

Fiction Writing Basics

Unit 1: Ideas – How to Find and Develop Them

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- I don't know what to write about
- My ideas aren't original
- I'm only a housewife, nothing's happened to me.

Are you 'blocked' by these kinds of doubts? Don't be: ideas are all around you, it's okay to write about everyday things, and nothing happened to Jane Austen, either (well, it did, but you know what I mean).

1. Finding ideas

Here are some common sources. Some may lead to a story or novel, others to a scene, incident or character. Some ideas will never be used, lie dormant until sparked off by another, or need to percolate for years:

- Newspapers, diaries, letters
- Dreams, paintings, photographs
- Overheard conversations (I once heard a teenager tell her friend, 'Everything went wrong when Grandma came to live with us.')
- People's behaviour and relationships
- Other people's anecdotes
- Speculation (asking 'What if...?')
- Incidents witnessed
- Characters met
- Places

2. Starring yourself

It's also okay to draw on your own experiences, and they're probably not as boring as you think. You've been in love, betrayed by a friend or falsely accused. Or felt grief, hatred and jealousy. These are the subjects of countless novels and stories.

But how does one 'fictionalise' an experience?

Never simply *report what really happened*, as we might do with a diary entry about a raw or recent experience. It's important to have a perspective, the ability to stand back and say, for example, 'I behaved badly', for then we can stop reporting and reshape the material creatively, as shown in the next point.

3. Building on your idea

The one-sentence idea scribbled down at 2 a.m. or at a traffic light is a long way short of a story or novel. Try teasing out what it means to you by bombarding it with questions:

- Why did she do that?
- What might happen next?
- What if X happened instead?
- Is this the start or end of something?

If you're drawing on something that really happened, don't be afraid to meddle with it. Add invented characters and incidents, remove characters and incidents, change the outcome, or tell it from another's viewpoint.

The Irish writer, Sean O'Faolain, said that three essential factors are necessary before we can begin: a character, a situation and a promise. It's not necessary to work from a detailed plan: fiction writing may be a voyage of discovery.

4. Idea and theme

Theme and idea are not necessarily the same thing. A common theme is *loss of innocence*. You might write a story about your harrowing first year as a teacher in the outback, and later realise that it's really about the loss of innocence. It wasn't until I'd finished *Past the Headlands*, which draws on a letter I found in an archive, that I realised I'd been exploring another common theme: *the search for a true home*.

5. Original, profound, dramatic?

You've written a boy-meets-girl story in which there are no car chases or knotty questions posed about the meaning of life. That's a relief. Humble themes and everyday events and characters are ideal subjects for fiction. All that matters is that your story is fresh, honest and the one that only you could have written.

ACTION ACTIVITY

Here is a newspaper item:

Body Found: Workmen demolishing an old house in the Blue Mountains yesterday found the partly mummified remains of an elderly woman concealed inside the window seat.

That's all we're told, but we writers don't need more.

How would *you* rework this?

(For example, one of my students wrote about a woman who returns to her childhood home and is overcome by unsettling memories when she finds a long-lost doll in the window seat.)