



Getting started: ideas and inspiration

Do you get excited by the sight of a fresh pad of paper or a blank computer screen? There it sits, waiting for you to fill it with breakneck plotlines; beautifully crafted sentences; characters so real they almost wave at you from the page. Well, that's the idea, anyway...

If you're desperate to create something but can't think where to start, suddenly that empty piece of paper can look daunting. The cursor on your screen seems to tease you as it blinks: "Hurry up, tell me a story!"

But what if you don't have an idea? Here are six simple things to try:

01. Think 'practical'

If you're waiting for the moment when a bestselling plot pops fully formed into your head, it's just not going to happen. Sorry. Even the simplest, most 'throwaway' novel you ever read was likely to have been carefully planned, developed and revised.

You may need to actively search for your story idea, perhaps teasing it out from a conversation you overheard on the train; a memory from childhood; something interesting you watched on TV. It's okay to start small: Stephen King's idea for *Carrie* began when he worked as a janitor in a high school and cleaned the girls' showers...

02. Study people

Good writing ideas are everywhere you go – you just need to train yourself to spot them. Watch people; listen to arguments in the supermarket queue; think up a reason for why the fraught-looking man at the petrol station is buying flowers.

Every experience in life will add to your literary 'paint box' – and the more you can tune into people and their day-to-day lives, the more shades, strokes and techniques you will have to work with.

03. Keep a writing journal

It's a good idea to keep a writing journal and jot down one or two observations every day: that slow sigh your colleague makes whenever the phone rings, or the smell of the doctor's surgery while you wait for your appointment. Sometimes seemingly insignificant moments can give birth to the character or concept that will drive your story.

Even observations that don't 'go anywhere' at first may be useful later on, making your writing richer and more realistic.

04. Watch the news

'Truth is stranger than fiction' is an old saying, but it's correct – often you need look no further than your local newspaper for wonderfully weird tales just crying out to be fictionalised. How about the Ukrainian-born bride who, realising her family couldn't make her London wedding, advertised for guests on the internet? Or the cat in Plymouth who has jumped on the same bus every day for four years?



Whenever something moves or amuses you, cut it out or scribble it down. You don't have to re-tell the real-life story (often it's better not to), but you may be able to weave it into something bigger and even more exciting.

05. Look to the past

Some of the best works of fiction offer a new angle on a moment in history. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, for example, reconstructs events from Canada in 1843 when a young housemaid was tried for the murder of her employer. *Schindler's Ark* by Thomas Keneally tells the true story of a Nazi Party member who saved more than 1,000 Jews from concentration camps. And Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* is based on events in 1692, which led to the Salem Witch Trials.

Is there a moment from history that particularly interests you? If you feel passionately enough about someone to thoroughly research their background, life and loves, then maybe you are the right person to bring them to life again.

06. Try some exercises

There are hundreds of books on creative writing that you could read: look out for those with writing 'prompts' or exercises you can use to work your mental muscles. *The Creative Writing Coursebook* (edited by Julia Bell and Paul Magrs) is a great place to start, with tips on writing fiction and poetry from 40 different authors.

The internet is also a brilliant source of ideas and exercises. Try:

- <http://www.writersdigest.com/WritingPrompts> for regularly updated (and often amusing) scenarios for you to develop;
- <http://www.goodasgoldws.co.uk/ideas.php> for a randomly generated protagonist, start and theme for your story;
- <http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/storystarters/storystarter1.htm> for a brilliant ideas generator for children;
- <http://fictionwriting.about.com/od/writingexercises/tp/writingprompts.htm> for a series of inspiring writing prompts.

Good luck!

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