

Formulating Ideas

By Midnight

Formulating Ideas: How to Develop Winning Stories

It's often said that "everybody has a book inside them." In reality, this couldn't be further from the truth. Certainly, many would-be writers have *ideas*, but lack the talent or drive to produce a paragraph, much less a finished novel. Some who try—and fail—might be able to develop intriguing concepts or even well thought out thumbnail plots, but don't have the determination or discipline to fine tune their work into any completed format.

Screenplays are no exception. Many claim they plan to write one once they "get around to it." There's a saying that if you approach a random stranger in Los Angeles and ask them about their script, they'll answer, "How did you know I was working on one?" Of course, very few ever get the first act of a script done, to say nothing of a fully functional three-act screenplay.

There are usually two central reasons why the majority of aspiring writers never put pen to paper (or, more accurately, fingers to the keyboard). The first, as previously mentioned, is due to a lack of dedication in setting aside the time to write and focus on turning out consecutive pages. However, the second reason is something that can haunt even the most talented of writers—big name professionals included. And that's the dreaded moment when one must scrounge for the germ of an idea and turn it into an actual story.

Some writers are fortunate enough to have countless ideas buzzing around in their head at all times, making it a game of pick and choose which concept they feel like diving into next. While others may not have decided upon their next story—either because they don't have one yet, or they haven't been inspired by anything interesting enough to write.

Let's be honest, every story has to start somewhere. Likewise, every writer has to draw their ideas from someplace (even those fortunate writers with near limitless concepts clogging their brains). This raises the question—where do we cull our story ideas from? In the event we're at a loss, or experiencing a dread case of writer's block, where can we look to stir up new inspiration? After all, stories don't write themselves.

Inspiration, Imagination and Homework

"Write what you know." It's an old adage, but there's some truth in it. If you're at a loss for new

concepts, consider writing from personal experience. Some writers with military, police, or security backgrounds are able to work those experiences into novels. For example, Ian Fleming incorporated elements from his own time in the British military, circa World War II, into his most iconic creation, James Bond.

However, an author doesn't need to be living on the edge to accrue ideas. Even the most trivial, mundane event can prove to be a creative jumpstart. Stephen King's short story, "Crouch End," was inspired by King getting lost in London's back streets while searching for a friend's address.

Maybe you'd prefer to fall back on other people's experiences, rather than your own? Then you'll only need to look as far as the daily news. With the perpetual influx of media headlines coming from television, newspapers, and the Internet, there's a nigh-endless source of inspiration always at hand. In the original *Dirty Harry* film, our title hero is pitted against the sadistic "Scorpio" who is merely a stand-in for the real-life "Zodiac Killer." The film borrows much from the then-current 1970s Zodiac hysteria, resonating fresh in the minds of moviegoers at the time.

In the 1980s, how many action novels and films centered on rescuing MIA soldiers in Vietnam? Too many to count (*Rambo* and *Missing in Action* are some of the most notable examples, as far as movies go). Venturing back even earlier, Robert Bloch's novel, *Psycho* was ripped from the headlines, basing the infamous Norman Bates character on real life murderer, Ed Gein. Some stories are more bankable than others, with Gein's being particularly noteworthy, as it also gave birth to the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise.

A blend of fact and fiction, if sensibly employed, adds authenticity—along with your own imaginative twist. It would be impossible to tally up the many '70s era horror stories that were born from the Manson Family murders, or the Jim Jones cult. And many of those plots are still rehashed today.

Techno-thrillers of the '80s and '90s often fell back on the US/Soviet Cold War conflict. Today, the floodgates have opened to a much wider selection of "villains," from homegrown terrorists, to outside sources including any number of countries with high-tech weaponry and cyber warfare divisions.

Obsolescence

When deciding on a story line, beware of subjects with a built-in deadline which could soon render your work obsolete. Whether it's a novel, screenplay, or comic, keep in mind that it takes *time* between first draft, revisions, and finished product. As such, if your story centers on a world changing event happening at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics—but you only started penning your story three months *before* the actual Olympic games happen—that's a pretty good indication that you may want to reconsider the

setting.

A major publishing house may be able to grind out a quickie paperback in a month or so, but some can take *eighteen* months before your manuscript sees print. For a screenplay, it can take even longer before what you wrote materializes on screen—and that’s assuming one’s work doesn’t end up in development hell, or gets delayed by studio execs. Comic books tend to be the quickest outlet for transferring the printed word to a finished product, but if you’re an independent publisher, you’re only as fast as your artist is at turning out pages.

Much like the Olympics example, writing a story that takes place during a current election cycle or a presently ongoing war can also fall victim to obsolescence (momentarily popular trends and fads are also things to watch out for). It’s always important to consider if your story will have relevance in a year from now. On the other hand, it’s entirely possible to write about a past event and use history to enrich the plot.

Getting a Handle on the Headlines

When it comes to using headlines to jumpstart an idea, one’s only limitation is purely their imagination. Let’s take a look at this synopsisized example, which could have easily come from a recent headline:

Moments before a disastrous airplane crash, the pilot radios for help, reporting sounds of gunfire from the passenger compartment.

Okay—how will we use this concept? As a writer, will you make this event the climax of the story? Or should we make it the “accident” that allows the story’s protagonist to search for answers and find out who’s responsible? Let’s go with the latter and say that our protagonist—an ex-FBI agent—was supposed to be on the plane, but missed his flight. However, his associate—who was also a good friend—was murdered aboard the aircraft. Now, it’s up to our intrepid protagonist to find *who* did the shooting. To add to his woes, the authorities have left him in the dark without a shred of information. His old contacts have dried up, and now it’s up to our hero to solve the mystery himself and avenge his friend’s death. We can work out any number of plots from this. Maybe our protagonist was the target all along, and has become a “loose end” due to knowledge of some international crime ring. Maybe his former FBI superiors are onboard with getting rid of him, etc...the possibilities are endless.

What’s Old is New Again

“There’s nothing new under the sun!”

“It’s all been done before!”

“There’s nothing original anymore!”

We’ve all heard these sayings, and there’s some validation to them, especially for a writer. Ideas cannot be copyrighted, and that’s one of the reasons we see so many of the same concepts explored and explored *again* in fiction. While it’s unwise to blatantly rip-off a story scene-for-scene, it can also be argued that there are only *so* many universal stories out there. It’s been said that the modern Western story, for both films and novels, *all* fall into one of six themes. Stephen King has said that horror stories can be slotted into four unique categories: vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and “things without a name.”

As for action stories, they tend to have a single, common theme: the heroic quest, or as Joseph Campbell put it, “the hero’s journey.” This may sound like an oversimplification, but once the paint is washed away, there really are *only* so many themes to choose from. How many times have we seen the revenge theme played out? Albeit, not every revenge tale is identical, and most have different circumstances, but the core plot remains. What makes stories different and stand out from the pack, is the way they’re rewrapped. This is owed mostly to a writer’s imagination.

Romeo & Juliet is a literary staple, but the basic premise has evolved throughout the years. The Broadway musical (and later film adaptation) of *West Side Story* was a modern retelling of Shakespeare’s work. In 1987, the film *China Girl* was another take on the formula. Today the base plotline continues to be used, even in horror/action films like *Underworld*, which follows the forbidden romance between a vampire and werewolf. Yet, how many people left the theater and boycotted *Underworld* as a *Romeo & Juliet* knockoff? On the contrary, the film spawned a franchise.

James Cameron’s *Avatar* was a clear example of often-used formulas being pulled together. The movie liberally borrowed concepts from *Pocahontas*, *Fern Gully*, and *Dances with Wolves* but, despite that, the film turned out to be biggest box office hit of all time.

There’s certainly a line that one could cross which enters full-on plagiarism, but common tropes are so abundant that orchestrating a fully original idea, from start to finish which no one has seen before, is a tall order. In addition, whether it’s a novel or script you’re working on, audiences are always eager to find something “familiar” in their entertainment. Sure, your work should never be a blatant copy, but there’s a reason such “familiar” stories resonate with audiences.

For years, George Lucas had wanted to make a film based on *Flash Gordon*. When he wasn’t able to get the licensing rights, he reworked the space opera concept and gave the world *Star Wars*. In many respects, *Star Wars* is also a sci-fi reworking of the 1958 Japanese film, *The Hidden Fortress*.

The 1958 science fiction movie, *It! The Terror from Beyond Space* featured a monstrous stowaway alien attacking a spaceship full of people. Sound familiar? Dan O’Bannon, the screenwriter for 1979’s *Alien*, later cited the 1958 film as a huge inspiration.

Of course, it is one thing to borrow common tropes or be inspired by another work, but best not to lift entire scenes for your own. Citing a greater extreme, Sergio Leone's iconic 'spaghetti western' *A Fistful of Dollars* took the complete plot from the Japanese movie, *Yojimbo* (which ultimately resulted in a lawsuit).

Keep in mind how many television sitcoms share a similar plot. The same goes for the various crime dramas, superhero movies, romantic comedies, and thrillers. One superhero film may have a different setting, villain, and problem for our protagonist to overcome. But there's always the same elements in each story: the call to action, the struggle to overcome the opposition and, ultimately, the eventual climatic conflict with the antagonist. This brings up another age-old maxim, "great minds with a single thought."

The true key to capturing an audience's attention is to take a concept that works, but add your own imaginative flair to it; something to spice it up. My webcomic, *Danger Zone One*, employs the basic buddy cop trope: two officers with opposing personalities being forced to work together. However, several twists keep it from being a carbon copy of what's come before. There's certainly no shortage of buddy cop movies, but there are far *less* comics that tackle the theme and, as far as I know, none that use the manga art style. Most buddy cop plots revolve around male characters, which *Danger Zone One* inverts, by featuring female officers. And, most strikingly, *Danger Zone One* employs a near-future setting, allowing for sci-fi plotlines that simply wouldn't work in, say, *Lethal Weapon*, *48 Hours*, or *Red Heat*.

Learn from the Competition

Reading inside the genre you're looking to write in can be immensely helpful, and not just by reading the *best*, but also the *worst* out there. If you only read what works, you'll never know what doesn't, until it's too late. This helps to identify contemporary market trends, common elements of style, and learn which snafus should be avoided. Reading *outside* your chosen genre can be extremely beneficial as well, helping to broaden your interests and perspective. Always be on the lookout to pick up pointers on plotting, characterization, and style. Even the worst that the literary world has to offer can provide a writer with new insight. And if your goal is screenwriting, the same goes for movies, but also be sure to get your hands on actual scripts (many can be found online), to analyze the makings of what went right and what fell short.