

## Section 1: Generating Ideas for stories

When writing a script, we're looking to tell exciting stories about interesting people in an engaging manner. The essential elements of a well-told, interesting and exciting story are:

1. The story is about a person or people whom we have some empathy,
2. this person or people want(s) somebody badly,
3. this goal is difficult to achieve. Crucially however, it is possible,
4. there are obstacles in the way of the character/s achieving these goals,
5. the story develops an emotional impact and allows the audience to connect with it,
6. finally, the story reaches a satisfactory conclusion, though not always a happy or clear ending.

Another way of looking at this is through this 'equation':  
(Character/s + Desires) x Obstacles = **Story**

However, developing an idea for a story can be incredibly difficult. When presented with the freedom to create any story and featuring any characters, people can find this freedom intimidating. The aim of this resource therefore is to help provide activities, prompts and suggestions that will help develop a starting point and, to an extent, structures that help to create an idea for a story.

This resource will focus on two methods for developing an idea:

- using prompts and influences
- using restrictions

### 1. USING PROMPTS AND INFLUENCES

The single biggest issue in starting to develop a new idea for a story is starting. Thinking of creating and developing an idea from nothing can be incredibly daunting and somewhat frustrating but often all we need is a spark. Here are 10 resources and ideas that will help to create that spark by exploring a wide range of ideas, prompts, influences and suggestions.

**Idea 1:** Use generic conventions. Examining generic conventions can be a very useful way of considering what kind of story you want to tell and what kind of things the audience would expect to see. From this, it presents the writer with a few key "touchstone" elements that will need to be included in order to produce a story that recognisably 'belongs' to a genre.

This also allows you to then play around with genres. For example, you could take an element or range of elements from different genres and incorporate and shape them into the genre you're working in. For example, if creating a war film, you could take a typical sci-fi storyline - having to leave Earth to fight aliens and find a new world, and then twist it to make a war film. The storyline could be leaving one country/area/building, to fight another group of people and then settle in the new area. Or use a teenage, coming-of-age film, where the main teenage girl has fallen in

love with their brother's best friend and they've fallen out over it. As a war film, you could have a young teenage soldier falling in love with a relative of a comrade, who also happens to be the enemy.

Section 1, Resource 1- Exploring Genre, contains a range of activities to help develop an understanding and appreciation of genre and generic convention. Activity one features some descriptions of genre. For each one, read the description and fill in the blanks with the correct name for the genre. An answer sheet has been provided. The second activity includes a blank column to which examples of each film can be added. Finally, the third activity provides spaces where genres can be considered through mise-en-scene and setting. For each genre, consider what examples of mise-en-scene and settings an audience would expect to see. This can be used to help consider what aspects or *touchstones* should be included to help signify genre and perhaps stimulate the writing process. Of course, these can also be used by *ignoring* some to help subvert a genre.

**Idea 2:** Select keys at random. In looking to develop an idea, prompts or individual ideas are often useful. One way of finding these initial ideas could be through selecting ideas at random and creating a story from them.

Section 1, Resource 2 contains 5 different 6x6 grids. By rolling a dice for example, students can find a number that corresponds with one axis. Choosing a second number will then give a 'grid reference' that can then be plotted across the grid. There are 5 grids in total and if all used, could produce a character, a location, an object, time and situation. Whilst at first this may seem to produce disparate nonsense, a considered use of imagination can produce some useful results. For example, "Soon after the party", "a particular bunch of keys", "passing through a mirror", "a moon base" and "a child who is always grumbling", could give you "On a base on the moon, a very grumpy child went to a birthday party. Afterwards, she was given a small party bag and the size of it annoyed her - there was no way that there was anything good in there. When she opened it, she found some keys and a map to what turned out to be a lock door on the other side of the base. The keys opened the door but inside the room was only a mirror. The mirror however, looked odd, it looked liquid. Whilst touching it, the young girl was shocked to discover that her finger passed right through - the mirror was liquid. As she pushed further, she found that her entire body could effortlessly glide through the mirror and behind the liquid she found..."

Of course, these can and should be adapted and may not follow the words and phrases exactly as they are randomly selected, but they are certainly useful in developing those sparks, ideas and nuggets of inspirations.

**Idea 3:** Adjectives. Adjectives can be a powerful tool in helping to develop characters that are 'fully-formed' or in some way 'fleshed-out'.

Section 1, Resource 3 is another grid that this time, contains a range of adjectives that could help to develop a character that has an interesting aspect to their personality. By selecting 2 or 3 at random, it will help to create someone who has a multi-faceted personality.

**Idea 4:** A creative box. Creating the spark that enables creating a story requires inspiration; creating a box of possible inspirations can help in developing the basis of an idea or story.

Section 1, Resource 4 provides a framework for the collection of a range of objects and materials that could provide that creative inspiration. This can then be used in two ways; either by collecting all objects and ideas from a group to produce one larger box that anyone can select any ideas from. The second method is to create one smaller box per person that each individual can use as and when they need. The suggested objects and materials are:

- Two famous paintings that you like or admire.
- A local news story.
- A national news story.
- An international news story.
- A story about someone in your family from either the past or present.
- A dramatic story from you when you were younger.
- Lyrics from a favourite song.
- A strange object you've found or a photo of a strange object that someone else has found.

Of course, the possibilities here are endless and it's encouraged to think of many other possible objects and materials.

**Idea 5:** As well as an inspiration box, students could be asked to work to a list of ideas that provides inspiration. This one from, <http://www.nownovel.com/blog/how-to-find-book-ideas-easy/>

is especially useful:

- 1: Try Burroughs' 'cut-up' method for finding story ideas
- 2: Get story inspiration from music
- 3: Find inspiration in facts from non-fiction and Google
- 4: Do physical exercise for a creative mind
- 5: Read news story headlines for intrigues
- 6: Combine story ideas from multiple sources
- 7: Make up improbable or unusual questions and find answers
- 8: Mine your dreams for ideas
- 9: Try brainstorming novel ideas in a different environment
- 10: Keep a journal
- 11: Use free-writing to associate ideas
- 12: Become a discreet eavesdropper
- 13: Draw book inspiration from your own life
- 14: Use mind-mapping
- 15: Write a book in dialogue with another author's work

**Idea 6:** Pobble365. Images are brilliant for developing ideas through inspiration. Pobble365 is a website which is designed for teachers to use with students to develop writing skills, but is just as useful in developing ideas for stories. Every day the website posts a new image which is designed to create intrigue and a sense of ambiguity and therefore developing a sense of inspiration. To accompany this, they

also provide a series of writing prompts and questions that can be used to further develop ideas. One way of creating an idea for a story could be to scour the website and look at the images provided.

**Idea 7: Find ideas from around you.** One way of creating a spark of inspiration is to find ideas from everyday situations or locations.

Section 1, Resource 5 offers five different examples of where an everyday situation could be used to provide inspiration.

Students could be tasked, perhaps as homework, with completing the attached resource and then using these as a basis for developing an original story.

The five areas for finding ideas are:

- Rewrite a scene from a story that you like.
- Be a spy.
- Check your emails.
- Use Facebook.
- Rewrite the news.

As with idea 4, these ideas are not exhaustive or definitive, so play around with ideas of inspiration and seek them out from other places around you.

**Idea 8: Developing ideas for characters.** Characters need to be complicated, multi-faceted people in order for an audience to believe in them and care about them. Using the resource, develop some ideas and a range of possibilities for key aspects of characters. Developing and working on ideas about the background of a character is always recommended as it will allow a scriptwriter to develop a detailed and therefore perhaps more *authentic* character.

Section 1, Resource 6 contains 6 boxes and 6 main elements to consider; name, age, job, aspiration, barriers and family. By considering a range of ideas for each it should allow you to develop a complex and well-rounded character with depth, and hopefully, a sense of personality and humanity.

**Idea 9: “The 5 W’s.”** Any story should contain a useful structure that is ideally, planned and considered beforehand so that it makes sense and is enjoyable to watch or read.

Section 1, Resource 7 offers a useful plan to complete. There should be a need or want to develop initial ideas first, before planning how this idea could work as a story. This activity is a useful way of ensuring that a detailed and useful plan has been used to help develop a solid structure to any story. It also offers prompts and helps to spark some inspiration about the specific details needed to make a successful idea for a story.

**Idea 10: A mood board.** This activity is a classic, and for a good reason! In setting a production brief, a mood-board is a useful starting point in helping to develop initial ideas by exploring what conventions that should include. For example, if creating a war film, include images or key words ideas of things that people expect to see in a war film. This could also include conventions or generic

elements such as costume, locations, typical characters, make up or even notes on performance of actors and character traits.

Section 1, Resource 8 provides a space to do so and suggestions on what kinds of things could be used on a mood board to generate ideas.

## 2. USING RESTRICTIONS

Perhaps the most immediate way to begin developing an idea is to actually *prevent* the use of ideas and to put restrictions in place. With barriers and key aspects that must be avoided in place, it means that scriptwriters/filmmakers have to be especially imaginative, skilful and show a good ability in being malleable and flexible in the approach to their work. Restrictions also develop problem-solving skills and also ensure that ideas are narrowed and focused on producing an idea that suits the restrictions, rather than trying to simply explore every possibility. One main problem with this however, is that restrictions work best when placed on and around existing parameters. Therefore, if there is no initial idea, no matter how simple, it's difficult to restrict the wide ranging possibilities that exist for them. Restrictions, however, can also be placed on the creation of the production as well as the actual narrative of the script or film. Here are two ways in which restrictions can be placed upon production.

**Idea 1: Restricting the characters.** Before production is even considered, it could be suitable to restrict the possibility of key aspects. For example, limiting the number of characters can focus a narrative to a core number and thus prevent any ideas from expanding and becoming unmanageable.

**Idea 2: Restricting personalities.** Whilst developing well-rounded and multi-faceted characters is of vital importance for any successful production, it can be useful to 'limit' the personality of characters. One way of doing so could be to ensure that each character in any idea have personalities that feature a specific trait or flaw. Including a weakness or a problem for a character is a way of showing that characters are not simply 'perfect' and can work through any and all problems and issues in the narrative. It also ensures that when developing an idea, that characters cannot simply overcome any problems and thus make the narrative less interesting or engaging. When developing the idea of a character, adjectives (as seen in Section 1, Resource 3) are a very useful way of creating a personality, but they can also be used to provide a flaw or 'Achilles Heel'.

**Idea 3: Restricting the setting.** Much like interesting and 'authentic' characters, an engaging location or setting can help to produce a much more effective film. However, when developing an idea, it could be more useful to explore where an idea should *not* be set. On one hand, this allows the production to avoid clichés, (do we need *another* horror film set in an abandoned house?) but it also ensures that a production is clever in its use of subversion and is focused on one or two interesting places, rather than being sprawled and unfocused.

**Idea 4: Restricting the genre.** Before developing an idea some restrictive parameters on genre can be framed as being a useful guidance into creating an

idea. For example, working within a specific genre can be much more creative than trying to develop an idea across a range of genres. Similarly, not *all* genres may be appropriate for the production, (developing an idea for a sci-fi film for example may not be worthwhile if the production for it cannot be achieved) so consider restricting this before developing an idea into much more detail.

**Idea 5: Restricting the language.** Writing a script for a “war film” may be wholly appropriate, but in trying to achieve a recognisably generic film, clichés may be used and certain words or tropes may be referred to too often. To avoid this, consider drawing up a list of words or vocabulary bank that is *not* allowed. Working with such a restriction can ensure that a much more flexible and creative idea and production is produced, and if working within a group, consider changing the words for each group member to ensure that a wide variety of scripts are developed.

**Idea 6: Restricting the film language.** When considering the first stages of the actual production, whether script or film, limiting, preventing or restricting specific examples of film language may be of use. In the same way that restricting language can be a useful tool for developing creative and original ideas, preventing the use of, for example, specific camera movements can also be an interesting and useful tool. This could be expanded to include a wide range of film language elements, such as the number or types of props allowed, the costumes that can be used or the types of soundtrack.

**Idea 7: Restricting the production.** The final form of restriction could be applied during the production of the idea, whether as a script or as a film. When writing scripts, a restriction on the number of words or by using a specific program or app can produce tightly focused screenplays. For those filming their own short film, restrictions could be placed on filming over a set period of time, at a specific location, during a specific part of the day or using specific equipment. Indeed, any production brief can itself provide a useful framework or restriction whether that be production length or genre and ideas can be developed as a result of these.

Finally, restrictive frameworks as directed to develop ideas. For example, not being allowed to include a monologue, or any less than a set total number for actions/directions in a script, or a specific word count.