

Where do I get ideas for stories?



One of the first questions that people ask writers is, “Where do you get your ideas?”

Writers get story ideas from lots of different places. Sometimes a dream can spark a story. That’s how Mary Shelley came up with the idea for *Frankenstein*. She was on holiday with her husband, Percy, and their friend, Lord Byron. They were stuck indoors because of bad weather, and Lord Byron, suggested that they each write a ghost story to pass the time. Mary was a little intimidated by the challenge, but woke up the next morning with the idea for the book: “*I saw – with shut eyes, but acute mental vision – I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous*

phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion.” <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/11/100-best-novels-frankenstein-mary-shelley>

Award-winning author, Susanna Kearsley got the inspiration one of her books this way: “*Mariana began with a scene from the book that just came to me, out of thin air. I saw it like a movie in my mind, and I just wrote it down – the dialogue and all. And when I read what I had written I could tell it was a woman of the present day, but speaking of an incident that happened in the distant past, so then I knew the book would have to feature time travel. I wasn’t keen to tackle that, but the characters just wouldn’t go away, and so at last I had to try.*”

<http://www.susannakearsley.com/faqs.html>

Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson series was born from a combination of Greek mythology and the request of Riordan’s son, Haley.

“*I thought about Haley’s struggle with ADHD and dyslexia. I imagined the faces of all the students I’d taught who had these same conditions. I felt the need to honor them, to let them know that being different wasn’t a bad thing. Intelligence wasn’t always measurable with a piece of paper and a number two pencil. Talent didn’t come in only one flavor.*”

“*Then I thought about the heroes in the old myths – sons and daughters of gods and humans – and all the troubles they’d had to overcome because of their mixed heritage. Off the top of head, I began a*

story about a 12-year-old boy named Percy Jackson, the modern-day son of the Greek god Poseidon ... It took me three nights to tell of Percy's epic quest across the United States to retrieve a lightning bolt stolen from Zeus. When I was done, Haley told me I should write the story down."

<http://rickriordan.blogspot.ca/search?updated-min=2005-01-01T00:00:00-06:00&updated-max=2006-01-01T00:00:00-06:00&max-results=15>

I like to put random words together sometimes and see what happens. At the end of the chapter is a page with 4 columns of 26 words each. Choose 4 different numbers from 1 to 26, such as 6, 11, 22, and 5. Then count down the first column to the 6th words. Take the 11th word from the second column, the 22nd word from the third column, and the 5th word from the fourth. Think about the story you can invent using the words: blizzard, fall, scrollll, and lie.

What if?

Another way to come up with a story is to ask the writer's favourite question: What if? What if I found out one day that I was a wizard, or a princess, or a demi-god? What if a reality TV show actually had people fight to the death? What if a boy was stranded in the Alaskan wilderness with only a hatchet? Or could ride a dragon? Or a girl found out she'd been kidnapped when she was a baby, or cursed with the spell of obedience, or that she really wasn't a Muggle? You can see how those two short words, "what if" can result in some pretty interesting stories.

Write What You Know

A piece of advice for writers that's been around for a long time is, "Write what you know." This isn't very encouraging advice when you haven't been on planet Earth for that many years yet. And what if you really want to write about horses or dragons or magic or spaceships or things you've only read about or seen on TV or movies? Some things you can make up—like your own rules for magic, for instance—but some things you will have to look up in books or on the Internet, such as how to fly to Mars, or what herbs you could use to help your horse if it went lame.

Good stories are about characters, and that's something you know about. You know people and you know yourself. Think of a time when you were scared—climbing a tall ladder, preparing to make a speech, facing a bully or a teacher you didn't like, getting caught in a lie. Remember what being afraid felt like? You might have been shaky all over with your heart racing, knees weak, hands sweaty. Those are the same feelings your characters will have when they ride a dragon for the first time, or when the countdown begins for the spacecraft's launch or when they find out that they'll never be ordinary kids anymore. Fear is fear.



Think of the things you do know, such as how to swing a bat, play basketball, bake a cake, sing a song, play an instrument, dance, play cards or chess. These are all things that your character might do or need to know how to do to succeed at whatever challenge he or she is facing. You know the sound the basketball makes as it bounces down the court or across the playground. You know what vanilla smells like, or how sticky egg shells feel, or how fresh baked cupcakes smell and taste. You know how it feels to have to stand tall and breathe properly in order to sing or play in public or for a music exam. You know how you feel when you draw a winning card or find your king in check. All of those emotions, sounds, textures, sight, tastes are what you bring to a story. They are the details that make your story real to you reader.

Set aside a page in your notebook or a document on your computer and start a list all of the things you know about. As time goes on, keep adding to it when you think of something you've forgotten or when you learn something new. Maybe you help two friends get together after a fight or help a friend practise for a test. You could turn either (or both) of those situations into a story.

Another tip is to keep your phone or a small notebook with you at all times. You never know when a story idea will strike or when you'll overhear a great piece of dialogue or see a road sign that would make the perfect book title. You need to write these ideas down right away, so they don't get forgotten. Cut stories out of newspapers or magazines and keep them in a folder or an envelope. Paste interesting ideas or links into a file in Evernote. You never know when you might find a story in them later.

If you're still stuck for a story idea, maybe one of the prompts in the next chapter will help.