

“Narrative Soup”
Or How I Turn Ideas into Books
By Brandon Sanderson

Part One: Definitions

One of the most common questions that authors get has to be “Where do you get your ideas?” Though some authors apparently get annoyed by the question, I’ve always found it to be a very good one. What is more pertinent to the writing process than the very foundation of a novel, the formation of ideas? I think understanding how certain authors construct stories can not only help beginning writers, but also help old pros by showing them the process from a different perspective.

And so, I’d like to try and tackle this somewhat overwhelming question. One thing to understand about writing, however, is that there’s no one way to do it. I’m going to explain what I do, as best I can. Hopefully, seeing my process will help those who read this article--though they certainly shouldn’t expect their own process to perfectly mimic my own!

As I consider this topic, another important thing occurs to me. That is a simple, but somewhat daunting fact: That ideas are the easy part. Most authors I’ve met express this same sentiment, and I’ve certainly felt it myself. I have far more ideas than I can use. As a writer, I’ve trained myself to always be looking for ideas in the world around me. In fact, on my blog at brandonsanderson.com, I post a couple of story ideas every week, just to keep myself fresh. (If you’re having trouble getting started, my blog might be a place to visit for a story prompt.)

Now, as I’ve explained, I have a lot of ideas. The good ones are the ones that stick in my head, and keep coming back. However, one thing I notice about newer writers is that they often latch onto a single idea and try to make a novel out of it. So, let me enforce something very strongly here: One idea, no matter how brilliant, does not make a novel! One idea probably won’t even make a short story. I’d say that a novel needs at least six, a short story at least two. The numbers will differ, but the thing to keep in mind is that you can’t generally carry a story on just one concept.

I split ideas into three general sections. There are plot ideas, character ideas, and setting ideas. I look for at least one good character idea per viewpoint I’m going to do. A character idea is usually a motivation, which often relates to a character arc. Where is this character going, and what will they accomplish? Plot ideas generally come in the form of general frameworks. You may have heard that there are only a few basic ‘plots,’ which is, in a way, true. However, what I look for here is a new twist on a plot structure. I usually try to combine a couple of these for a novel. The final type of idea, for me, relates to setting. These come in the forms of interesting visual paradigms, or in the forms of interesting magic systems. This is the place where I tend to get the most ‘crazy.’ Plots and characters are fairly archetypal--but setting is where science fiction and fantasy really shine. You can do some very interesting things here, and I encourage people to be as original as possible in this area.

Part Two: Synergy

Okay, so we’ve established that before I start a novel, I have a bunch of random ideas

bumping about in my head. Some character ideas, some magic system ideas, some plot hooks, some images of interesting climactic scenes, and some visuals of interesting settings in which to tell a story.

For me, a novel begins when two of these ideas bump into each other in my head. I look at the two ideas I've had separately, then see how they influence each other. I think "What would happen if these two ideas happened in the same story?"

For example, I'll start putting characters together, and see if their separate climaxes/motivations rub each other in interesting ways. I'm looking for compliments, though this doesn't necessarily mean characters who will get along well. Often, the best characters to put together in a story are the ones who react best against one another. At this point, what I'm looking for are characters who are interesting alone--but MORE interesting when I consider them in the same story.

The same works with plot and setting. If you add characters in your head into one of the plots you've been working on, how does that character change? Do their motivations combine in an interesting way with the conflict and tension of the plot idea? What about the magic systems? If you place one of those with a character, what does it do to the character?

Plots can mix together to form very interesting ideas as well. If you mix two plot tensions, will combining them make complimentary storylines or not? In a novel, I think it's important to have a nice mix between smaller level plotting and large, macroscopic plotting. Don't mix two plots that are so distinct and separate that the reader feels like they're reading two books. (Though, it can be a very interesting method of storytelling to start with what seems like two separate stories that begin to interweave and affect one another. This is, essentially, what I did in ELANTRIS.)

Eventually, these thoughts in my head will start to stick together. Like water droplets running into each other and combining, some ideas will get so intermixed that it's tough to pull them back apart. Some characters will begin to grow together in my head and become one person, others will stick together, and the way I regard them will become dependant upon their relationships with the other characters.

This is the beginning of a book. When these ideas work so well together that they become inseparable, I know I've got something good. Ideas are easy--but combining them together, then actualizing them on the page, THAT'S what is difficult. When I have six or so ideas, as mentioned before, that are working really well together, I know I've got a novel.

Part Three: Examples of Plot Synergy

All right, now that I've explained the process, let me see if I can show an example of the generation process that led me to the book that I'm releasing in July. It's called MISTBORN, and I've rarely had a set of ideas come together as well as they did for this book.

Let's start with plot, since I think the plot ideas were the foundation of my wanting to write this particular novel. In MISTBORN's case, I can trace my plot ideas directly back to plots that I experienced through other media. That happens quite a lot with writing, I think. Since plots themselves reused a lot, a lot of my plot ideas come from reading about a historical event, or watching a movie, and thinking "That's interesting. But what if THIS happened instead?"

In the case of MISTBORN, I was actually thinking about two separate plot frameworks. The first is the one that Tolkien used in Lord of the Rings. Those of you who read fantasy will be familiar

with this archetype--the 'everyman' hero who gets thrust into a fantastical world, has a large burden of responsibility placed on him, and who has to defeat a much more powerful foe. In fantasy, this usually manifests as a farmboy who goes on a quest to find/destroy a magical item and defeat a dark lord.

I've never really wanted to use this particular archetype. The truth is, it's terribly overused in fantasy. There are authors who have done this one very, very well, and whom I respect a lot. So, I figured that I'd leave this one alone. However, as I was watching the third LotR movie, a thought occurred to me.

What if the peasant hero failed?

This spawned a lot of interesting ideas. What if the hero got to the end of the quest, and the Dark Lord killed him. That gave me a world with a large amount of conflict. In essence, this was an 'overthrow the evil overlord' plot hook with a twist that really interested me. This would be a world where the people were oppressed, where dark and evil creatures were in control of the government. But, beyond that, everyone would know that the prophecies that they'd relied on--the hero that they'd had faith in--had failed. That was the hook that made me want to deal with this plot, the idea of a people whose mythology had failed them.

The second plot framework I was interested in was the one generally used in 'heist' movies, like Ocean's Eleven or Sneakers. It's the same one used in Mission Impossible (the TV show, not the movies) or even the A-Team. It's the framework which involves a small group of very specialized heroes who tackle a seemingly impossible task. However, because each of them brings something very distinctive to the team, they're able to break down the difficult task and pull it off in a brilliant, clever way.

I realized that I'd never seen this done in a fantasy book. The hook here was the idea that this archetype would make a GREAT fantasy book. I could have a team of specialists, ala Mission Impossible, who each had a distinctive magical power. It seemed perfect for the genre.

Eventually, these two ideas bumped together in my head. I thought "Hey, what if my team of specialists were to face down this evil dark emperor who conquered the world." And, bam, MISTBORN was born.

The two ideas enhanced and influenced each other. I realized that my team would have to be a group of thieves, living in the cultural underground of the dark empire. They knew that the prophecies had failed a thousand years before, and were tired of the emperor being in charge. So, they would decide to overthrow him their own way: by robbing him silly and using his money to bribe away his own armies. The mixing of the two ideas also changed the way I looked at the dark lord plot. Because of the more personal nature of the conflict--a group of people working specifically to overthrow him--I decided it would make the conflict more relevant if the Dark Lord weren't some faceless evil, but someone far more understandable.

That is when the idea evolved my favorite part of the MISTBORN early plotting cycle. I realized it would be better if the dark lord--the Lord Ruler, as I started calling him--were the very hero who was supposed to have saved the world. What if, instead of saving it a thousand years before, he'd decided to become the evil he was trying to fight? He'd conquered the world instead of saving it.

With those ideas well-linked, I had a framework for what would happen in the book, as well as a history and motivation for my villain. That wasn't enough, however--I still needed setting and characters. Those are next.

Part Four: Examples of Setting and Character

The setting for MISTBORN actually came from an older book that I'd written. This book had never quite taken off like I'd wanted it too. I'd been trying an experiment, seeing if I could write shorter fantasy novels without as epic of a storyline. Though I finished the book, it just didn't turn out like I'd wanted it to. The main character wasn't engaging enough, and the plot didn't really go anywhere. I didn't feel bad, since it was an experiment, and really didn't take that much of my time.

However, the setting of this book had been excellent. The idea had come from driving along on a foggy day, thinking about how visually interesting fog was. I decided to set a story in a place where the fog--or mists--were more of a world element than a simple weather phenomenon. The mists came upon the land every night, and had some mythological tie-ins and mystical meanings.

I stole this setting for the story I was working on, which I termed MISTBORN. I mixed with it a magic system that I'd played with a little before as well. What I liked about this system was that it involved a lot of different--yet related--powers. The reason this piece "Stuck" onto the story I was creating involved the team of thieves. The magic system, Allomancy, provided for a wide variety of magical 'specialties'. Therefore, as desired, I could provide each member of my thieving team with a specialized power. Some of the powers relied on the others, which made for a team that needed one another to work effectively.

With this falling into place, I was almost there. Now I needed characters. The process works a little differently with each book. In the case of Mistborn, I tailored the main characters to fit the setting and plot framework I'd developed through my formational ideas. I had one vague idea for a character that I'd been thinking of--this was a character who had been sent to a slave camp and worked nearly to death. It wasn't enough of an idea to stand very well on its own.

However, when melded with the growing MISTBORN idea, it stuck on and grew into something quite interesting. After letting the character seed stew for a while, I soon had a concept that would work quite well: a charismatic, and selfish, thief lord who had tried to rob the dark emperor himself, but had been caught. After working in the Lord Ruler's slave camp for a year's time--during which time the thief's wife, who had also been sent there, died--he developed Allomantic powers (for a reason to be developed later in the design process) and broke out. Now, he's going to gather his team of thieves to succeed where he failed before, and take another stab at robbing the emperor--and, perhaps, find a way to kill the creature in the process.

This character, however, couldn't be my only main character. The edge of vengefulness I imagined for him needed something else to balance it. And so, I decided I'd need a second viewpoint protagonist. I took another seed idea, and devised an apprentice for the thief lord--a young girl who had just started displaying Allomantic powers. Going into much more hear would probably spoil the book, so I'll just leave her character as more of a surprise.

Conclusion

Well, there you go. Hopefully, this lets you see a little bit more into my mind as I go through the writing process. Again, the process is different for everyone. This isn't a "How To" article. It's more of a "Look and Compare" article. Even for me, the process changes. For one book, MISTBORN, you can see that I did three separate kinds of idea generation. I developed the plot from plots I'd experienced and enjoyed; I took the magic system from random sparkings and "What Ifs" in

my mind; I developed the characters pretty much “on the spot”, tailoring them to the other ideas I’d already decided to use for the story.

Whatever your process, make certain that it’s not just relying on a single idea to hold your story. Find a way that you can combine ideas so that they synergize and play off of one another. If you have two great stories you want to write, think how much better the book will be if you can manage to combine them into a single effective story!

Thanks for reading! (And find more advice at www.brandonsanderson.com. Also, you’ll find the first three chapters of MISTBORN posted there, and can see how these ideas I discussed are actually in place, being used.)

Brandon