

THE IDEA GENERATION

Your next story idea comes from here.

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“Where do you get your ideas?”

Ah yes, the number one question pro writers receive! And said pros will answer with a quip like, “Why, the idea store, of course!”

Or they'll play Inscrutable Writing Buddha: “Ideas are everywhere... floating on the wind... you simply have to reach out and take one...”

Your shoulders droop. “Ah,” you think. “It's easy for *them*. The *real* writers. But I got nothing. No inspiration. I'd better pack it in.”

I've been there, friend, in that dark, idealess place. And it took me years to find my way out.

I'm a pro writer – [read my About page](#), why don'tcha? Years ago, my novel *Hammer of Witches* was published by not one but two traditional publishers (Lee & Low and Audible Books). My essays were featured in magazines even my grandparents had heard of! People paid me money – real money! – for my words.

And then – *bam*.

BLOCKED. AS. HELL.

No ideas. No motivation. My mind: a wasteland.

I tried to force it. That's what real writers do! I'd choose any old idea, shove my nose against grindstone, and *make it work, damn it!*

That, to put it in professional terms, sucked. I ended up with half-finished manuscripts, mediocre screenplays, and way too many therapy bills.

I looked for help, everywhere. I read dozens of bad writing books, did hundreds of useless writing exercises, and still – nothing.

At last I realized what I had to do.

I had to draw my own map to the pot of gold – to ideas that made me want to write again.

And, following my gut – plus some actually-useful tips from fellow writers – I did just that.

Finally brimming with ideas, I wrote dozens of screenplays, drew well-loved comics, and snagged tons of gigs as a writer, script doctor, and writing teacher.

My inspiration was back – and I knew how to bring it back, over and over.

As a writing coach, my #1 goal is to help my clients avoid the years of struggle I had to go through.

I'm not here to play Pompous Writing Guru or the literary Elle Woods. “What, like it's hard to think of a good idea?”

OK, sure, ideas *are* a dime a dozen, but you don't want just *any* idea.

You want *the* idea — the one you *need* to write. The one that practically writes itself.

Why waste a year (or decade) on a story that doesn't excite you?

Pros often say, “Don't wait for inspiration.” Good advice. But it doesn't mean, “Force yourself to write any old thing. Writing must be work! Horrible, grueling work!”

No. To me, what it means is, “The inspiration's already in you. You just have to find it.”

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Use What Works, Ditch the Rest

Most writing books leave out this crucial fact: every artist has a different process. We like to pretend that there is one true system for creative success, but this is an art, not a science.

It took me years of trial and error to learn how to coax my own muse. In the following pages I'll outline the most effective exercises *for me* (and most of my writing students), but some might not work for

you. And that's *fine*. Even so, I'd bet good money you'll find one or two that you'll be using for years to come.

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Your Tools of the Trade

You only need two:

- 1) *A notebook*
- 2) *A pencil*

Optional, but helpful:

- 3) *A timer*
- 4) *A writing buddy*

One item not on this list? A computer.

As far as I'm concerned, computers are the enemy of idea generation. It's not just that they're filled with distractions (including some you *think* will help I'm looking at you Wikipedia).

The real issue is that programs like Word, Final Draft, etc. can put you in a professional or academic mindset. Typing in Word gives me flashbacks of high school, toiling away at five-paragraph essays. Typing in Final Draft makes me feel like I have to write, well, a final draft. Those programs are fantastic... later in the writing process.

When it comes to brainstorming and free-flowing freewriters, stick with pencil and paper. Forget spelling, grammar, punctuation. Scrawl. Let your inner artist child play on the page, scribbling on looseleaf without constraint.

Speaking of constraints...

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What You Won't Find in this Book

Constraint-based exercises like, "Write a scene that ends with the word, 'Fire!'" or "Write a chapter without using the letter E."

These games can be fun, and constraints can breed creativity, but I've never had one of these exercises yield a feature screenplay or manuscript. Personally, I find them too constraining. And often silly, to be frank.

Here's what works for me.

- 1. Make a clearing.**
- 2. Start with yourself.**
- 3. Call in a character.**
- 4. Play with genre.**
- 5. Use what you have.**
- 6. Just write.**

You don't have to complete these sections in order. Ignore the ones that sound ridiculous – though you might be surprised if you try them.

Take what works and ignore the rest.

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1. Make a clearing.

When facing a problem, I can get... hyper-rational, is the nice way of putting it. It's one of my go-to coping mechanisms! I like facts, logic, systems. I can be Spock As Hell.

Maybe you're half-Vulcan, too. In that case you're going to hate me right now, because I'm about to get *woo*.

Look. Creative writing is woo-woo by nature. When I try using logic and systems to come up with plot ideas, I run around in circles of overthinking. I trawl through Wikipedia. I read fifty history books for “research.” I pretend to care about literary theory. I save lists of genres and “Ten Master Plots” in – good god – *spreadsheets*.

In short, I become Chidi Anagonye from *The Good Place*, researching and researching, looking for a capital A Answer to all my writing problems.

Don't be me. Don't be Chidi. Be Ursula K. LeGuin, my favorite writer and writing teacher.

LeGuin's stories are fluid and thoughtful, as was her writing advice. She didn't believe in “The Best! System! To blast! Past! Blocks!”

She didn't believe in blocks. She believed in clearings.

When our minds are clear – of ideas, of overthinking – they are open.

We can wait in the open fields of our minds, in calm readiness, to see what wanders through.

Waiting in readiness doesn't mean sitting around doing nothing. It means resting your mind on the page, freewriting in your notebook, without expectation.

Clear Your Mind with a Freewrite

Find your pencil and cheapest notebook – *not* a fancy one, not a computer or your phone.

Very kindly and with love, ask your inner critic to go sit somewhere else for a half hour. (They're more likely to listen if you promise they can come back later, during the revision process.)

Then, without judgment or expectation, without lifting your pencil off the page, write. Write anything that comes to mind. No editing allowed. No one's going to see this, ever.

You can set a timer a freewrite for 30 minutes, or be Julia Cameron and write three pages. Write, and see what happens. Maybe nothing.

Maybe magic.

It can be helpful to do this exercise in the same room/Zoom call as a friend who is also freewriting. In my experience, creative energy stacks. Writers tend to be solitary animals, but isolation is no good for the creative brain.

Bonus Woo-Woo Exercise (That Works)

As a writer, you're aiming for that flow state where ideas and words come naturally. You know who can get into a similar headspace? People who meditate.

No, no, don't close the pdf! I swear this isn't one of those “Meditation will solve all your problems” pitches. I'm an old school depressive; I know meditation doesn't solve everything hooo boy.

But you know who meditates? Mr. Spock. Our very archetype of logic. And why does he do it? Because it works, sciencely. It unclutters your mind. It gives you the right amount of focus. Clarity. The writer's best friend.

So I do recommend that, just once, you try a free meditation app and get in the zone. And when your mind is more or less clear, drop in a simple question:

“What do I want to write about?”

You might get an answer immediately. Or in a few minutes. Or an hour after the session ends. You might not get an answer, only a feeling. Maybe you get nothing at all.

No guarantees. But sometimes, your essential Self will pop in to say, “What if we wrote *this*?”

Alternative if you hate meditating: Ask yourself, “What do I want to write about?” in bed, right as you go to sleep. Then stop worrying; your unconscious is on the case.

If you're anything like me, you'll wake up in the morning (or 4 AM) with a great idea. *WRITE IT DOWN ASAP* or you *will* forget it.

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2. Start With Yourself

Every so often a new student will come to me with a draft and a lament: “I've been workshopping this story for years, but everyone keeps saying, 'Where's the heart? What's the point?'”

That's a hard note to get from a writing group. It's comparatively easy to fix a plot problem or strengthen a character arc. But how do you give a story a heart?

That's where my #1 piece of writing advice comes in.

Write. Personally.

Every piece I write is a thinly-veiled autobiography. Doesn't matter if it's about a robot on a spaceship, a middle-aged werewolf, or a mad scientist in the 19th century. Every character is an aspect of me. Every theme is a message from myself *to* myself.

Solipsistic? Eh, sort of. Mostly no. Because the more you write about yourself, from the deepest recesses of your heart, the more you connect with others who secretly have the same feelings. And the more you tap into your own feelings, the more you move your audience.

To paraphrase a (cough, yes, ok) meme I read on Tumblr:

Someone has a hole in their heart the shape of your words.

Connect to yourself, and you'll connect with your readers.

Get out that pencil and cheap notebook again.

Set a timer for 30 minutes and freewrite. But, this time, your freewrite starts like this:

What do I need to write about?

Or:

What do I need to tell myself?

You know how the ancient Greeks liked starting their pieces with, “Hey, Muse: I need an idea? Pretty please”? Be that ancient Greek... except your Muse is your unconscious mind, speaking to you through the medium of your notebook. Write on the page:

Hey, Magic Idea-Generating Notebook: What do I need to write?

Ask the question, and write without thinking.

I get my best ideas this way.

But Also... Have Fun with It

Often the best question to ask your notebook is

What would be fun to write?

As ole Joe Campbell used to say, Follow Your Bliss. Write what's most fun to write. Because as comics artist Stephen McCranie says, “Fun gets done.”

Sometimes when I freewrite, my inner Muse says I need to bleed on the page, write a story about my *deepest inner turmoil*, and wail in anguish and faint on my fainting couch. (Pro-tip: get a fainting couch.)

But mostly my Muse says things like, “Let's write about wizards! Wizards are cool.”

And you know what? Wizards *are* cool. I like writing about wizards; audiences like reading about wizards.

I'm not about to look a gift-horse in the mouth and ignore my Muse. So if Muse says, “Write about wizards,” I'm gonna sit my ass down and write about wizards.

I had a student a few years back who was always trying to make Serious Art. His stories were structurally sound, stylish... But not enough soul.

Now I happened to know that this student had been obsessed with dinosaurs since childhood. So I said, “Hey. Student. Why aren't you writing about dinosaurs?”

It took a couple months for him to take my (extremely good) advice, and he wrote not one but two gorgeous, heartfelt scripts about dinosaurs.

He had fun writing them, and his audience had fun reading them.

What would be fun for you to write?

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3. Call in a Character

Back to my main woman Ursula K. LeGuin. LeGuin believed the best writing starts with character – plot, setting, and the rest come later. Your best characters already exist in your head, somewhere. You just have to wait and listen for them.

One thousand percent true, in my experience. Humans contain multitudes – writers especially. We're collections of characters pretending to be a person.

Example: Right now, one part of you wants to keep reading this book. But maybe another part is itching to write already. A third part just wants a cookie and a nap.

See? You have three characters in you, right here, right now.

Which part of you needs to be heard most now? Make them your protagonist.

Let's say you already know who your main character is. What do you do with them?

“I know!” you exclaim. “I'll map out their backstory! Their tragic past, family members, astrological sign, D&D alignment, favorite food, favorite color—”

STOP. STOP RIGHT THERE.

DO NOT DO THIS.

“No, listen! I'll write a character sheet with their powers, design style, and—”

NO. NO, I WILL SMACK YOU WITH A ROLLED UP NEWSPAPER I SWEAR TO *GOD*

Don't get bogged down with character details yet. They will come. Later. *If* your story needs them.

At this early point in the process I focus on two questions regarding my protagonist:

What's their problem?

What's their name?

Strike that: you don't even need a name. One of my screenplays features characters such as, “The Alchemist” and “The King.”

But usually I can't get a grip on a character until I know their name. A “Steve Harrington” is different from “Celeborn of Lothlórien.”

“What's Your Problem, Protagonist?”

What's your deal? What's the main issue in your life right now? What's your goal? What's stopping you from reaching your goals?

If you don't know the answer to these questions, return to your handy dandy notebook and

Interview your protagonist.

One of my favorite exercises. You don't need to wrack your brain to know what your protagonist's deal is. Your character knows. As mentioned above, they already exist in your head. You just need to ask them simple questions like:

What do you want?

and

Why can't you get it?

And a question I love so very much:

What do you fear?

As you answer these questions, a plot will naturally arise.

Example:

What's my character's problem (or flaw)?

He's too loyal to his messed-up family.

What does my character want?

To get over his misplaced loyalty and build a life of his own.

What's in his way?

His awful family keeps dragging him back.

What's his big fear?

He can never escape them and will become as bad as they are.

And what's his name?

Michael Corleone. Or Michael Bluth. Same story, different genre.

In summary: Figure out your character's goal. Or, if you don't know what that goal is yet, pinpoint the character's biggest flaw or fear, and then give them a goal that requires them to face it head on. Ready-made conflict.

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4. Play With Genre

Write what's fun. Because fun = play = not torturous = easy = it actually gets written.

Also, “fun to write” generally => “fun to read.”

What's fun for you?

What books do you love to read? Don't get pretentious. “Oh, I read *Finnegan's Wake* to relax.” No. No one reads *Finnegan's Wake* for fun, and I say this as someone who reads *Ulysses* for fun.

What did you love reading *as a kid*? What TV shows do you keep coming back to? What movies are your comfort food? What thrills you? What moves you? What makes you laugh every time?

Turn off the self-judgment. Secretly love Hallmark movies? Write a rom-com. You a Whovian? Write a time-travel story.

Write fanfic and change the names. Or don't, if the original's in the public domain.

Who cares? Who cares?! Who cares.

Even if you're a student in the Iowa Writer's Workshop, it doesn't mean you can't bingewatch the *John Wick* series and write your own campy action movie.

Trust me: the more you struggle to write The Great American (or Chinese, German, etc.) Novel/Screenplay/Play/Whatever, the more you're going to hate your life.

Take a page from Lin Manuel. He was like, “You know what? I'm going to write a musical where Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson rap battle. This will be my great contribution to humankind. Take that, Broadway.”

Don't get me wrong. *Hamilton* is brilliant, but let's not ignore its fundamental *silliness*. That's one of the reasons we love it. Miranda had fun writing it; you can tell.

Exercise: List your faves.

No thinking. No editing. No judgment. Set a timer for 10 minutes, and, as quickly as possible, write these lists:

Movies I Loved As a Kid

Books I Loved As a Kid

Shows I Keep Rewatching

My Favorite Characters Ever

When you've finished, skim your list and see what makes you smile. You might have thoughts like:

“What if I wrote my own version of *Harry Potter*... but like, Jewishy?” (I got a book deal with this one.)

“What if Victor Frankenstein... was trans?” (A recent short of mine.)

“Time to write a heist movie!” (My latest project.)

Have fun.

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5. Use What You Have

If the above exercises didn't work for you, no problem. Let's get practical. (Although... I've gotten great writing ideas by pulling tarot cards. Don't knock it 'til you've tried it.)

Necessity: mother of invention. Limitations: breeder of creativity. So start with what you have on hand.

Want to make a film? Write for a location.

e.g., If you have access to your aunt's cabin in the woods, write a film like *Cabin in the Woods*. Or a family drama set that happens to be set in a cabin in the woods.

I have this terrible habit of writing period pieces and high-concept fantasies set in other countries. Don't be me. Write films that take place in your city or town, that can be filmed in your own house or apartment.

That might sound boring if you write speculative fiction like I do, but it's really not.

A non-comprehensive list of spec fic stories you can set in an apartment or house:

Time travel stories: Time machines, time skips, characters unstuck in time

Horror stories: Ghosts, demonic possession, doppelgängers, vampires

Easy-to-film superpowers: teleportation, mind control, divination, etc.

Robot stories (*Ex Machina* is a great example – four characters in a house but feels epic)

Alternate universe, body swaps, dystopias...

How many *Twilight Zone* episodes were set in an apartment, an office, a bar?

Or you can be a doofus like me and write screenplays set on spaceships. I can't stop ya.

Another suggestion for filmmakers: Write for your actors.

e.g. “My friends Tim and Lucia are amazing actors. Tim's good at playing nebbishes, and Lucia's a classic femme fatale. I'll write a detective story where they team up to solve a murder.”

Perfect! Get going.

Don't have actor friends?

Write for your favorite celebs. Sure, I probably won't get *Pose's* Dominique Jackson to star in my heist movie, but I can write the lead role for her anyway.

Suggestion for writers working in any medium: Make playlists.

Many writers work in silence. Others need music. Which type are you?

I'm the latter. I make playlists for every piece I write. Without them, I can't nail the tone of my story. One song can spark an idea that carries an entire novel or script. But you have to give yourself the gift of actually listening to the music.

Whenever you hear a song that inspires you, add it to an inspiration playlist. Later, take a break and listen to the song without doing anything else. Just listen.

Maybe a character will waltz in, or a scene will appear before your eyes. It might only be a flash, but that may be all the inspiration you need.

You can combine music with freewriting. I'll play an inspiration song on loop and write without thinking. If I'm lucky, an idea will arise – and it already has a soundtrack.

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6. Just Write.

Once you've done the above exercises, take out your notebook again and freewrite. If you set 30 minutes aside to freewrite in your notebook once a day (or once a week, whatever), you're eventually going to hit on an idea. Throw down 10,000 garbage words and eventually you'll write some words you like.

That said... in These Trying Times, my “just write” advice might sound like the bullshittiest bullshit that a bull ever shat. If you cannot, absolutely cannot get over your block no matter what you try:

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7. Take a Break. Really.

You freewrote. You interviewed your characters. And you have nothing to show for it.

You're frustrated. You're exhausted.

YOU NEED A BREAK.

So take one. No guilt.

Human brains love breaks. We struggle struggle struggle to come up with an idea, an answer to a pressing question – and then we get the answer when we're zoning out in the shower. Or driving. Washing the dishes. Taking a walk.

You have no idea how many writers get their best ideas on the toilet.

Our brains need breaks. Clearings, as mentioned. And our minds tend to be clearer when we're doing something healthy and mindless, like bathing, walking in nature, cooking, working out, sewing...

Freewrite... then take a break. That's how you clear your mind for your muse.

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Last Thoughts: Common Mental Pitfalls for Writers

Many writers I know (including me) have at some point adopted the following false beliefs:

Great writers are born, not made, and I wasn't born to be one.

I'm not a creative person.

I'm too depressed to be creative.

I can't write [insert concept here]; it's already been done.

These beliefs are false.

You have to trust that

The human mind – your mind – is naturally inventive, which means anyone can be an artist.

You WILL find something to write, even if it's not happening right now.

Even if someone wrote [insert concept here], the world is waiting for YOUR version of the story, the one only YOU can write

I can't wait to read it.

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Final final thoughts

Brainstorming can be way more fun with a friend... especially one who's a writing pro. Yes, friends, this is a plug for my website:

www.sethjulian.com

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