

Writing for Children – the Story Unfolds

Unit 1: Getting Ideas

'I can't think about what to write!'

Margaret Clark

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Her quirky sense of humour and effervescent creativity means she is able to make a good living out of writing. (Yes, it can be done!) Her motto is "Believe you can do it, then do it."

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Sometimes I have a request from a publisher wanting a certain book in a particular genre. And I am idea-less. For example, I accidentally stumbled upon the idea of writing hysterical historical fiction for the *Aussie Bite* series (Penguin), the first book being *Silent Knight*. This book was inspired by listening to a small boy talk about his 'secret friend' who came to visit just before he went to sleep. The secret friend was called Silent Night. So I changed this into *Silent Knight*, a shy little knight at the bottom of the knighthood pile.

Eight hysterical historical fiction titles later, it's not so easy finding an idea for this series. I have to work my imagination a bit harder. *The Worst Nurse*, started out as a book about Florence Nightingale. The publisher didn't like it so she changed to a medieval maiden who made the worst medicines in the world.

Some ideas don't work if you try to force them. I'm thinking the next hysterical historical should be about Elizabeth I. Good Keen Bess? Good queen Jess? I'm letting my idea ferment, a bit like making bread.

Ideas surround and meander

To absorb ideas, you need to keep an open mind and let it wander about absorbing sights and sounds. Sometimes it needs to meander back in time to a repressed memory. Often something very simple like a road sign will trigger an idea.

Ideas are everywhere. Never discard an idea as being unworkable. And try to do something different with the idea. For example:

- Look at something, like a dog walking down the street.
- Observe what it does, how it moves.
- What is it thinking? Does it think in pictures?

- Move the dog in your imagination to another setting e.g. struggling on a sand dune.
- Maybe the dog has now changed into an echidna.
- Or an old man.

Think laterally

Ideas are everywhere. All you have to do is harness one or two and then think laterally. Then, before you lose your wonderful idea in the labyrinths of your overworked brain, write it down. On a scrap of paper. If no paper, on your arm if you have to. Which means you should always carry a pen that works.

Also, it's common for authors to link one or two ideas together. Or even three or four.

So you still can't get an idea? Not even a teeny one? You notice that people's shadows are more or less the same, even though some people are fatter/shorter/thinner... which then links to an idea you had about aliens who don't have shadows. And that's how their presence is detected on Earth.

ACTION ACTIVITY

This is what I did when I wanted to write an *Aussie Bite* that followed *Snap!* and *Crackle!* Obviously the title was *Pop!* But what to write about?

- Grab a pen and paper.
- Write down the first word that comes into your head. (mine was 'pop')
- Now write down every associated word or thought that comes to mind from that word.

For example, mine looked like this:

balloon	bubbles	pop-off
bubble gum	rice bubble	over-inflated bike tyre
grandpa	pop	toast pow
paper bag	popcorn	finger-in-cheek sound
weasel	water bomb	pop gun

- Then choose one word. Then another. Build a short sentence or two around the two words. It doesn't matter how crazy it sounds. If you don't like it, choose another word. Or two.

For example, one of my words was popcorn and another word weasel, and I put the two words into the sentence, added a small, precocious boy and a computer and on I went with another 5,000 words to create the book *Pop!* The boy was curious, the weasel was naughty, no one believed him - ingredients to hook children into reading the book.

So try this method for yourself. Keep it simple. And the results will amaze you.