

Prompting Ideas

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Ideas for writing come from all sorts of places.

I have to admit, personally, coming up with ideas for what to write is something I have always struggled with. Good, original, sustainable ideas that capture and hold the reader seem even rarer in my world. That's why when I returned to the page in October 2007 and was directed here to [Fiction Friday](#) by my wonderful friend [Danae](#), I thought all my Christmases had come at once. I didn't have to think up the idea – just had to gestate and put down the story.

Left to my own devices – I would probably write very little. I would always be searching for the 'perfect idea' and let's be honest – there is no perfect idea. Prompts bypass the need for perfectionism and allow writers, like me, to do what they're best at – write!

It's not always easy though. Using a prompt as the impetus for a piece of work can challenge you – especially if there is no light bulb moment to assist you in those first few minutes after reading the prompt. It can almost be more frustrating than having no idea at all.

Sometimes you're lucky, other times you're not. There are weeks when I stare at the Fiction Friday prompt and feel like an unlucky fisherman, continually casting and dragging in nothing but a slightly nibbled piece of bait. In these moments I begin the freak out and lose faith in my abilities as a story teller.

Who cares – it's just Fiction Friday – the world won't stop rotating on its axis if I don't post (even if I have committed to writing one a week). But if I give up because a prompt is too hard, the idea won't come, the story isn't clear, the characters are ambiguous or I don't like them, it sets up a negative avoidance pattern for when things get tough. And I don't need for my journey. After all it's rarely smooth sailing all the way.

It's good to have a back up plan for these times, rather than rely on luck, serendipity or begging or the return of your creative inspiration to get you through.

Jennie Cromie in her New Year's post [No-Fail Freelance Resolutions: How to succeed in 2009](#) talks about planning for low motivation days. She writes:

"There will be days when you wake up all motivated and ready to tackle your daily goals, and then several hours later—for some inexplicable reason—you'll feel like throwing your hands up in the air and chucking the goal, the novel, the article, or whatever you're trying to accomplish. I call these the "F&k-Its." You have to decide how you're going to handle these moments ahead of time. Because no matter how much you think you want to achieve that dream of yours right now, I guarantee that there will come a time when that shiny new goal of yours becomes a pain in the you-know-what .. The key is to maintain the forward motion toward your goal, no matter how imperfect that forward motion is."*

So what about a Plan B?

In moments of extreme creative drought I've turned to my writing oracle. *Women Who Run With Wolves* is a feminist



psychoanalytic exploration of fairy stories – mainly very old ones to do with women's rites of passages. When I first got it (a wonderful \$10 buy at bookstore that helps to support a women's shelter in my home town of Cairns) and began reading, a friend told me that it could be used for bibliomancy. That is, you can hold a problem in your head, open to a page and find some wisdom to mull over. More recently my soul sister told me that she'd it in the same way as a writing oracle.

Since learning of this useful trick I've turned to it twice. The most successful was the creation of [Demon Lover](#) (inspired via a dream from a paragraph in the story *The Red Shoes*) – a short story that I actually sold last year! It's a good fall back, when the flow of ideas dam or dry up.

Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way* suggests that if you're stuck or blocked to mend a piece of clothing or to bake something – the physical process of fixing and mixing works at a creative/unconscious level. A friend of mine swears by this, as she does about knitting to keep the creative flow moving. Sewing, cooking and knitting are not everyone's cup of tea though.

Mundane, everyday, repetitive tasks have the ability to still the mind. Many artists and writers say their best ideas/plot revelations/characters developments happen in the shower, while hanging clothes on the line, driving the car or walking.

Other useful ways to generate forward motion with an idea (or in the idea-less vacuum):

- Just write – it doesn't matter if it is bad or indifferent. The simple act of writing generates momentum. Writing badly is painful – but it's not nearly as awful as not writing at all.
- Create a scrapbook that you keep handy, where you can write down things or glue images that you like: words, sentences, ideas, plot, characters, colours, poetry, images etc. They don't have to have any real shape or purpose – just things that strike you as being interesting.
- Make friends with your bad/imperfect ideas. Like new friends – give them a chance and they may just surprise you.
- Put your music on random and take the first line of the first ten songs and try to create something from that. Or listen to your favourite album, or something from a friend or partners collection that you have never listened to and do the same. Or just let the music wash over and through you.
- Keep a record of your dreams. Some of the best stories have deep roots in the dream sphere. Even if they are just snippets or glimpses rather than a whole story downloaded to you while you sleep.
- Have a word bucket – as described by Andrea.
- Go for a walk – take your muse out for some fresh air and a new perspective.
- Indulge in your favourite mundane task – wash the dishes, fold the washing, take a shower, hide away in the toilet. You know what works best for you.
- Do something else that is creative – play a musical instrument, doodle, paint, dance, sculpt, take some photos. Change your clothes, re-do your hair, wear a silly hat (this was the favourite source of stress relief for one of the girls my partner used to work with!)
- And remember that writing is meant to be enjoyable.

Having a list handy of the things that help to stir your creativity is a useful tool – a Plan B, for the moments when writers block hits or the ideas just refuse to come. Type it up, write it out, make it pretty, make it practical – but stick it up somewhere you can see it. If it's filed away in the bottom of your desk draw it's not going to be any use ... you'll forget it's there in your frustration.

Sometimes writers need safety nets. We may as well weave ones with plenty of spring to propel us upwards and onwards.