

[Home](#) [Sitemap](#) [Blog](#) [About](#) [Contact](#) [Novel Writing Software](#) [Getting Published](#)

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### Getting Started

[How to Write a Novel Step by Step](#)  
[How Long Will It Take?](#)  
[Becoming a Writer](#)  
[Types of Novel](#)

### Planning a Novel

[Finding Writing Ideas](#)  
[Theme & Symbolism](#)  
[Creating Characters](#)  
[Point of View](#)  
[Building the Setting](#)  
[Plotting a Novel](#)  
[Narrative Structure](#)

### Writing a Novel

[Narration & Description](#)  
[Writing Dialogue](#)  
[Interior Monologue](#)  
[Writing Solutions](#)

### Writing Resources

[Getting Published](#)  
[Writer's Software](#)  
[Writing Quotes](#)  
[Fiction Writing Q&A](#)  
[Classic Writing Guides](#)

### Loose Ends

[About](#)  
[Contact](#)  
[Sitemap](#)  
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[Blog](#)  
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## Finding Writing Ideas In 2 Easy Steps

Writing ideas are made up of four basic ingredients: character, plot, theme and setting.

Don't fall into the trap of coming up with an idea for just one of these things - a clever plot twist, say - and believing you are ready to start writing your novel. You are not.

### The key to finding winning ideas is to be methodical about it...

- Start by brainstorming each of the four elements in turn. Take your time on this part - there is a lot of treasure deep inside you waiting to be discovered, but it takes time to bring it to the surface.
- In the second step you play around with the results, rearranging them like jigsaw pieces, until you arrive at the perfect novel idea for you (several of them, probably).



To get the most out of this process, try not to think ahead to Step 2 when you are still on the first step.

The whole point of brainstorming is to come up with a lot of potential ideas (or raw material), and you won't do that if you try to turn the raw material into good-to-go writing ideas too early.

Also, if you already have a firm idea in your mind of the novel you want to write, try to disregard it during this process.

You might come up with a better idea, or find a new spin on your existing idea, or perhaps find a way to create a whole series of novels similar to the one you already have in mind.

Finally, take as long over this process as you need.

You might do it in a couple of days or a couple of weeks, but don't rush it. Writing a novel represents a huge time commitment (probably several years) so it makes sense not to settle on an idea until you know it is the right idea.

## Finding Writing Ideas 1: Brainstorming

"The way to get good ideas is to get lots of ideas, and throw the bad ones away."  
 - Linus Pauling

And so it is time to roll up your sleeves and get down to work...

- Take out a pencil and plenty of paper. (Or use your laptop if you prefer to work that way.)
- Disconnect the phone and make yourself comfortable (I find brainstorming for writing ideas so much easier sitting in an armchair than sitting at a desk).
- Put on some music if it helps (something which will fade unobtrusively into the background).
- Then simply fill one sheet of paper (more if you like) with brainstormed ideas in each of the four categories...

### 1. Ideas for Characters

The chances are that your imagination is already chock-full of great characters. (For writers, having a head full of fictional characters is an acceptable way of still having imaginary friends in adulthood!)

But if you don't have any ideas for characters yet, don't worry - they are simple enough to come by once you put your mind to it. After all, we've been rubbing shoulders with our fellow human beings since the day we were born.

### Ask yourself this question...

How many people do you know, or have you known, in your life? Hundreds, right? And that includes everyone from your closest family and friends, through work colleagues and neighbors,

to the lady who sells you cigarettes and the stranger you sat next to on the train.

Add to that the thousands more people you've seen on television or read about in newspapers and magazines and books, and you have a vast stockpile of character traits and behaviors and physical characteristics from which to construct your fictional characters.

Oh, and don't forget the biggest inspiration for characters in novels that there is: your good self!

Now all you have to do is take all these traits and characteristics and reassemble them to form brand new people. Your finished novel will likely have dozens of characters (hundreds if you include the walk-ons), but all you are interested in here are candidates for the job of leading woman or man - or the protagonist of the novel.

You don't need to flesh them out in any detail at this stage, or construct elaborate biographies for them (you will find out how to do that later, in the section on creating characters). For now, little one-line character sketches are perfect...

- A forty-something waitress with three kids and debts to pay.
- A laughing, joking taxi driver with worsening eyesight.
- A sweet old lady who takes in stray cats.
- A bullied schoolboy with a crippling stammer.
- A millionaire businessman who secretly gives away small fortunes to charity.

These are ideas for characters that are interesting to me (and might mean absolutely nothing to you), but they should give you the idea. Simply fill a page or two with similar character sketches, ones that are interesting to you or meaningful to you in some way.

You can flesh out the characters more than I have done if you wish (if it helps you to "see" them in your mind's eye). But spending too long on any one character defeats the purpose of this exercise, which is simply to trawl your memory and your imagination for as much raw material for your novel as you possibly can.

During this brainstorming, you don't want to linger on any individual area for too long. Just get some ideas down on paper then move on. Or to put it another way, go for quantity here rather than quality. Why? Because this gives you the best chance of trawling the deepest recesses of your mind and imagination - and it is there that the best ideas are often found lurking.

## 2. Ideas for Plots

Finding plot ideas for a novel is easier than you might think. Once you have read the simple technique below, you will never be short of plots ever again.

How exactly do you brainstorm something as complex as a plot line in a novel? In brief, by not over-complicating the issue at this stage.

Just as you weren't trying to come up with detailed character portraits when brainstorming for character ideas, so you aren't trying to write detailed plot outlines now, each one complete with a beginning, a middle, an ending and twists and turns along the way.

(You will learn how to do all of that in the section on [plotting a novel](#)).

All you want now is the spark of a plot, or a simple situation from which a complex story is sure to flow. The best way to find this spark is to draw up a list of things that your leading character (whoever they turn out to be) might *want*.

Why? Because if a person wants something - really wants it - and if that something isn't going to be easy to come by (if they are going to have to fight for it with everything they have), then you have a story on your hands.

### Yes, finding a plot idea really is that simple...

Imagine a lonely, middle-aged man. We'll call him Fred. One day, Fred reaches a crisis point: he can't stand to be alone for one more minute.

In other words, all of a sudden he wants something: to find love and companionship. And I don't mean he wants it just a little bit - Fred needs to find a soul mate to save him from overwhelming despair.

Trouble is, he's painfully shy, and kind of set in his ways, meaning that love won't be easy to find. (Novel writing is often about being cruel to the characters.)

So from that simple desire, the desire to find a partner, you have the makings of an entire plot in a novel.

### The way to draw up a brainstormed list of plot ideas, then, is to think about all the things that you have ever wanted in life...

- The love of the boy or the girl next door.
- To find your missing pet dog.
- Victory in a tennis tournament.

Share

- Promotion at work.
- To quit smoking.
- To make your loved ones proud of you.

Of course, a lot of the ideas you come up with will end up in the bin. Even with the ones you keep, you probably won't turn them into a plot literally (not unless you intend to write [strongly autobiographical fiction](#)).

Instead, you will use them as a starting point, from which stronger plot ideas will come.

Say you once spent three days searching for your missing pet pooch. You searched outbuildings, knocked on doors, put up flyers, walked the streets until the early hours feeling sick with worry.

This experience probably isn't enough to form the central plot of a novel (though with skill and imagination, it could be). But what if you took that overwhelming need you had to find your dog safe and well but made the dog a child? Now you have a novel on your hands!

(Not only that, but you will have an idea that is meaningful to you. You simply take all those emotions you felt when your dog went A.W.O.L. and multiply them by ten to be able to write convincing fiction about a missing child.)

So when you draw up your own list of plot ideas, don't worry if the things you wanted were large or small, significant or apparently inconsequential. So long as you felt a strong desire to achieve some specific goal, that is all the spark you require for a gripping plot.

Finally, remember that your finished novel will likely have many strands of plot running through it, all of them weaving their way in and out of each other, but all you are concerned with here is the central story. The [subplots](#) can wait for another day.

### 3. Ideas for Themes

The very mention of [themes](#) in a novel is enough to strike fear into some writers' hearts. Actually, though, themes are simple - not least because they don't require a whole lot of work on your part.

Now, this isn't the place to get all hung up on the technicalities of theme. All you need to know about theme for the purposes of finding ideas for potential themes is that every novel should be "about" something - about unrequited love, about the destructive nature of greed, about the futility of war, about whatever you like.

- On the surface of your novel are the plot and the characters and the places.
- Running beneath the surface is this deeper layer of meaning in the form of the novel's theme.

So what you have to ask yourself here is whether you have anything to say about love or greed or war or a million other topics? And the answer is yes, of course you do.

Just think about the subject of "friendship" for a moment. I bet you could write pages and pages on what it means to you, based on your own life experiences...

- Maybe you believe friendship is an even stronger bond than love.
- Or maybe you believe that friends will only let you down in the end.

What you say doesn't have to be clever or philosophical, it just needs to be true to what you really think and feel, based on your own experiences. And if you shoot from the heart and talk honestly about what friendship has meant to you in your own life, it will be.

Don't worry, I'm not asking you to fill your next sheet of paper with mini-essays on love or friendship or anything. I simply want you to fill it with a list of topics that interest you and about which you feel you have something to say, even if you aren't exactly clear right now what that something might be.

Things that you simply want to get off your chest make perfect ideas for themes. So your list might look something like this...

- The toughness of being a single parent.
- How guilt can cripple you if you don't come clean.
- The problems of wanting to be in a relationship but also needing solitude.
- How the best life is a simple life.

If a particular topic means nothing to you, leave it for another writer to explore. Brainstorming for writing ideas is pointless if you are less than 100% honest.

If you struggle, try looking back over the various experiences of your life and asking yourself which ones truly affected you - which ones triggered a powerful emotional reaction of anger or joy or pain or whatever. These will be the issues about which you have something to say.

And remember, it is what has hurt you that is often of most use to you as a novel writer.

### 4. Ideas for Settings

An easy one to finish on...

You must have visited countless places in your life - locally, nationally and internationally - and any of these places could inspire the setting for your novel.

And even if you haven't been anywhere - even if you have lived your whole life in the same small town, and never once ventured beyond its borders - you still have the perfect setting for a novel: your own hometown!

Remember that you don't have to use a setting literally in your writing.

If you do decide to set your novel in your own hometown, for example, you don't have to use the town's name. You can give it a fictional name, and give all the landmarks and streets fictional names, too, and even rearrange the town's geography and alter its history to better suit your storytelling needs.

But it will still be your hometown in essence, meaning you will have that all important ability to write about it with authority (hence the word "author").

### **Ideas for setting come from more than just place.**

I will be talking about this in more detail later on (in the [section on setting](#)) but, for now, know that setting encompasses far more than just streets and buildings and the communities in which they sit.

It includes a whole range of things but, for the purposes of this brainstorming exercise, you need to know that it includes occupations and hobbies, like landscape gardening and beekeeping.

Every novel needs a focus. This often comes from the place in which the novel is set: the town, or a location within the town (a particular shop or restaurant, say). But making the focus an activity, like beekeeping, can work just as well.

Obviously, novels focussing on an activity still need to be set somewhere, but the town itself won't need to be such a vivid "focal point" because the activity at the centre of the novel fulfils this role.

### **Back to brainstorming ideas for settings.**

Simply fill your final page with a list of potential locations or activities. Like these...

- A Manhattan advertising agency.
- Your own suburb.
- Tenpin bowling as a central activity.
- The planet Mars.
- A haunted house in the middle of nowhere.
- The world of professional ice hockey.
- 18th century Paris.
- Antique dealing.
- A fishing village in Cornwall.

Always bear in mind how well you know a setting or an activity.

If you grew up on a dairy farm in New Hampshire and you set your novel on a dairy farm in New Hampshire, you won't have much research to do. If you set your novel in Spain during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, you will have plenty.

### **And that is the end of the brainstorming...**

Like I said, it is worthwhile taking your time on this exercise and coming up with as many ideas as you possibly can. If the ideas don't flow, try again tomorrow.

As soon as you have thoroughly brainstormed each of the four ingredients from which novel ideas are made, you are ready to move onto the second step...

## **Finding Writing Ideas 2: Putting It All Together**

If you have already carried out the brainstorming from Part 1, you have already done all the hard work. It's now time to have some fun and turn all that work into some novel ideas of your own.

What do you have to do during step two? Essentially, you take one element from each of your brainstormed lists...

- Ideas for Characters
- Ideas for Plots
- Ideas for Themes
- Ideas for Settings

...and stick them together. The resulting novel idea will be greater than the sum of its parts and, if it is the right idea for you, will set your mind reeling with possibilities.

You could probably do this randomly and come up with some workable writing ideas, maybe even a great one, but a more methodical approach is obviously better.

The best way to explain the process is with a couple of worked examples...

### Worked Example 1: Rita's Story

Start by choosing any element you like from any of your four brainstormed lists of writing ideas.

Say you choose a **character**: a single mother of three kids struggling to pay the bills. Your own circumstances are completely different from hers, but you can at least imagine yourself stepping into her shoes.

Let's call her Rita.

Next, choose another of the four ingredients that make up a novel idea - perhaps a **setting** this time. (It really doesn't matter - this second step of finding writing ideas is essentially a random, trial-and-error process.)

The idea of setting your novel in a restaurant appeals to you (maybe you work in one), but for some reason you can't put your finger on Rita doesn't feel like a waitress. So scrap the restaurant idea. How about a fishing village on the Cornish coast, or a department store in New York City, or a small farm in the middle of Nowhereville?

You go with the farm idea. You might not know much about farming, but lately you've taken an interest in growing your own produce and living more self-sufficiently, so at least the research would be fun.

Fine. So Rita lives with her three kids on her small farm in Nowhereville, and she struggles to pay the bills each month.

Now choose a **plot** from your brainstormed list of writing ideas - or, more precisely, something that Rita might *want*...

- The love of a good man (one who won't walk out on her this time).
- Enough money to pay the debts and have enough over to give her kids a Christmas they won't forget.
- To keep her farm out of the hands of the greedy developers.
- Perhaps all three.

You can't decide right now. What about a **theme**?

One of the items on your list was about how the best life is a simple life, one which turns its back on the excesses of the modern world. That fits well with the small farm setting, so you decide to go for it.

Back to **plot**. Because of the theme, the central plot in your novel probably won't revolve around love (though there will almost certainly be a love interest in the novel somewhere).

It is essential that your main plot complements your theme, and so you come up with an idea where Rita receives a generous cash offer for her farm from that greedy developer. Yes, it would solve her financial problems, but it would also mean a return to the hustle and bustle of the city.

Not happy with that? Then simply keep playing around with your brainstormed writing ideas until you find a novel idea that you *are* happy to run with...

- Maybe make it a love story after all.
- Or scrap the small farm idea and set the novel in a lighthouse.
- Or stick with the farm but swap Rita for a married couple in their eighties who never stop bickering.
- Or go back to Rita and the farm and make it a murder novel. (The developer is found dead in her bottom field and she is wrongly arrested...)
- Or go right back to the beginning and pick a fresh element from any of your brainstormed lists of writing ideas and take it from there.

The possibilities using this method of coming up with novel ideas are limitless. What you will probably find is that, far from struggling to come up with one good idea, you'll have the opposite problem of having to decide which one to go with first.

Incidentally, when you go through this process, don't get too bogged down in the details - you are simply trying to find the bare bones of a novel here.

When you are deciding on the plot, for example, don't worry about the nitty-gritty details of [plotting a novel](#). And don't worry about the finer points of [creating fictional characters](#) here. The detailed work will come later.

As you hopefully know by now, writing ideas should be simple things. Ideally, you should be

able to sum up your novel in a single sentence. Here is the sentence for the idea we have just been brainstorming...

*Rita, a single mother of three struggling to make ends meet in Nowhereville, has to decide between accepting a developer's cash offer for her beloved small farm or starting over in the city.*

It contains every element that all good novel ideas should have:

- Character: Rita, the single mother.
- Plot: We know what she wants - to stay on her beloved farm. So the plot will involve her struggling to do this and not caving in to the developer.
- Theme: Living a simple life vs. the onward march of the modern world.
- Setting: The small farm in Nowhereville and the city - and the contrast between the two.

Now, you know that the idea is true to who you are and to your interests (because every element came from your own brainstormed lists of writing ideas that appealed to you).

But it is important to realize that you are not obliged to stick to this final idea rigidly.

Yes, you need a strong idea to get you started on your novel - without one, you'll have no foundation on which to start building.

But if the novel that the idea becomes ends up totally different from the original spark, it really doesn't matter.

### Writing ideas are not set in stone.

Let's say as you plan the Rita story in more detail that the love interest - between Rita and the greedy developer? - demands more and more space in your novel than you originally anticipated.

Well, fine - let your novel go whichever way it wants. But remember to alter the other elements of your original idea to reflect any changes you make - which in the case of the Rita-and-the-developer love story means changing the theme from an exploration of leading a simple life to an exploration of some aspect of love.

It is impossible to get started on a novel without an idea, but they rarely end up leading you to precisely the destination you imagined.

### Worked Example 2: Alice & Frank's Story

This time we'll begin with a **plot**: a love story. One of the "wants" on your plot list was to find love (which of us doesn't want that?) but your particular spin on it is about finding love later in life.

The **theme** has chosen itself already: the difficulties of finding love in later life.

You have faced this situation yourself and therefore have plenty to say on the subject - how hard it can be to let go of your previous life partner, the way you look for different qualities in a person when you are 60 than when you were 16 - but the way that first flush of romance can still make you feel like a kid again.

More generally, you see the novel as being about second chances and the challenge of starting over when you are closer to the end than the beginning.

Fine. So this novel's **plot** is essentially a boy-meets-girl love story, and the **theme** revolves around finding love later in life

Next, you need a **character** - or in the case of a romance, two of them. (You might end up telling the novel from just one of their viewpoints or both, but you can decide that later during the detailed planning stage.)

One of the characters on your list of brainstormed writing ideas was a local radio host called Alice (you used to host your own radio show once upon a time so you know a thing or two about it). You originally had the character down as being in her twenties, but you can easily change her to a sixty-something.

(As a matter of fact, making her post-retirement age suggests a **subplot** in which the radio station tries to replace her with someone younger - and that ties in nicely with your novel's theme.)

What about a partner for Alice? If she works at a radio station, you could have the man (or woman) she falls in love with work there, too. They could be bickering colleagues - host and producer, perhaps.

That's one possibility, but you see this love story as being more tender than that, so the character you pick from your brainstormed list is a cop forced into retirement after taking a bullet. His name is Frank and his wife recently died.

It was only his job that kept him going, but now he is stuck in an empty house all day - and it is this loneliness which makes him call the radio station during one of Alice's late night phone-ins. The chemistry is instant, but neither of them quite believes that love can happen this late in life.

How does the relationship develop from there? In about a million ways, but you don't need to know the specifics of the plot right now, only that the possibilities are immense.

The only element of the novel idea left is the **setting** and, once again, it has already worked itself out for you: the small town that is home to the local radio station (which you decide to make a fictionalized version of the small town you once lived in).

But that creates a problem: you had Frank down as a policeman who took a bullet, and cops are far more likely to get shot in big cities than sleepy towns. So you change his background, make him a car salesman who lost his job at the local dealership. (Again, this ties in with the theme - being laid off because society considers you worthless.)

And now all the elements of your love story work in perfect unison. The one-sentence summary of this novel might go something like this...

*When Frank phones Alice's night-time radio show, the instant chemistry between them makes them both dare to believe in second chances.*

Now it's your turn to create some ready-to-go writing ideas of your own. I'm sure you can do better.

**Next Step:** Actually, I jumped the gun a bit when I said that the ideas above are "ready to go".

Before you commit to writing ideas - and never forget that seeing a work of long fiction through to completion is a huge commitment - you want to be sure that they are the right idea.

How do you do that?

One way is to "road test" an idea. But before I talk about that, here is some more general advice on how to decide if your [ideas for writing are any good](#)...



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**Daniel Little** · Works at The Shelley School of Irish Dance

This was awesome! Me and my friends are having a little competition to see if we can start a decent novel in the next month, and lots of us have been struggling to get ideas, this will really help! Also, as I read this, I couldn't help but grab my notebook and do this process a couple times!

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