

John Brown's Idea Generation List

Many of these methods were freely shared by various successful authors (others were stolen at gunpoint). But beware: there are no grails, which, if drunk from, give the penitent author eternal life. So don't go looking for them.

Instead, find many ways to generate zing--ideas that are alive with some measure of electrical current for you. Zing's the goal. For when you have enough zing crackling about your brain focused on the main parts of story (setting, characters, problem, and plot) the story will, of its own accord, open its eyes and look up at you.

The List

WHAT IF? In Kitchen Privileges, Mary Higgins Clark talks about what she does with her sparks to develop a story. If you don't know what to write about, she says, then take a dramatic situation, something that sticks in your mind, something that happened to you or someone you know or something you read about that intrigues you. Ask three questions about that situation--suppose, what if, and why. I just read about a guy who was in the Mafia and became a Mormon. I asked--what if, after leaving the Mafia, some of his old mafia associates came back one day asking for a favor?

RESEARCH. Go read on a subject, preferably one you don't know much about or don't even like, look for characters, settings, and problems. Start with juveniles or encyclopedia articles or documentaries and move to thicker texts.

CONVERSATION. Strike up a conversation with someone. Listen to their stories, asking them questions. Then ask what if and what else. I once talked to a woman who worked at an art gallery. She said she used to be in a bike gang. After talking to her, I began to wonder--what else could have happened to her? Why else might she have left the gang?

WHAT COULD GO WRONG? Take any technology and ask what could go wrong. This is what Michael Crichton does in many of his thrillers. If you brought dinosaurs back, what could go wrong?

WHERE'S THE DANGER? With any setting or character situation ask where the danger is. You have a girl living in the wild west--what dangers might she face? A boy going to school in a new land--what dangers might he face?

WHO IS IN DANGER? When you have a setting or basic situation, ask who would be in danger here? Remember, the danger doesn't have to be physical danger.

TV GUIDE. Get a TV Guide or cable or satellite movie schedule with list of movies in back. Look at the loglines (short descriptions of the movie). Find one for a movie you've never seen. Begin developing the story from there.

BOOK COVER BLURB. This is the same as the TV Guide method, except you go to a library or book store. Look at the back cover or flaps to get the premise of the book. Begin developing the story from there.

THE SHAKESPEARE. Take stories that have been around a while and rewrite them the way you'd like them to be.

REWRITE SOMEONE ELSE'S CRAP. If you come across a story that you didn't like, ask how you could have done it better. Then write that story.

FIRST CHAPTER. Take a new book and read the 1st chapter. Put the book down and think how rest will end. Take the germ and write your own story.

CHARACTERS IN THE STORE. Go to a store with a notebook. Write up some details about someone interesting you see. Then go to the other side and write up someone interesting you see there. Then start asking how they might be in a story together.

NEWS MATCH. Take stories or lines from stories from the news and juxtapose them up until they begin to spark story ideas.

WORD MATCH. Take random words from the dictionary or from two sets of jargon, e.g. technical words and domestic words. Nouns and verbs work best. Put pairs together until they begin to spark ideas.

PRESENT NEWS IN THE PAST OR FUTURE. Take a story from the news and ask yourself--what would that have been like at a different period in time in the past or a different place.

OLD NEWS IN THE PRESENT. After reading about something that happened in the past, ask what that would be like today. After reading about the US Government asking the mafia to help secure a specific boat construction dock in WW2, I asked, what might the US Government ask them to do today?

CHANGE GENRE. Identify the story's problem and change the genre. What if Star Wars was a Western? What if Maverick was science fiction? Here are some genres: fantasy, science fiction, western, romance, comedy, horror, war, suspense, mystery, buddy cop, heist, swashbucklers, political, medical thriller, etc.

CHANGE THE SETTING. Take a story and put it in a different setting. A story about battle at sea becomes one about battle between the stars.

CHANGE THE CHARACTERS. Take a story and switch out one of the main characters. A story about the three pigs becomes a story about the three boys and a wolf. Or write the story from a different character's point of view. Tell Snow White from the queen's perspective--or the mirror's (Mette Harrison's "Mira, Mirror" does this).

CHANGE THE PROBLEM. Take the characters and setting, but look for a different problem. "Hoodwinked" does this. Instead of it being about a wolf trying to eat a little girl, it's about a bunny taking over the woods.

CAPTURE CONVERSATION PHRASES. Write down a snippet of an overheard conversations and phrases. James van Pelt once overheard: "I'm interested in growing young girls." Put that in a science fiction genre and ideas begin to spark.

HISTORY. After reading about people or events in history, ask yourself what if. Stories like The Davinci Code and The Dirty Dozen came from this.

SCIENCE. When reading about some scientific principle ask what could this allow us to do and what could go wrong? Remember Jurassic Park?

ISSUE. Take an current issue like water rights, illegal immigration, or pollution control and ask who is involved and who would face problems. Then exaggerate the issue.

FEAR. Find a fear that interests you (any of the types of happiness threats) and start listing ways that someone would be forced to face that fear.

FLIP AN IDEA. Take a story and do the exact opposite. A story about a man be followed by a hitman becomes a hitman being followed by a man. A story about three pigs being chased by a wolf becomes a wolf being chased by three pigs. A story about two lovers kept apart (Romeo & Juliet) becomes one about two people who don't love each other being forced to be married.

MINE THE OCCUPATION. Focus on a vocation or occupation and ask all the things that could go wrong. CSI, ER, West Wing, Recess all took one occupation and asked what situations could arise.

TRUE STORIES. Look for true stories that are extraordinary. Fictionalize it by thinking up characters who could be there or what must have happened. Gerald Lund's best-selling The Work and The Glory series did this.

DOMINANT IMPRESSION. Come up with a dominant impression that interests you. Then ask what's the worst thing that could happen to such a person or what's the best thing that could happen to such a person.

EXAGGERATION. Take any setting, character, or event, and ask what if it got worse? Much worse? Out at sea and get caught in a storm? What if that storm produced a 100 foot wave? Have a car salesman who is pushy, what if it got worse? What if he followed you home? Your dog went crazy one day and bit you. What if it got worse? What if he got rabies? What if the dog was being controlled by someone else? You get attacked by ants, what if hundreds of colonies of ants went berserk?

SOMETHING ODD AND WHY. Take some odd event you heard about or made up and ask why it might happen. Let's say it started raining fish. Why might that happen? An airplane with

fish exploded, and why did it explode? Or maybe there was an explosion that threw them in the air. Why an explosion? Or maybe this is some other world, some genetically altered fish.

MEMORY. Take something or someone interesting, dramatic, or scary in your past. Exaggerate the larger-than-life aspects or the danger. In an attempt to flee, a peacock once flew at me and scratched my face. What if it had been a hawk with sharp talons? A big owl? What if the bird wasn't fleeing, but trained to do so? Who would train it and why?

WHAT ARE THEY HIDING? Take someone that interests you and match them with a crime. Ask what might induce that person to commit that crime. List the obvious, dark motives, then go beyond them. Why might a good-hearted, retired welder feel he must burgle?

VOCATION-ACTION CARDS. Make two decks of 10 - 20 cards. On the first deck of cards write down one vocation per card, e.g. lawyer, scientist, garbage man, housewife, etc. On the second deck write down one odd action, e.g. set parakeet free, clean the septic tank, search for a car you sold 10 years ago, etc. Shuffle each deck then pick one card from each deck and match them. Keep matching until you find one that sparks, and then ask why someone might do this? What story might this odd event be an ending to?

CRUCIBLE. In everyday life, a crucible is a container that is used to hold metal or liquids as they boil. In fiction, a crucible is any setting (stuck on a boat or island, forced to share a cabin, etc.), condition (common enemy or project), or relationship (family, culture, marriage, etc.) that keeps two characters (a protagonist and an antagonist) who don't want to be together from splitting apart. Identify two people who are, or would be, at odds or even enemies and ask what would force the two together.

HORNS OF A DILEMMA. This is where someone is faced with a terrible choice--they can save their sister or brother, but not both. They love their father, but he's doing criminal things they should turn him in for. Find a character. Ask what they love. Then ask what would force them to sacrifice that thing.

FISH OUT OF WATER. If you have a character, ask yourself: in which setting or vocation would she be a fish out of water? If you have a setting or vocation, ask yourself: who would be totally out of their element in that place? If you have a problem, ask yourself: who would be an unlikely candidate to be in this type of situation? Put a city boy out on the ranch or vice versa and ask why he's there and what happens. Make a roughneck oil rig worker a professor and ask why he's there and what happens. Take a millionaire and put him in a sleeping bag or cardboard box in some alley and ask why he's there and what happens.