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## Novel Writing Ideas: How to Get Them

by Glen C. Strathy

Every novel starts with an idea.

The best writing ideas come to you without effort and unannounced. They burst into your mind demanding to be written down in words and determined not to let go until you satisfy their need. They may live in the back of your head for years, impatiently nagging at you until you finally make the time to write them.

Such ideas are wonderful, because they are often the catalyst that finally begins your writing career.

Good writing ideas may be brief, but they will contain something that intrigues you. For instance, they may take the form of "somebody does something strange or discovers something unexpected."

You, as the writer, are then left with a mystery to ponder. Who is this person? Why do they do that? Or ... How did this unexpected thing come about? What are the consequences? The stranger the event is, the more you are compelled to come up with answers that make sense of it all. Your story will then be about both the event and the answers to the questions surrounding the event.

If you already have an idea for a novel gnawing away at you, one you feel must be written, congratulations! Feel free to return to the [How to Write a Novel](#) page and check out the next article. If you are short on writing ideas, don't worry. Here are some easy techniques you can use to will generate a **virtually unlimited supply of novel writing ideas...**

### Enlist Your Passion

Writing a novel takes a lot of time and effort. You're going to live with the characters and the world you create for a long time. So don't choose an idea you will get bored with or grow to resent after a while. Instead, look for writing ideas you can be passionate about - ones that are meaningful to you, that you will have fun working with, that you can feel proud to have written.

One way to open your mind up to great novel writing ideas is to think about stories other people have written that you have felt most passionate about. Ask yourself which novels or films have given you the most enjoyment, changed your view of the world, or impacted you most profoundly? Make a list of these favourite all-time stories.

Then look over your list and ask yourself what these stories have in common.

For example ...

**Genre.** Do you prefer literary fiction or genre fiction? Romances, mysteries, or science fiction? Historical novels, fantasy, or some combination? Keep in mind that most genres have loose definitions and tend to overlap with other genres, as in historical mystery, science fiction adventure, paranormal romance, etc. Stories that are typically lumped in the same genre can also be quite different. *Star Wars* and *1984* are very different types of stories, even though they can both be categorized as science fiction. A whodunit or a quest can be set in ancient Egypt or on the planet Mars. So pay attention to what your favourite stories have in common, even if they appear to be different genres.

**Character.** What type of people do you like to read stories about? What kind of characters do you have the most sympathy for or empathy with? Do you like stories about underdogs and misfits, or the rich and famous? World leaders or gang leaders? Men of



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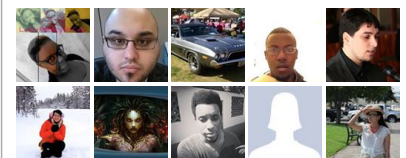
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"Thanks to your ["Create a Plot Outline in 8 Easy Steps."](#) I was able to take a story that I simply just fooled around with and went willy nilly all over, into a clearly defined, intriguing battle where two characters fight to keep their relationship intact, and try to find a balance in control of themselves and their lives. Thanks to you, I'm not ashamed of the poor organization of my writing." - Nommanic Ragus

action and valor? Women caught in difficult situations? Whose stories do you think need to be told?

**Problems.** Notice if your favourite protagonists face similar kinds of problems. What kinds of personal difficulties or external threats do they struggle with? Do they have similar goals (e.g. revenge, rescue, love, freedom, understanding, acceptance, wealth, discovering the truth, reevaluating their past, healing a relationship, winning a war, coping with change, attaining wisdom, fulfilling a dream, coming of age, finding meaning, protecting the weak and innocent, rediscovering their zest for life, to name just a few).

**Themes.** What values do your favourite stories concern themselves with? What lessons do the characters in them learn or fail to learn?

Be willing to spend some time on this process – not just one afternoon. As you consider your favourite stories, write out your thoughts and observations in as much detail as you can. Then reflect on and add to your observations over the next few days.

Chances are you will learn something about yourself as you do this exercise. The stories that touch us the most tend to be about characters who share our concerns, problems, values, and goals.

While you reflect on your favourite stories, you may even discover (to your surprise or horror) that the things that matter most to you are not what you thought they were. If so, congratulate yourself on your new insight. The more honest you can be with yourself, the better writer you will be.

The other thing that may happen over several days of pondering your favourite stories is that one of those great writing ideas I mentioned above may pop into your mind. If so, fantastic! Write it down.

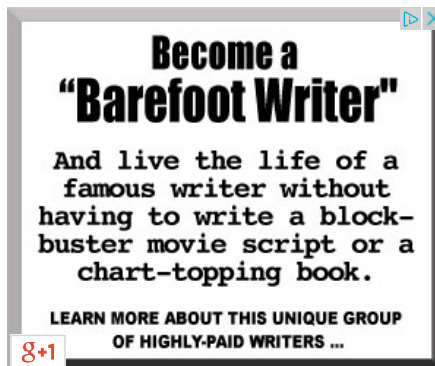
If not, that's okay too. At least you will have a clearer idea of the type of novel you want to write. There's more than one way to prime a pump or persuade your muse to generate a stream of novel writing ideas. So try this next approach...

## Fun with Plot Summaries

Here is one of the simplest ways to come up with writing ideas you can turn into novels.

### Step #1. Get a bunch of plot summaries for existing stories.

You can find these on book jackets, TV listings, or movie guides. For example, the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)) can be a great resource for generating writing ideas. It provides a brief plot summary for almost every movie ever made. The site has a list of the top 250 films (according to user votes), and the bottom 100, and also lets you browse alphabetically through all the films that have plot summaries.



Choose summaries that are brief, perhaps one or two sentences at most.

### Step #2: Create original writing ideas by changing one thing at a time.

Choose one plot summary.

For the purpose of illustration, I'll pick one plot summary from IMDb's top 250 list. I choose *The Third Man*, because I have never seen the film, so I have no preconceived ideas about it. (This actually makes it easier.) There are several plot summaries for this film, written by different people. I want the shortest one for this exercise – just the bare bones of the story idea. Here it is ...

"An American pulp writer arrives in post-WWII Vienna only to find that the friend who waited for him is killed under mysterious circumstances. Then he becomes involved in his friend's involvement in the black market, with the help of his Czech girlfriend."

that the friend who is killed under mystery entangles the writer with the national police, and

Now choose **one** thing to change about your chosen plot summary.

can be anything at all.

For instance, here are some possible changes I could make .

1) "An American pulp writer..." What if the protagonist was a psychiatrist? Or a criminal on the run from the law? Or a young woman with a background on her first trip to Europe before starting college?

...that the friend who is killed under mystery entangles the writer with the national police, and

2) "...arrives in post-WWII Vienna..." Instead of this setting in a small town in the old West? Or an Inuit village? Or in a space station? Changing the setting may involve changing the genres are defined by setting (e.g. Westerns).

...that the friend who is killed under mystery entangles the writer with the national police, and

"I never knew what to do with all the characters in my head, but since discovering Dramatica I am writing again in my spare time. Thank you for making this available. Yes, it is a bit complex, and it does take time, but I love it because it works." - Colin Shoeman

"I came across your website by chance. It is a plethora of knowledge, written in a simplistic way to help aspiring writers. I truly appreciate all of the information you have provided to help me successfully (relative term) write my novel. Thank you very much!" - Leo T. Rollins

"I can honestly say that this is the first website that is really helpful. You manage to answer complex questions in relatively short articles and with really intelligent answers. Thank you for taking the time to write these articles and sharing them so generously." - Chrystelle Nash

- 3) "...only to find that the friend who waited for him is killed under mysterious circumstances." Instead of the writer's friend being killed, what if he is kidnapped, or what if he has a group of friends who are trying to smuggle something out of the country? What if the friend who was waiting for him turned out to be an imposter and the real friend is elsewhere for some reason?
- 4) "The ensuing mystery entangles him in his friend's involvement in the black market..." What if the friend isn't involved with the black market but is a member of a group of former SS officers? Or Russian military intelligence? Or war profiteers? Or art collectors, zoo keepers, film students, physicists, anything at all?
- 5) "...with the multinational police..." What if instead of the police being involved, the police refuse to get involved for some nefarious reason?
- 6) "...and with his Czech girlfriend." What if the Czech girlfriend is actually a homosexual man? Or the friend's illicit daughter? Or the wife of a powerful politician?
- 7) Could I change the genre? The original story seems to be a murder mystery or thriller. However, I could certainly put a romance into it (perhaps between the writer and his friend's girlfriend). I might even be able to make the murder plot take a backseat to the romance. I could turn it into a children's or young adult story by changing the age of the main characters. Perhaps I could make it a horror story by adding supernatural elements. (Is some monster the real killer? Is the girlfriend a ghost?) Perhaps if the mystery is never solved the story could even take an element of ambiguity that would make it seem more like literary fiction.

As you can see, the number of new writing ideas you can create from a single plot summary is enormous.

In this example, I'll keep it simple. For my one change, I'll make the protagonist "a young girl from a sheltered background on her first trip to Europe before starting college."

#### **Step #3: Rewrite the plot summary, incorporating your change.**

Chances are you will have to alter a few other elements of the summary to make sense of the first change you made. For instance, post-WWII Vienna might seem like a strange vacation choice for a young girl. So I could either give her a different reason for going, or I can change the setting to a different period, say the year 2000. Also, if she is sheltered, perhaps she is planning to stay with one of her mother's old friends (who can keep an eye on her). So we get ...

"A young girl from a sheltered background arrives in Vienna in the year 2000 to stay with an old friend of her mother. It is her first trip to Europe. However, when she arrives, her mother's friend is killed under mysterious circumstances. The ensuing mystery entangles her in this friend's involvement in the black market, with the multinational police, and with her Czech husband."

#### **Step #4: Make the writing ideas fit your passion.**

Consider what you've learned about the kind of story you want to write. Can you rewrite your new plot summary so that it becomes about a problem or situation that interests you, or a protagonist you can empathize with?

For example, I happen to like stories about people with suppressed talents who get their chance to shine. So perhaps I'll give my protagonist a unique talent for solving puzzles. Maybe she is planning to study criminology at college (perhaps she has a rebellious streak). So, while her parents would like her to come home after the murder, she decides to stay and try to investigate what happened herself.

#### **Step #5: Change ambiguities into specifics.**

In the above example, the word, "entangles," is rather vague. So is "mysterious circumstances." It's a good idea to change such terms into specific details.

Perhaps this family friend's Czech husband was actually planning to use the protagonist to smuggle a stolen miniature painting into America, by concealing it in a book he gives her. Perhaps he stole it from a gangster who then committed the murder accidentally while searching the woman's home, trying to get the object back. The lack of an apparent motive for the murder would qualify it as mysterious.

So we get...

"A young girl from a sheltered background arrives in Vienna in the year 2000 to stay with an old friend of her mother. It is her first trip to Europe. However, when she arrives, her mother's friend is killed under mysterious circumstances. The girl decides to investigate the crime herself. She finds herself pursued by gangsters, who think she has a stolen painting that belongs to them, and by the police who want to use her as bait to catch the gangsters. Meanwhile, her investigation is aided by the murdered woman's husband who secretly wants to use her to smuggle the stolen painting out of the country."

#### **Step #6: Decide on the Ending.**

One thing about plot summaries you find on the web or other listings is that they generally don't mention the ending of the story. (They don't want to spoil it for those who haven't seen or read the story.) So go ahead and make one up. In the example I've been using, I would probably let the girl solve the mystery and put the evil husband in jail. But

that's just because I like crime stories where justice triumphs.

Again, I have no idea how the plot of the original film, *The Third Man*, goes, though I hope it's very different from my new version. However, if I were to actually use this idea for writing a novel, I would be sure to make so many other changes by the time I finished my outline that my story bore little resemblance to the original.

#### Step #7: Repeat until you have many writing ideas to choose from, and one you love.

Use this process to create a number of new writing ideas. You can come up with several writing ideas using one plot summary as your starting point, or use a number of different summaries. Try to come up with a dozen or more new writing ideas before you settle on one for your novel.

In case you think this method is cheating and that you should be coming up with writing ideas totally from scratch, let me remind you that some story ideas have been used many times by different writers.

Take this one, for example ...

"An orphaned boy is raised in the care of a powerless uncle, but watched over by an old wizard. When the boy reaches a certain age, the old wizard tells the boy about his true heritage and helps him develop his powers until he is able to avenge his father's death."

That is the basic writing idea behind the stories of *King Arthur*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, *Eragon*, and many other novels and films. For example, change the word "powers" to "ballroom dancing skills" and you have the premise for the Australian film, *Strictly Ballroom*. Change it to "soup making talents" and you have the premise for the Japanese film, *Tampopo*.

Similarly, Helen Fielding took this writing idea from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* ...

"A young woman wants to marry for love rather than money. But she discovers that, of her two suitors, the poor man she initially likes is a villain, while the rich man she initially hates is most worthy of her love."

... and reworked it into her original novel, *Bridget Jones' Diary*.

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* likewise underlies the martial arts film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Do we call this plagiarism? No, because the writers took only the basic writing ideas from earlier works. They made major changes to the setting, plot, and characters in order to create a new and original piece of fiction. That is perfectly legitimate.

## Finding Writing Ideas In Real Life

Another source of writing ideas you can draw upon is real life. Events that happen to you, someone you know, or even events in the news can be the basis of a story if they strike you as uncommon.

The first thing you should probably do when taking writing ideas for your novel from real life events is change the person the events happen to.

After all, you're not writing a biography. You're writing a novel. If you try to use a real person as a character in your novel, they may object. Even worse, they may want to have some control over how you portray them. And that's one hassle you don't need.

So create a different person for the event to happen to. And while you're at it, don't just pick any old character. Choose a character for whom the event would be especially disturbing, challenging, embarrassing, galling or otherwise fraught with emotion.

It's also important to note that real life isn't a story. Real life is just stuff that happens. Stories are about depicting events and experiences that resemble life, but doing it in a way that gives them meaning.

When you use a real life experience as the basis of a story, you must tell it in a way that makes it meaningful. Even if all you do is add your perspective, you will be creating a meaningful context. But more than likely, you will need to make other changes and additions.

To create meaning, you will need to put the event into a dramatic structure. You will need to decide if this event will be the Inciting Incident, the Climax, or the Resolution of the story. You will need to ask the same questions you would with any other idea: Who are the people involved? Why do they do what they do? Or ... how did this strange event come about? What are the consequences? And you will have to invent additional characters and events around it.

The other thing you should consider when basing a novel on a real life incident is whether you can heighten the emotion of the event. If the event was embarrassing, can you make it more embarrassing? If it was frightening, can you make it more so? It's worth experimenting with different ideas to see if you can heighten the drama, without harming credulity. [With your novel writing ideas in hand, go to Part 3: Choosing a Story Goal.](#)

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Do you have a question about finding ideas or any other aspect of novel writing? If so, visit our [Questions About Novel Writing](#) page to get the answers you need.

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I think you are fantastic,you have me really hyped up to start writing.Thank you for sharing your knowledge and ideas.Take care  
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This was very enlightening. Cant thank you enough, now i know how to jot down all those foggy ideas in a shapely manner

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**Lois Marie Augustine Galloway**

Wow! I so needed to read this today...now it feels "possible" for me to get started. Thanks!

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Get started today Lois!!! I know you have the "great" novel in you! Take a deep breath and get it down on paper! Now my sister, have you been told? xx

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I found this article very inspiring. As a person who has been writing off and on for 30 years, I can tell you it is quite daunting to have so many ideas floating out there in the ether between my ears that it threatens to foster a near constant state of panic.

I just commented on this blog to another aspiring author, Summer Cooley, who was worried about how to deal with an overabundance of ideas by suggesting that she carry a notebook around everywhere she goes and write down ideas as they come, while they're freshest in our minds.

I suggested that she create a framework to contain the ideas into.

I, myself, have created such a framework that I use for two of my biggest stories.

It is called an Idea Conception Table (ICT for short).

I take the idea(s) as they come, and I try to discipline my mind to automatically c... [See More](#)

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