

Write Your Novel – Week 1

Where to find ideas for your novel

Try the 'cut-up' method

The American author William S. Burroughs would take a text and cut it into strips of individual words and phrases, then rearrange them at random to create new sentences.

Get an old, battered second-hand book. Cut up a page or two into strips of words and phrases with a pair of scissors. Jumble these up and place some chosen at random on a page (or choose your options more carefully). Does a line or phrase (or strange pairing) spark a story idea?

Find inspiration in interesting facts

Fantasy writer Robin Hobb says she often gets new story ideas while she is researching facts:

'Often the research is what triggers the story in the first place. I may be looking up something specific in a story, discover a related fact or two and think, 'Well, there's a story idea right there.'

Open up an encyclopaedia or Wikipedia. Search for a subject that interests you (e.g. space travel; natural disasters; the reign of Henry VIII). Read through and make a note of any surprising or interesting fact, event or anecdote that could be the seed of an engrossing story.

Do physical exercise for mental benefits

Many writers swear by physical activity as an aid to creativity. Besides keeping you healthy, physical activity helps you brainstorm. Something about the monotony of the physical activity seems to set the mind to work and allow problem-solving from a different perspective.

If you're worried about forgetting ideas you have while you are out doing something like running, carry a phone or voice-recording device to quickly record any brainwaves.

Read news story headlines for ideas

The internet is a treasure trove of ideas when it comes to news items. These range from the bizarre and absurd to the poignant or political. Skim the day's events from the news of the weird to human interest stories from around the globe.

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For example, if you go to the 'News' tab of Google now, enter 'scientists discover' and click search, you'll get interesting headlines:

'Scientists Discover Vast Swathes of Arctic are Bulging'. If you're interested in the environment and our relationship to it, you might find an entire novel idea spooling out of that headline alone.

Do the same, and search for news articles on a subject that interests you, whether it's science, music, sport or another subject.

Combine story ideas from multiple sources

Sometimes combining several different ideas can lead to inspiration. Try a similar exercise. Turn on a TV and flick through channels. Write down the most basic elements about what's happening in the scene (e.g. A judge is scolding a woman for shoplifting). Then think about how the separate scenes and story themes could combine in interesting ways.

Ask creative 'what if' and 'I wonder' questions

The popular and prolific writer Neil Gaiman suggests asking questions to find ideas. Ask yourself questions about your story or anything that interests you, and see where your answers take you.

Create a list of questions, e.g:

'What if a man was accidentally voted president and his name wasn't even entered into the running?'

'What if the trope of hostile aliens making contact were reversed and humans made contact with an alien race, inadvertently causing it harm?'

Mine your dreams for ideas

Often what seems like a great idea in the middle of the night is revealed to be somewhat less inspired in the light of the day. All the same, dreams can form great kernels for ideas.

Brainstorming novel ideas in a new environment

Sometimes, being in a different environment can spark an idea. Trains, buses and other forms of transportation can take you out of your ordinary routine.

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Take a notebook with you somewhere different to where you usually write. It could be a library, a botanical garden, a coffee shop or public transport. Just start writing down ideas for stories (switch off your inner censor).

Keep a journal

Keeping a journal to generate story ideas does not have to be a formal process. In fact, it may be more useful if it is not. You can make lists, scribble down words or images that interest you, and make note of other types of inspiration. Check out Julia Cameron's wonderfully inspiring book *The Artist's Life* or the more recent *Write for Life* to find out more about Morning Pages.

Get a journal that is small enough that you can take it with you wherever you go. Alternately, some people prefer to make notes on a tablet or smartphone.

Use free-writing to associate ideas

Free-writing is effective because it doesn't give you time to second guess yourself. Choose a limit, set a timer and go. Write for five or ten or fifteen minutes without lifting the pen from the paper. You can do this on a computer as well, and if you do, don't take your fingers away from the keyboard or slow down. Don't judge what you have written. Put it away for at least a day, and you may find that there is a good idea in there or even a story opening.

To begin, choose a subject to free-write on. If, for example, you love sci-fi, you could choose a subject such as 'the dangers of technology'; 'the rise of artificial intelligence', etc.

Become a discreet eavesdropper

Listening to others' conversations might feel a little sneaky but it can be a wonderful inspiration. It's best to sit in a public place (such as a coffee shop or on public transport) and simply remember any interesting snippet of conversation you happen to overhear (rather than listening in intently).

Go to a public place and spend 15 minutes just keeping aware of conversation around you. If you hear any interesting view or idea, write it down later and see if you can tease a story idea out of it.

Draw inspiration from your own life

It's not just the lives of other people that can provide inspiration for stories. As the saying goes, it's important to 'write what you know,' and your own life, the people you have known and experiences you have had are probably far more interesting and unique than you give them credit for.

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Think about which incidents from your own life that would make compelling fiction. It could be a surprising experience or encounter. List events, for example:

- The time I started at a new school and how hard it was adjusting to my new lessons and teachers
- The time I found a strange box of trinkets when we cleared out our home's attic and wondered about their history

Even the smallest event can inspire a longer, more eventful story. An experience transferring to another school could become a book about an underdog finding their 'people'. The story of the mysterious box could become a portal fantasy.

Use mind-mapping

This is a kind of brainstorming that involves starting with a word, an image, an idea, a character or some other element in the middle of the page and branching off from that element with other free associations. You might end up with an entire novel plotted or with just enough to begin a traditional outline or, if you are a pantsier, the beginning of your book.

Retell a familiar story

Other writers are always a source of inspiration, but in some cases, they can inspire your novel very directly. The book *Wicked* used characters and a world created by L. Frank Baum in *The Wizard of Oz* while Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* drew on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

If you are using material directly from the source as *Wicked* did, be sure the work is in the public domain. You can also look to world myths, legends and folklore for ideas.

One advantage of trying out some of these methods for finding story ideas is that you will realize just how many ideas are out there.

Source: NowNovel.com