detail, just bring it in. In *The Writing Desk*, I introduced two desks, one in the first twenty pages.

Look for ways to juxtapose the past with the present.

Around the middle of the story, somewhere deep in the Second Act, the contemporary protagonist discovers some truth about the past. (Which ultimately makes them discover a truth about themselves.)

Toward the end of the Second Act, the contemporary protagonist discovers the whole truth about the past. In the historical timeline, "the event" happens that the contemporary protagonist is discovering.

In *The Memory House*, I use an old cell phone to unlock secrets in the contemporary protagonist's heart. Which allowed her to discover the historical heroine.

In *The Writing Desk*, the protagonist discovers an unpublished manuscript and a very secret room!

The Second Act still must end with a Black Moment, in both timelines, and move to the Third Act in which the protagonists recover, find a way to overcome, and have a happy ending. Often the historical timeline ends before the contemporary. Since the entire story is about righting wrongs of the past or uncovering a truth, you can end the historical timeline unresolved. The contemporary protagonist must bring the questions into light, discover the truth, and right the wrongs.

### **Pacing.**

Imagine writing two 40 to 50 thousand word stories. But you must keep each story line in mind as you write. "How does the past shadow the present? What does the contemporary protagonist discover?"

Use the object, person, event, or prevailing truth, to help move the scenes and characters forward.

If you write two to four scenes of the historical characters, then move to the contemporary timeline and repeat.

### **Split time is not flashbacks?**

I used flashbacks as a vehicle to understand the main protagonist in *The Songbird Novels* with Sara Evans.

The stories of Jade as a child helped the reader see her wounds and hurts, her motivations. There was also a teen love story that impacted the present-day plot.

But flashbacks do not require a story arc, or three act structure. Split time does. Flashbacks are story layers.

### **The End**

Just like with any novel, the ending must be happy or satisfying. The story question is answered and the reader feels as if they've been on an adventure. 😊

Now with this information to help you, go write something brilliant!

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