

TWELVE GREAT WAYS TO GENERATE IDEAS FOR FICTION!

A Report by Nick Daws

Need an idea for a short story, play or movie script? Here are twelve kick-starters for your imagination!

1. Dictionary Roulette

Open a dictionary at random and choose the first word that appears. Do this twice more, so that you have three randomly chosen words. Now try to incorporate all three words into a story.

2. Take it From Here

Read the first paragraph of a story you have never read before in an anthology or magazine (if the opening paragraphs are very short, read the second and third paragraph as well). Now put the story to one side and write the rest of the story. The chances are that you will end up with a completely different story from the original. All you need to do then is change the opening paragraph/s in your story to have a completely new tale of your own.

3. The Untidy Professor

Think of a character with a particularly strong character trait, e.g. absent-minded, lazy, domineering. Place your character in circumstances which conflict with this trait. Immediately you have two of the essential ingredients for fiction: characters and conflict. To create a story, all you need to do is build the conflict to a crisis, and show what change results.

4. Hold the Front Page!

Take a newspaper - local papers and tabloids are often best - and choose a story from it which intrigues you. Imagine the events which led up to the incident described and/or what happened next. You could easily have the basis for a story.

5. Proverbs

Write a story based on a proverb or a quotation, e.g. cheats never prosper.

6. Tales by Letter

Write a story in the form of a series of letters or postcards, faxes, official reports, (imaginary) newspaper stories, answerphone messages, e-mails, diary entries or a travel journal. Combine any or all of these in your finished story.

7. What's My Motive?

Start with a character who wants something badly. It might be a new job, a new partner, a holiday, something else. Place obstacles in the path of your character and show how he/she overcomes these (or fails to).

8. Start with a setting

Write a short story with one of the following settings: a small seaside town; a pub, cafe or restaurant; a doctor's waiting room; a hotel or boarding house; a factory; a busy office; a bus or railway station; a caravan park; a garage; a shop or supermarket; a theme park; a 13th storey tower block flat; a school; a nursery; a college campus; a picnic. Perhaps the setting itself could provide the source of conflict in your story: for example, a wife wants to move to the country, while her husband prefers to live in town.

9. Events and situations

Here is a list of events and situations: a job interview; a pop concert; a telephone call; the arrival of a stray cat; a car breaking down; going on holiday; losing a purse or wallet; an eye test; a party; going on a blind date; a birthday party; a child starting school; a circus arriving in town; moving house; starting a new job; a family meal; a football match; a car park; a long car journey; an argument; going back to your old school; breaking an ornament; a diary or calendar; mowing the grass; visiting a fairground; writing a letter; going round a supermarket. Take any two of these and think about how they could be combined in a plot. Ask yourself 'What if..?' or 'Supposing...?' type questions to help develop the plot.

10. Mining Your Past.

Consider using your past as a source of story ideas. To help prime the pump, get out your old school reports and school magazines. Was there a teacher you especially loved or hated? Maybe you could write a story about them. Similarly, did you have a close friend or a sworn enemy among your classmates? Maybe you could update the relationship and turn it into a story about two adults. Bring out your old family photographs and memorabilia. Do those photos of a summer picnic, a sports day or a seaside holiday suggest ideas for stories?

11. Picture This.

Pictures and photographs can often suggest ideas. Try visiting your local art gallery, or just look in a newspaper or magazine.

12. Agony Aunt

Other good sources of fiction ideas include the agony columns and letters pages in many women's, men's and general interest magazines. Read about the problems described and see if you could work them into a story.

One other quick bit of advice - once you have an idea for a story, don't be in too much of a hurry to start writing. Mull it over, develop it, see if you can add some interesting twists and turns. Don't be too easily satisfied with your first idea, as often these are unoriginal. Aim to surprise your reader by confounding his or her expectations. Give your story idea time to mature.

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