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## 2. Write What You Know. Finding Out What You Know.

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A piece of advice for writers that's been around for a long time is, "Write what you know." This isn't very encouraging advice when you haven't been on planet Earth for that many years yet. And what if you really want to write about horses or dragons or magic or spaceships or things and places you've only read about or seen on TV or in movies? Some things you can make up—like your own rules for magic, for instance—but some things you will have to look up in books or on the Internet, such as how to fly to Mars, or what herbs you could use to help your horse if it went lame in the 1600s. Writing = Research. Always.

Good stories are about people, and that's something you do know about. You know people and you know yourself. Think of a time when you were scared—climbing a tall ladder, preparing to make a speech, facing a bully or a teacher you didn't like, getting caught in a lie. Remember what being afraid felt like? You might have been shaky all over with your heart racing, knees weak, and hands sweaty. Those are the same feelings your characters will have when they ride a dragon for the first time, or when the countdown begins for the spacecraft's launch or when they find out that they'll never be ordinary kids anymore. Fear is fear.

Think of the things you do know, such as how to swing a bat, play basketball, bake a cake, sing a song, play an instrument, dance, set up a tent, play video games, cards or chess. These are all things that your character might do or need to know how to do to succeed at whatever challenge he or she is facing. You know the sound the basketball makes as it bounces down the court or across the playground. You know what vanilla smells like, or how sticky egg shells feel, or how fresh baked cupcakes smell and taste. You know how it feels to have to stand

tall and breathe properly in order to sing or play an instrument in public or for a music exam. You know how you feel when you draw a winning card or find your king in check. You can bring all of those emotions, sounds, textures, sight, tastes to your story. Those details make your story real to your reader.

Suzanne Collins has never had to defeat a group of people who wanted to kill her in order to save her life and the lives of others, but she wrote *The Hunger Games* trilogy because she understood the incredible strength of the love of family and loyalty to others. I'm sure Christopher Paolini has never flown or known a dragon, but he wrote *Eragon* anyway, because he understood friendship and accepting challenges and being scared, and he made his dragons and the world they lived in just as real as all those things.

Write about what you want to know, too. I love medieval history, so I set a mystery for middle readers in England in the year 1214. I had great fun doing the research, because I knew I could use it for my story.

Use the write-what-you-know worksheet, write in your journal, or create a document on your computer and start a list of all the things you know about. As time goes on, keep adding to it when you think of something you've forgotten or when you learn something new. Maybe you helped two friends get together after a fight or helped a friend study for a test or kept a secret. You could turn those situations into a story.