Everybody loves a good story. But it’s just as true that everybody hates a bad one. There’s a lot on the line when you write fiction. Readers have high expectations. Many have been reading great stories by the world’s best writers since they were old enough to hold a book in their hands and turn the pages. Personally, I find this quite intimidating. I make no secret of the fact that I am afraid of writing fiction. But that doesn’t mean I won’t give it a try. Especially if I have a little help.

A few years ago, I learned that if I want to write a good story, I need to know the Five Facts of Fiction:

- **Fact #1: Fiction is all about character.** The best stories are built around rich, complex, extremely interesting characters.

- **Fact #2: Fiction is all about what your character wants.** Your character wants one thing more than anything else in the world and that one thing drives everything your character does.

- **Fact #3: Fiction is all about how your character gets or does not get what he or she wants.** Some characters get what they want, others fail. This is how you develop the plot of your story.

- **Fact #4: Fiction is all about how your character changes.** After everything that happens, your character is forever changed. This is what makes your story meaningful.

- **Fact #5: Fiction is all about a world that you create.** You choose the people, places, things, and ideas in your story. Your choices influence the meaning of the story and your readers’ level of interest.

Fiction is the hardest kind of writing to do well. It challenges even the most competent professionals. But with the right tools, even fearful fiction writers like me can give it a good shot.
The Five Facts of Harry Potter

Do real writers use the Five Facts of Fiction? When I was in school and a teacher wanted me to do something a certain way, I often wanted to know how that way compared to the way people did the same thing in the real world outside of school. I have always felt that that was a reasonable thing for a student to want to know. After all, if part of the reason we go to school is to get us ready for life outside of it, it makes sense that we would want to learn about authentic ways of doing things, ways that real people really do them in the real world. So, do professional writers in the real world use something like Five Facts of Fiction to write their stories? For example, did J. K. Rowling use it to develop her Harry Potter stories? Probably not.

Every writer works differently. Writing is a very individual and often idiosyncratic activity. How writers write is a complex, at times even quirky, process filled with starts and stops and twists and turns of seemingly infinite variety. Even writers themselves are often at a loss to explain exactly how they do what they do. Many might even say they do things a little differently every time they start a new project. That’s just the truth of writing: there’s no one best way to do it. So where does that leave us with the Five Facts of Fiction? If real writers don’t use it, why should you? Because it will help you get the same great results that real writers get.

Even though real writers may not use something like the Five Facts of Fiction, they still have to wrestle with all the same issues this strategy presents. They still have to consider their characters, what they want and why they do things, what happens to them, how they change, and the kind of world they inhabit. Most writers may not want to use a particular strategy to accomplish this, but they have to accomplish it just the same. And so do you. That’s why I suggest that you try so many different strategies: they may not represent the real way real writers really write, but they are real enough to help you produce real writing.

So, could J. K. Rowling have used the Five Facts of Fiction to write Harry Potter? Though I know she didn’t, I think she probably could have.

Fact #1: Fiction is all about character. Harry Potter: 12 years old, black tousled hair, bright green eyes, glasses, lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. Naïve, a bit shy at times, kind, compassionate, curious. Discovers that he is a wizard, and a rather famous one at that, when he is invited to attend the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. He is famous because, as an infant, he somehow survived an attack by Voldemort, the world’s most powerful evil wizard.

Fact #2: Fiction is all about what a character wants. More than anything in the world, Harry wants a family. He is orphaned as an infant when his parents are killed by Voldemort. He is sent to live with his closest relatives, Petunia and Vernon Dursley, his uncle and aunt, and their exceedingly obnoxious son, Dudley. The Dursley’s treat him badly and, through their abuse and neglect, he grows up to be a lonely, confused, and often depressed young boy.
Harry Potter, Cont.

Fact #3: Fiction is all about how a character gets or does not get what he or she wants. Does Harry get what he wants? In a way, yes he does. Harry joins the family of wizards at Hogwarts. During his first year as a member of Gryffindor House, he forms sibling-like bonds with Hermione Granger and the Weasley brothers. Hagrid, the school groundskeeper, is like an uncle or a big brother to Harry; Dumbledore takes on a fatherly role. Together, these people become the family Harry lost when Voldemort killed his parents.

Fact #4: Fiction is all about how a character changes. In the beginning, Harry is sullen and scared. He spends most of his time locked in a small closet beneath the basement stairs. When the Dursleys let him out, he is taunted and terrorized by their son Dudley. Harry is miserable and hopeless, a victim of his unfortunate circumstances.

At the end of the story, while sad to be returning temporarily to the home of his aunt and uncle, Harry is no longer helpless, hopeless, and hapless. In his year at Hogwarts he has gained tremendous self-confidence and a better understanding of who he is and what his life is all about.

The lesson of the story is this: If we’re lucky enough to find out who we really are, and if we have the courage to claim our true power and embrace our destiny, we can take control of our world instead of letting it take control of us.

Fact #5: Fiction is all about a world an author creates. Who are the people (and animals) in this world? Muggles (regular humans), wizards, Dumbledore, Hagrid, Hermione, Ron, Voldemort, snooty professors, snotty cousins, a mean uncle and aunt, great friends, poor people, rich people, kind people, evil people, baby dragons, three-headed dogs, ghosts, and so on.

What are the important places in the story? The Dursley’s home on Privet Drive, Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, Diagon Alley, the train station, the Quidditch field, Hagrid’s cottage, the forest.

What are the important things? Magic, quidditch, spells and potions, a lightning-shaped scar, the sorcerer’s stone, magic wands, flying brooms, a cape that makes you invisible, a mirror that shows you what you really want.

What ideas is the writer working with in this world: Magic, Loneliness, Friendship, Identity, Belonging, Evil, Treachery, Abuse, Competition, Learning, Tradition, Destiny.

What kind of world is this? This is a world where there’s always some supernatural something or magical someone around to save the right people when they are in trouble. It’s a world where courage is rewarded, friendship is valued, and good triumphs over evil.
Fact of Fiction #1

Fiction is all about character. Start with your character's name and age. What does this person look like? What is your character's life like and how does he or she feel about it? What does your character like to do? How does your character get along with others? And so on. Try to come up with as much information about your character as you can.