

# IDEA GENERATION: Opening the doors to creativity

Chances are if you're here in this class, you've had ideas for stories, probably more than you can count. Creativity is a part of the human experience, so it's not unique to get that spark of a story idea. However, some of us are more open to those ideas than others. Many people let those whims or flights of fancy pass along their consciousness and pass right out of it. Those who want to create learn to grab ahold of those ideas and *do* something with them.

You're here because you want to take action on those ideas. That means you're already ahead of the game. \*High five\* However, if you've tried to put those ideas onto the page, you know it's not as easy as saying, "Hey, I want to write this story." When you actually sit down to write, often all those great ideas go running off in a panic because you looked at them with that sparkle in your eye. Ideas are skittish that way. *Oh wait, she wants to do something with me? Hide!* Or sometimes, what seemed like a great idea when you first thought of it falls flat when you dig into it deeper. Or you realize it's a copycat idea or has already been done to death. That's all part of the process.

The key to finding great, fresh ideas is to have a LOT of them. You want a big pile to play with, mash together, and rework. You don't want three LEGO blocks. You want three-thousand.

I'll talk more in the next lecture about selecting the best ideas, but for now, I want to focus on the importance of being open to ideas and putting yourself in position to have ideas flowing regularly.

Living a creative life is an important part of the job. In order to *create* on regular basis, we have to *consume* on a regular basis. If you don't, you'll find your ideas begin to dry up or you end up in writer's block. This consumption is that *filling the well* thing you often hear about. Oftentimes, people use that phrase to mean you need to rest and rejuvenate. You do, but in this case, I mean filling the well with juicy, creative input. The writer engine can't run without regular doses of creative fuel.

So what does that look like?

## **1. Read Read Read.**

I know I probably don't have to tell most of you to read, but I'm surprised by how many aspiring writers I've come across who say, "Well, I'm not really a big reader." Or "I don't read romance, but I have this idea to write one."

Reading within your genre (and outside of it) is a vital part of being a writer. I'll dig more deeply into that in the next lecture because I think this reading thing is so important, it earned its own lecture.

*\*Note: Some writers don't like reading within their genre while they're actively writing in that genre because they're afraid they'll inadvertently lift ideas from others. Totally understandable. But that doesn't mean they haven't read extensively in that genre before ever beginning their novel.*

## **2. Watching TV Shows and Movies Count as Work (You're welcome)**

Storytelling is storytelling, whether it's on the page or on a screen. And right now, we're living in a quite a television renaissance. There is so much quality television (and film) out there that writers can find endless sources of inspiration with the click of a button. Even "trashy" television can be great for triggering ideas. My novella *Yours All Along* was an idea that I got while watching *Big Brother*. And how many other stories started out as thinly veiled fan fiction?

Don't be afraid to count watching TV shows and movies as part of your job. But be a focused watcher. Pay attention to how the stories are being told, what the directors/writers did, how the characters come to life. Note what storylines and characters spark your imagination.

You can also try your hand at some fan fiction if you're nervous about jumping straight into original fiction. It can be a good training ground to build confidence, even if you never share it with anyone. The very first novel I ever wrote (at age 15) was New Kids on the Block fan fiction. (Go ahead, laugh, it's okay.) And recently, I watched all seven seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for the first time. I now have the need to write a Spike-inspired character into something. : )

TV shows and movies are fertile ground. They are full of character archetypes you can endlessly riff on. They also can teach you a lot about pacing, conflict, and character arcs. So get that Netflix binge started. ;)

### **3. Non-fiction (books, news, articles, etc.)**

Sometimes I feel like being a writer is a version of being a perpetual student. If you want to write a lot of books, you're going to have to expand beyond your current cache of knowledge. Each book is going to bring up something else you need to learn

about—a location, a type of job, a time period, etc. Research is part of the gig. BUT, this can also be done in reverse as an inspiration tool.

The key is to be endlessly curious and then to chase that curiosity. When you feel a spark about a topic, that little nudge of “I kind of want to know more about that”, don’t let that go. That is rich territory to mine.

I sometimes joke with my family that I became a writer because I wanted to be so many things “when I grew up.” As a writer, I get to virtually try out all kinds of jobs. I’ve gotten to be a chef, a musician, a doctor, a sex therapist, a photographer, a real estate agent, a forensic psychologist, a video game designer, and the list goes on. Each character I write is a different pair of shoes I get to inhabit while I’m writing them. But each came from an initial spark of curiosity to know more about that profession.

Or, it could be a particular topic you learned about in a news story or book that instigates a story idea. *The Ones Who Got Away* happened because in quick succession I read a YA book about a school shooting and then read *Columbine*. The two got my brain working and asking the question: *what happens to the survivors when the news cameras and the attention of the world moves on?* That one question launched a 4-book series.

The great thing is that you just have to chase your own interests. You don’t have to force yourself to read or research topics that don’t get you excited. I love rockstar/band documentaries (and biographies), so it’s no surprise that I’ve written a number of musician heroes and heroines. But you’re probably not going to catch me writing about an entomologist because I’m never going to read a book about bugs, lol.

And it doesn’t even have to be deep reading. Scan news headlines, click on quirky ones or ones that catch your interest. You never know what one little thing is going to open up the idea floodgate.

## 4. Experiences

I work from home and I work a lot, so this one is one I have to remind myself of often. In order to write about life, I have to, you know, actually leave my house sometimes. ;) If you're writing full-time or trying to balance writing with another job, your free time can get eaten up quickly. But getting out of the house and experiencing things can be key for creativity.

Vacations and road trips can be great for this, but aren't always in the cards. However, there's probably a lot near your home that could be used as book fodder. Go to local concerts or art shows. Visit a museum. Attend local theatre. Go to sporting events. Go to that neighborhood picnic. Volunteer somewhere. In Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, she suggests going on these Artist Dates regularly. ([Here's a list of suggestions from her.](#))

You do this enough, and I promise those experiences will start popping up in your stories. They will add color and life to your story because they're grounded in something you really experienced, and you'll be able to add specificity and authenticity to that description.

I visited San Francisco a few years ago, and though I've never set a story there, I had a pivotal scene in *Off the Clock* happen there. That scene never would've happened without that trip.

I went to a concert at a ranch out in the middle of nowhere Texas years ago with my husband. I remember looking around and seeing nothing for miles and miles, but all these people were there for the concert. It felt like a secret place that only that group

was privy to. That one event sparked the idea for The Ranch, the main setting in my Loving on the Edge erotic romance series.

Get out of the house. Have fun. Live. Then take all those little scraps of inspiration and bring them back to the page.

## 5. Music

This is a classic one that doesn't need much explanation, but I didn't want to fail to mention it. I am a huge music lover, and I've lost count of how many times a song has inspired a story or a scene idea. I make soundtracks for each of my novels because music often plays such a vital role.

So if you're feeling stuck, listen to music, *really* listen to the lyrics, imagine whose story it could be telling. And don't just listen to your same favorites, pick other playlists online and discover some new songs to get your brain working.

## 6. Classes

Like I mentioned above, writers are often lifelong learners. Don't be afraid to chase a whim if you want to learn something new. I took a photography class and have since written two photographer characters. I've taken cooking classes and written chefs. I have a subscription to Masterclass and take classes on there for things I never plan to do in real life. Like right now, I'm watching Steve Martin's class on stand-up comedy. My introvert self is never going to get on stage for a comedy show, but I have a future character who will. :)

You don't have to go back to college or spend a whole lot of money. A lot of community centers offer quick, cheap classes to introduce you to topic. And there are endless resources online these days. Have fun with it. You'll pick up inspiration and some new skills!

## **7. Observation**

One of the superpowers of a writer is that we're the ones in the world who are watching just a little bit closer. We pick up the details others miss and file those things away. This close observation of the world and people around us can be magic. Don't forget to use that power. There are ideas hiding in the smallest moments. Put your phone down and look up, pay attention.

That enigmatic conversation overheard at the coffee shop. That scene that couple caused in the grocery store. How that waitress at the breakfast restaurant down the street talks to everyone like she's related to them. All of it can be fodder for stories or for adding color to characters and scenes.

Every time you go out in the world is an opportunity to get an idea for a future character or scene in your book.

## **8. Your Own History**

I mentioned experiences above, but you can also delve into your own memory bank to dig for story ideas. No, you're not writing an autobiography, but snippets of your own life experiences can be the seeds of ideas or they can be twisted into something new and different.

You can take an experience you had in your past and give them different outcomes and see where that leads. For instance, when I was a kid, I actually had the stranger with candy thing happen to me. A guy pulled up in front of my house where I was playing in the yard with a friend, and he asked us to come see something in his car. I was a paranoid child already and schooled on stranger danger so I screamed, grabbed my friend's hand, and we ran inside. But I could write a story where the character didn't run, where the girl goes to the car.

Or, most of us are writing romance, think back to your own adventures in dating. Bad dates can be a great seed for a funny scene or story idea. And if nothing else, looking back on past memories gives us a direct line to tap into emotions. Do you remember how it felt to have a crush on someone? Do you remember how it felt to embarrass yourself in front of someone you liked? All those things can be fodder for ideas, scenes, and characters.

## 9. Story Prompts

If the ones above aren't getting you what you want or you just feel hopelessly stuck, there's always the tried and true method used by English teachers everywhere of using story prompts. Sometimes you just need a little nudge. Find some websites or get yourself a book of story prompts or writing exercises. If you haven't been writing for a while, these can help stretch the writer muscles. And hey, you never know, it may spark an entire story idea.

I've had *The Writer's Book of Matches* for years and I still pick it up sometimes just to flip through it and see where my mind goes with the prompts. For instance, I just opened it to this prompt:

"I'm going to disappoint you. But you knew that already."

That already has my mind going. I imagine the hero saying this to the heroine. Why? They obviously have some kind of history. What is it? Or maybe it's her saying it to him. Why is she so sure she's going to disappoint him?



That can be pure writer fun. Here are a few I keep on my shelf. I got [Complete the Story](#) from Barnes and Noble, and it's journal style with a story prompt on the top of each page and then room to write. [The Book of Matches](#) is just pages of 1-3 line prompts or snippets like above. And the [Now Write series](#) is a fantastic series of book that provide all kinds of writing exercises from famous writers. There are also websites [that generate opening lines to spark creativity](#). Here's [another](#).

My only warning is don't get lost in the cycle of just writing to prompts. Use them to get your creativity flowing if you're stuck or to spark ideas for your own stories, but don't let them become a substitute for writing your book.

## Capturing the Ideas

Now that you're getting all these ideas, make a habit of noting down things you observe or ideas you get. Carry a little notebook in your bag or use a note-taking app. I use the [Pensieve app](#) which allows me to automatically email myself without having to type in the address and such. I use it all the time and keep a folder of book notes in my email.

I also have a dedicated notebook for "future ideas" that I can't use right now but don't want to forget. This is important to keep around because sometimes an idea needs to germinate a while. It's not ready but you don't want to forget it.

---

**Assignment:**

Set up your system for capturing ideas (analog, digital, or both) and vow to use one or more of the above strategies for brainstorming story ideas this coming week. Write down even the bad ideas. See how many ideas you can come up with in just a few days.

**Bonus:** If you're feeling stuck, try out some story prompts. You don't even have to write out and

## Discuss:

In the comments below, tell us your favorite way to get ideas. We can learn from each other!